



M. Prozesky

HONEST TO GOD AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN CHURCHES IN 2016

ABSTRACT

The year 2013 was fifty years since the publication of *Honest to God*, by John A.T. Robinson (1919-1983), who was Bishop of Woolwich at the time. The book became a bestseller. The research question that gave rise to the present article is how relevant and sound its main ideas are for South Africa, in particular, and for his own church in 2016. This paper examines Robinson's views from three perspectives, namely Christian and secular practical ethics, the recent history of the church, to which the Bishop belonged in England, and the contemporary South African situation, in particular. The paper argues that, five hundred years on, Robinson's project of developing a Christian response to contemporary secular challenges remains valid in South Africa.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article's main contribution to knowledge is that Bishop John Robinson's sensational book *Honest to God* (1963) remains relevant not only in his own country and church, but also in contemporary South Africa. In the book, he called for a radical restatement of Christian belief and ethical practice in response to powerful new ethical and social forces that challenged the church at the time. Unlike previous studies of the impact of *Honest to God* that emphasized theological and church matters, this article is more interested in practical ethics and its implications for Christian practice and belief in South Africa and elsewhere.

Prof. M. Prozesky, Professor Extraordinaire, Faculty of Theology, University of the Free State, and Professor Emeritus, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 9 Berry Hill Lane, Hilton, 3245. South Africa. E-mail: marproz@mweb.co.za. The financial, scholarly and personal support of the Faculty of Theology at the University of the Free State in the research and writing of this paper is gratefully acknowledged, as is the invaluable assistance of my wife Elizabeth in connection with editing, bibliographical and other matters.

Robinson issued his call in the face of a secular, science-driven culture at a time when a powerful, humane ethic was a pressing need. The South African situation is both similar and different, as will be explained in the last section of the article, but the ethical challenges facing it and its churches are nonetheless extremely serious.

To achieve its purpose, the article consists, first, of this introduction and, secondly, of an account of the contents of Robinson's famous book, in as much detail as is necessary for his message to be made clear, especially for a younger generation of Christians in South Africa to whom *Honest to God* may well be largely unknown. This is followed by a critical discussion of the book, mainly from the perspective of practical ethics fifty-odd years later, but also from the perspective of the history of the Church of England since 1963, which was Robinson's main, but not sole concern. The last section of the article offers contentions about the relevance of *Honest to God* in contemporary South Africa in terms of both belief and ethical practice, based on a perception in the wider society of the churches as insufficiently effective in overcoming the challenges currently facing them.

The article is not concerned with Robinson's other works in the years prior to, and shortly after 1963, except in so far as they shed light on the issues addressed in this article, with the exception of his little book *Christian morals today* because of its direct relevance to this article's concern with practical ethics (Robinson 1964). Nor is it concerned with his published work as a New Testament scholar, because it falls outside the focus of the present article; neither is it concerned with the large body of doctrinally oriented, popular and academic writing that followed the appearance of his famous book and re-surfaced at various anniversaries of the book's first appearance from Eric James (2004), John Bowden (1993), Tom Wright (2005:181-196), and Colin Slee (2004).

Robinson caused an uproar with *Honest to God*. Deeply concerned that the rise of a liberal, secular and science-informed culture in Britain was undermining the main teachings and ethical policy of his church, he issued a far-reaching challenge to conventionally understood core Christian beliefs about God and Christ, and to important spiritual practices such as worship and prayer, and to his church's ethical practices. Later that same year, he wrote a short article for a book about the debate caused by *Honest to God*, explaining why he wrote the book, saying that what he wanted to do "was not to deny God in any sense, but put him back in the middle of life – where Jesus showed us he belonged". He added, at the end of the article, that he wanted "God to be as real for our modern secular, scientific world as he ever was for the 'ages of faith'" (Edwards 1963:277, 279). Affirming this intention, Ryan (2004:48) could write some

forty years later that Robinson's intention was "the validation of the idea of transcendence for modern man ...".

This was no new concern for the bishop, for he had repeatedly emphasized it three years earlier in his book *On being the church in the world*, even viewing Marxism and secularism, with their exclusively this-worldly character, as being closer to the Christianity of the first century than the church of the centuries since then (Robinson 1960:16). Nor was Robinson alone in his view of the contemporary situation facing his church, for his influential publisher at the SCM Press in London, the leading Anglican churchperson D.L. Edwards publicly shared this view in the opening chapter of his book *The Honest to God debate* (1963:13-44). The fact that, within four years, *Honest to God* had sold over a million copies and was translated into twelve languages indicates the extent of the interest it provoked, making it the bestselling theological work ever published, at least in English. Fellow Anglican theologian Colin Slee (2004:4) viewed the immediate impact of the book, some forty years later, as follows:

Honest to God not only blew away the rule book which defined the boundaries of theological adventuring, it also ... marked an unmistakable watershed in theological debate within and beyond church membership.

Hardly anything in the book was original or new to academic theologians. The sensation was that a bishop was taking the views of three radical German theologians, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich, from the academy to the pew and using them to call for radical changes about how God is conceived and what Jesus Christ was, among other central Christian concerns. According to many, Anglican bishops were supposed to defend orthodoxy, not challenge it the way Robinson did. As he himself noted shortly afterwards in reflecting on the response of conservatives to his book in the volume *The Honest to God debate*, a bishop is expected to be

a guardian and defender of the Faith and "to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrine contrary to God's Word" (Edwards 1963:240; 1988: 81-95).

Other Christian responses, however, were very favourable, as is obvious from many items in the selection of letters sent to Robinson (over a thousand within months of publication), scholarly reviews and essays that were included in *The Honest to God debate* within months of the appearance of *Honest to God* (Edwards 1963:13-44). Edwards himself, as could perhaps be expected, wrote sympathetically about the book in his

opening essay in that volume, called "A new stirring in English Christianity" (Edwards 1963:13-44).

2. ROBINSON'S MESSAGE IN *HONEST TO GOD*

The central message of the book is a call for Christians to save their faith and their ethic from what Robinson regarded as a rising, naturalistic, secular world view that has no place for religion, by means of certain radical changes to how God and Christ are conceived. He believed that the way to do this was by freeing the faith from what he viewed as an outer shell of the mythology it picked up from the cultures where its teachings first formed. This mythological framework, he believed, had made Christianity's doctrines about God and Christ incredible to modern, secular people. Instead, wrote the bishop, Christians must embrace the truths and language of the modern, science-informed world view and re-formulate their beliefs accordingly.

What he meant by "secular" can best be seen in his concluding essay, later in 1963, in *The Honest to God debate*, called "The debate continues" (Edwards 1963:248). Rejecting the view of some Christians that secularism was inherently something evil and hostile to religion, he instead regarded it as capable of being positive towards a Christianity that had left behind its long use of a scientifically surpassed, mythological and "supranatural" world view, as he also called it. What Robinson meant by "myth" is most obvious in the same essay where he wrote that myth, "in itself, merely meant a story, a pictorial representation in words", which can be factual and fictional, and whose purpose is to interpret the significance of events such as the birth of Christ (Edwards 1963:264-267).

According to *Honest to God*, the best example of that mythology is the old, three-decker view of the universe in which the earth, viewed as a flat surface and not as a sphere, exists between the heavens above and the underworld beneath (Robinson 1963:11). Accordingly, people then believed that God and other spiritual beings such as angels existed above us quite literally. As noted earlier, Robinson (1963:29) also referred to this as the "supranaturalistic view" of God, and of Christ, a Christological issue he explored after his discussion of the concept of God.

2.1 God as ground and depth

Except perhaps for the rarest of persistent dissidents, evidently no Christians still believe in a three-decker universe. They do not believe that heaven is literally somewhere above the clouds and hell beneath our feet.

Robinson, therefore, declared that the Christian concept of God must change from a God mythically “up there” or philosophically “out there” to a new understanding of God as the Being that grounds and gives depth to our existence through love, drawing on the influential systematic theologian Paul Tillich, in this instance (Robinson 1963:29-32). As Robinson (1963:55) put it,

[t]he question of God is the question *whether this depth of being is a reality or an illusion*, not whether a Being exists beyond the bright blue sky, or anywhere else (italics original).

Later in the book he showed that for him, belief in God must have the greatest possible ethical implications. He wrote, significantly, that whether “one has ‘known’ God is tested by one question only, ‘How deeply have you loved?’” (Robinson 1963:61).

2.2 A post-mythological Christ

What was the main message of *Honest to God* about the church’s understanding of Jesus Christ, the most distinctive part of Christianity? Here again, the bishop revealed an extremely important focus on ethics that is of paramount importance for the present article. Jesus of Nazareth, he wrote, was “the man for others” (Robinson 1963:64). As such, Jesus showed what it is to be grounded in the divine love that is, for Robinson, the bedrock of faith and Christianity’s main conviction about the nature of God. No Christian believer would quarrel with that, but what about Robinson’s views concerning traditional Christology, the orthodox Christian doctrine about Christ who, in the words of the Nicene Creed, “came down from heaven” as the incarnate second person of the Trinity?

Robinson’s (1963:64) view was that traditional Christology “has worked with a frankly supernaturalistic scheme”. It asserts that God the Son “came down” to live on earth as a genuine human being, and at the end of his time on earth, arose and returned to heaven above. This is what Robinson meant by a mythological or supernaturalistic view of reality, which very few, if any, held in 1963 and hold half a century later.

As a leading New Testament scholar, Robinson could contend with academic authority that the common view of Christ as God is not, in fact, biblical at all: “Jesus never claims to be God, personally: yet he always claims to bring God, completely.” (Robinson 1963:73). Christians who find this difficult to believe might do well to study very carefully what Robinson mentions in *Honest to God* about the biblical evidence and with open

minds, especially those who do not have a very good grasp of biblical Greek (Robinson 1963:70-75).

2.3 Christian ethics returned to Christ

Another of Bishop Robinson's chapters was devoted to ethics, as can be expected of a writer who saw Christ as "the man for others", following Bonhoeffer (Robinson 1963: 105-121). The rise of a liberal, secular morality was an issue to which the bishop devoted considerable attention in *Honest to God*. His argument was that traditional Christian ethics was losing credibility on two fronts: from its entanglement with the old, mythological, supranaturalistic world view, and from the appeal of a humane, liberal ethic in an increasingly secular society. The potential for controversy, in this instance, was acute. Anglican bishops were and still are expected by many in the church to defend the long-held moral values of their church, but Robinson welcomed aspects of the liberal morality that began to spread in the 1960s, which seemed to many of the faithful to be no morality at all.

According to the supranaturalistic, mythological world view that Robinson rejected, God handed down timeless moral absolutes (Robinson 1963:106). The Biblical account of the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai is an indication of the background belief that the domain of God is literally on high in the heavens above, from which originate the unchanging moral absolutes. Robinson cites the example of his church's prohibition of divorce, by then permitted by the law of the land.

Robinson argues that rigidly staying with this prohibition of divorce and other such legalistic prohibitions was a departure from the ethic taught by Christ:

Life in Christ Jesus, in the new being, in the Spirit, means having no absolute but his love, being totally uncommitted in every other respect but totally committed in this (Robinson 1963:14).

Therefore, he could write that the "supranaturalistic ethic ... seriously distorts the teaching of Jesus" (Robinson 1963:110). Contending that Jesus' ethical teaching "does not consist in literal injunctions for any situation or universal principles for every situation", he viewed it rather as a love-based ethic that must be applied lovingly according to the needs of each situation (Robinson 1963:111, 120). Thus, the bishop could also write that "the only intrinsic evil is lack of love" (Robinson 1963:118).

Like the three German theologians mentioned earlier who influenced Robinson's ideas about God, Christ and religion, so his ideas about Christian ethics also reveal an important influence, this time from an article by the

American scholar Joseph Fletcher (Robinson 1963:116-119). Fletcher, later to issue his controversial book *Situation ethics*, was an Episcopalian professor of ethics in the United States of America and had published an article entitled "The new look in Christian ethics" (1959), which anticipated his subsequent book, and from which Robinson drew support in *Honest to God* (Fletcher 1959).

He could thus conclude his discussion on Christian ethics by viewing the new morality of the 1960s as, in fact, the original ethic taught and lived by Christ:

This "new morality" is, of course, none other than the old morality, just as the new commandment is the old, yet ever fresh, commandment of love (Robinson 1963:119).

Useful clarifications about Robinson's call for a new Christian ethic in contrast with what he referred to as the old one are provided by the invited lectures he gave on 31 October 1963 at Liverpool Cathedral, published by the SCM Press under the title *Christian morals today* (Robinson 1964). Traditionally, according to the bishop, Christian ethics was defined by the *content* of the commands about right and wrong in its teaching. Thus, there are

certain things which are always right, and others which are always wrong. These absolute Christian standards are eternally valid, and remain unchanging in the midst of relativity and flux (Robinson 1964:11).

The task of Christian ethics is, therefore, to apply these standards to changing situations, but the content remains the same.

By contrast, the new ethic envisaged by the bishop would have only one unchanging value, namely the love embodied by Christ, understood in all its richness (Percy 2004:32). As Robinson (1964:12) explains, Christ's purpose was to call people to

subject everything in their lives to the overriding, unconditional claim of God's utterly gracious yet utterly demanding rule of righteous love.

This would naturally include the Christian's actions towards others and thus fall under ethics. Exactly what love requires of those actions is, however, not constant, but "will differ with every century, group individual".

A few pages later, he summarizes his view as follows:

In Christian ethics the only pure statement is the command to love: every other injunction depends on it and is an explication or application of it (Robinson 1964:13, 16).

It is obvious from this quote that Robinson did not specifically mention his approval in *Honest to God* of the situation ethics of Joseph Fletcher in his Liverpool Cathedral lectures. The bishop could regard Christian ethics as having both a constant core and varying applications, both fixity and freedom, finding God in both the rocks and the rapids, as he put it (Robinson 1964:20).

Later in *Christian morals today*, Robinson provided another useful contrast between the old and the new Christian moralities by means of the essential polarities of transcendence and immanence and the deductive and inductive approaches. He views the old approach as involving the transcendent, the deductive and the authoritative side of Christian ethics, whereas the new approach starts from the facts of actual personal relationships – hence its immanent character – and proceeds inductively, starting from persons and moving to the necessary principles (Robinson 1964:34-37). One example of about how this new approach results in changes in Christian ethics is the way in which the population explosion is affecting the ethics of birth control (Robinson 1964:43). In 1963 and 1964, these views about Christian ethics produced as much controversy as Robinson's calls for a changed image of God and a new view of Christ, again involving both denunciation and support. The same divided response, but with less volume, greeted his account, in *Honest to God*, of a number of other issues of major concern to Christians.

2.4 Other issues

Robinson arguably added even more fuel to the fires of ecclesiastical dismay on the part of his critics by using the term “worldly holiness” for worship and prayer (Robinson 1963:84). Believers mostly understand worldliness as an absence of faith and upright living. So, how could it be holy? The term “worldly” has another, more literal meaning, standing for immersion in the cares and concerns of the world. This is what the bishop had in mind. In connection with public worship, he disputed the common view that views this part of the Christian faith as a matter of times of withdrawal to a consecrated space (Robinson 1963:85). There is a need for this, certainly, but is it the main mode? Robinson thought that it was not, supporting his view by citing the way in which Christ instituted Holy Communion, the most important of the church's acts of public workshop. It happened in a home and involved a special meal, to which Christ gave profound meaning. In so doing, wrote the bishop, Christ gave his followers a new and highly significant way of understanding holiness. Robinson (1963:87) called it “the ‘depth’ in the common”.

What about prayer? As a rule, prayer involves the believer setting aside times to disengage from the concerns of the world in order to raise them up to God. Once again, Robinson argues for an ethically oriented view that requires engagement, not disengagement, with the world and its concerns. In and through that engagement, seeking to discern the love that Robinson viewed as the divine ground of our existence, prayer finds its true function: "Prayer is openness to the ground of our being." (Robinson 1963:102).

In his last chapter entitled "Recasting the mould", Robinson (1963:124-141) summarizes and reflects on the basic message of the book, emphasizing that he had sought to be honest about things that need to be questioned and changed in the church. He used the metaphor of a mould to refer to the outer casing of mythological ideas, in which the heart of the faith, as he saw it, is expressed during the formative years of Christianity. He could thus write that Christianity now needs a "radically new mould", adding that everything from the old mould goes into what he spoke of as the melting pot, starting with "our image of God" (Robinson 1963:124). It is vital to notice that, according to Robinson, our *image* of God must change, as distinct from the living reality, to which the image of a heavenly being is believed by Christians and others to refer. This is what differentiates him from what he perceived as the errors of the naturalistic atheists and supranaturalistic, traditionalist Christians, respectively. What are their errors?

Naturalists believe that the physical universe is the only reality. Nowadays, we would probably call their world view secularism. They believe that there is no divine reality underlying our human images of God, and that the whole thing is simply a delusion. By contrast, Robinson passionately held that there is such a reality, namely the divine love that is the basis of our being (Robinson 1963:127-130).

According to Robinson, the supranaturalists, or traditional believers fail to distinguish the divine love from the images the church has used to speak of that reality, above all those embedded in the outdated, three-decker view of the universe. He argues that their view merely plays into the hands of the church's naturalistic critics, locking Christianity to beliefs that people find simply unbelievable, or so he avers (Robinson 1963:130-133).

Two years after the publication of *Honest to God*, Bishop Robinson (1965) produced a book entitled *The new reformation*, in which he discusses in some detail several aspects of what he discerns as the coming shape of the Christian church, but without adding to what he had already written about ethics. This matter is beyond the scope of this article.

3. HONEST TO GOD TODAY

How well or badly has *Honest to God* stood the test of time in over half a century since its publication? The answer, in this article, is based on the perspectives mentioned earlier, namely the history of the church since 1963, Robinson's church, in particular, and ethics, as distinct from a critique based on doctrinal considerations. While the main concern of this article is South Africa, in fairness to Bishop Robinson his own church in England will be critically considered first. The initial questions are raised. How sound was Robinson's view of the future of his own Church of England and how adequately did he address the matter of Christian ethics? As mentioned earlier, this evaluation of *Honest to God* after fifty-odd years is unlike theological critiques such as those given by Wright (2005:181-196), the conservative Anglican bishop, New Testament scholar and theologian, when he assessed the book in 2003, forty years after its appearance.

3.1 The future of the church in England

Turning to the first critical question about Robinson's view of the main challenge facing his church, I have a mixed judgement. I shall indicate that the bishop has been proved correct about the need for Christianity to respond in both doctrine and ethics to the growing influence of secular culture, about the change of ethical policy he called for from his church, and also in foreseeing a grave and possibly irreversible decline for church membership because of the appeal of secular, science-based culture. In the words of Williams (2004: 140), "... at least in Britain, Christianity is a minority religion ...".

On the other hand, Robinson was mistaken in his belief that Christianity could not survive the secular challenge to its beliefs, unless it radically changed the old, mythological mould, as he called it, in which its teachings about God and Christ were expressed. He was thus also wrong about the current character of his church. Given such a doctrinal revolution, a vibrant, modernized set of doctrines would triumph over secular naturalism, the arch-foe of the faith, so he contended.

The evidence about the Church of England (and others) is currently very different. This verdict has been raised in personal correspondence with a leading theologian in the Church of England, who has broadly confirmed this (Percy 2014). For example, there have been no radical bishops in the Church of England since Robinson, at least none such as Bishop John Shelby Spong in the Episcopal Church in the United States of America (Spong 2005), although the liberal bishops David Jenkins and Peter Selby can be perceived as fairly close to Robinson (Percy 2014). The liberal project

championed by Robinson is in serious decline in his and other churches, much eroded on one side by the very secularism Robinson feared and, on the other, by the significant growth of the conservative wing in the churches involving Pentecostal tendencies and vigorous new expressions of the evangelical and fundamentalist movements (Slee 2004:22). These show not the slightest sign of recasting inherited ways of speaking about God and Christ. Furthermore, they and not Christian liberalism are growing in England and elsewhere.

About the secularist threat, on the other hand, Robinson was certainly right, nowhere more so than in his own country and church. The secular inroads into church membership that he feared have certainly happened, and church attendance in the Church of England now involves a small section of the population. Over the past decade, this challenge has been further intensified through the rise of an extremely confident and vocal new atheism, led by Dawkins (2006) and Hitchens (2007). It is surely a vindication of Robinson's warning about clinging to an outdated world view that Dawkins' attack on belief in God is dominated by that way of thinking about God. Nonetheless, Robinson the amateur sociologist of religion was wrong if he thought that traditionally expressed Christian beliefs would only survive inside the church if they were radically recast in a liberal direction. The account of the upsurge of conservative forms of Christianity in the book *God is back* is ample evidence of this reality (Micklethwaite & Wooldridge: 2009).

3.2 Ethics and the church

Turning to Robinson the ethicist, the question now arises as to whether his views have proved sound. That a new, liberal morality was gaining ground in society in the 1960s is clear, nowhere more so than in terms of sexual morality. The issue on which the bishop focused in *Honest to God* was, however, divorce, then prohibited by his church and some others, but permitted by the law on grounds such as adultery. The new sexual morality made possible especially by the pill and the rise of the feminist movement was not yet in 1963 the major issue it would become, but clearly Robinson correctly discerned the arrival of a more liberal ethic than the one then dominant in his own church and others.

Was he logical to welcome it and deem it a return to the ethics of Christ, as the man for others who was rooted in the divine love, which Robinson wrote of as the ground of our being? That Christianity believes in a God of love and that it holds Christ to be the incarnation of that divine reality is, of course, its central belief. Thus, there can hardly be a logical or theological objection to the bishops' desire to base ethics in that love.

Why, then, did he object to the older, more rigid ethic of his church on a matter such as divorce and re-marriage? There are two reasons. First, he judged the church's policy on divorce to fall short of the love embodied and taught by Christ. Secondly, he believed that the traditional policy of forbidding divorce and re-marriage was as much entangled with what he saw as an outdated, mistaken, mythological world view, as the church's traditional doctrines about God and Christ. If the wider English society was moving in an increasingly secular and ethically liberal direction, as it indeed has over the past half a century, then his fear that it would not simply discard belief in God and in a divine Christ, but also its moral credibility, was logical and justified, a conclusion to which this paper returns below. What he did not, and perhaps could not foresee was the extent to which a moral chasm would open between conservative and liberal Anglicans on the issue of sexual orientation that now threatens to split parts of the Anglican communion and other Christian denominations.

It is clear that Robinson correctly identified an ethical parting of the ways between traditionalists and liberals in his church, and that on matters such as divorce and the position of women in his church, Anglicanism has indeed embraced what he called the new morality. It has done exactly what Robinson foresaw.

Whether his chapter on ethics would impress theological ethicists in Christianity is not a matter for this article with its different focus. Robinson has certainly been much criticized from the perspective of technical, theological ethics (Hart 2004:83-110), but it must be remembered that the bishop was concerned with practical issues of right and wrong in society, not academic ones, as is also obvious from his much later essays on the theme "The way of social responsibility". (Robinson 1987:79-125). It is evident that he accurately discerned a major new trend in both ethics and belief, for why else would his little book have been the massive bestseller it was.

3.3 Robinson's relevance for contemporary South African churches

Honest to God and the other books by Robinson do not mention South Africa's theological concerns and above all its apartheid policies and practices at the time. His concern was not the wider Christian world or even simply the wider Anglican world, but his own country and the Church of England, in particular. However, Robinson was sufficiently interested in South Africa. In 1977, he met liberal political figures besides visiting a number of theological centres. It is thus relevant to ask, over fifty years later, about the relevance of his most famous book for present-day

South Africa in connection with ethics in itself and in its implications for Christian belief.

Robinson believed that the powerful influence of science and a secular culture in Britain had made obsolete what he calls the mythological, three-decker world view which Christianity had used in formulating its beliefs in the period after the time of Christ. In addition, he was greatly concerned that the ethical policy of his church on issues such as divorce and re-marriage was also called into question by the liberal, secular ethic of the surrounding society, besides being seen as less than fully loving. Therefore, he wanted Christianity to renew its image of God and its concept of Christ in ways that would both express the centrality of love for Christianity and, by using modern thought-forms such as the concept of God proposed by Paul Tillich, be more credible to people whose thinking was based on modern science, philosophy and ethics. Briefly, he called on the church for a renewal of its theology and ethics to combat the inroads of a science-based, secular culture.

The contention of this article is that, at present, the churches in South Africa are at least as deeply challenged as those in Britain in 1963 in the fields of both ethics and theology. I shall first discuss the theological challenge as an ethical issue. It is ethical in nature, because it is about truth and is generated by three realities that have emerged, in South Africa, Britain and elsewhere, since 1963. These are the implications of new knowledge about the plurality of religions, of the new atheism and of the Progressive Christianity movement for the credibility of core Christian beliefs (Progressive Christianity, s.a.).

The first of these has, since the 1960s, become the subject of serious academic study and teaching in the form of new departments of Religion Studies separate, from departments or faculties of theology in a good number of universities in South Africa, Britain and elsewhere. This is a secular development, because such departments are, or should be, entirely academic in their orientation and not linked to the church. Those exposed to this significant academic development have been made aware of two main and far-reaching sets of questions for Christian theology.

First, the careful study of religion globally has made it clear that Christianity is a minority faith world-wide and part of a range of faiths in which rich intellectual, moral and spiritual quality are present that cannot by independent norms be judged inferior to those of the churches, as indicated by Hick (1989). In view of this new knowledge, how credible is belief in Christ as literally the only incarnate Son of God and the only saviour? Can it really be true that somebody like Gandhi, whose transition from an inexperienced young lawyer to a Mahatma ("Great Soul") happened

in South Africa and who refused all attempts to convert him to Christianity, is eternally lost because of that refusal? (Gandhi 1963) Commenting on this issue in Britain a decade ago, but just as relevant currently for South Africa, Williams (2004:141) wrote:

It is not divine presence and activity that is impossible to believe, but the Christian claim that our telling of it is the only possible one.

Secondly, how well does the traditional Christian concept of God fare when our new knowledge of other faiths reveals that Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and part of Hinduism have no use for the concept of a God and yet possess great spiritual, philosophical and ethical depth? Does this reality deny universal significance to theistic religion and if not, how does Christian theism explain the non-theistic faiths in ways that acknowledge their quality? To this challenge posed to Christian theism (and other kinds) by the global reality of religion, there has over the past decade or two been added the strident voice of the new atheism championed by leading scientist Dawkins and others. In his best-selling book *The God delusion*, Dawkins (2006) subjected Christian beliefs about God to relentless criticism, as did Hitchens (2007) in his book *God is not great: How religion poisons everything*. Robinson's 1963 challenge about the need to rethink the concept of God therefore remains valid.

The third of these theologically significant, ethical developments is the emergence, now also in South Africa where part of it is known as "The New Reformation", of the Progressive Christianity movement. It is marked by passion for Jesus of Nazareth as revealed by recent historical scholarship, deep ethical commitment, openness about beliefs and by informal organizational structure. Numbering, among its advocates, such leading New Testament scholars as Borg and Crossan, as well as radical religious thinkers such as Geering, it poses serious questions about the validity of traditional views of Christianity from within a faith rooted in a God of love disclosed, for Christians, uniquely by Christ. The echo of *Honest to God* is clear.

This article contends that the church in South Africa, or even simply one of its denominations, as distinct from individual scholars such as Klaus Nürnberger, Wentzel van Huysteen, and others, or a philosopher of religion such as Martin Prozesky, has so far failed to face the twin challenges to its beliefs about Christ and God posed by the global reality of religion, the new atheism and ethics (Nürnberger 2010:95-174; Van Huysteen 2006; Prozesky 1993:78-130). Robinson's call in 1963 for profound theological re-thinking is thus if anything even more urgent at present than it was then. The only recent, truly radical South African attempt to do what

Robinson called for in 1963 is Oxtoby's book *The two faces of Christianity* (Oxtoby 2014:76-148).

While it is true that South African society is far less secular than Britain, with population census figures in South Africa reporting that as many as 90% of its population consider themselves religious, most of them Christian theists, truth is not settled by majorities or by authorities, but by the most diligent use of evidence, correct reasoning and moral commitment combined with spiritual dedication of the highest order. For our churches, as distinct from certain individual Christian thinkers, to be viewed as less than relentless in the pursuit of truth in the face of new challenges and evidence is to do very grave damage to their moral credibility.

The above reference to moral credibility brings the discussion to the second of the ways in which Bishop Robinson's 1963 views are relevant to South Africa today, namely ethics. Three realities in the very recent history of the country confront the churches with ethical challenges of a serious kind. First, the fact that apartheid, as an unloving social system of great and sustained injustice, *was created and maintained by a largely Christian population*. From a standpoint outside institutional Christianity in a country now beset by very grave moral challenges such as corruption, abuse of political power, violence, homophobia and gender injustice, and in dire need of all the ethical help it can get, this fact still poses a serious question about the effectiveness of our churches as ethical forces for good in society. The question is this: Has the moral effectiveness of Christianity in the wider society been sufficiently assessed in our churches (as distinct from prophetic individuals), especially now that two decades have passed since the legal end of apartheid, giving our churches sufficient time to come to terms with that unloving past and achieving an effective, morally transforming impact on the country?

The second recent reality that involves important ethical challenges is the coming of a secular constitutional dispensation and with it a series of what many see as enlightened new laws in connection with racial, gender and religious discrimination, and also sexuality. Few would deny that South African society at present suffers from extremely serious ethical problems such as violence, economic injustice, corruption and crime, so that the need for a powerful, prophetic, moral voice is acute, but it is no longer being heard in the wider society the way it was from heroic Christian leaders like Albert Luthuli, Beyers Naude, Nico Smit, Denis Hurley and Desmond Tutu. Instead, there is a perception that such really powerful ethical strength as the country now has is to be found in its secular constitution of 1996, with its main values of justice, dignity, equality and freedom, and also in new laws based on them and in the repeal of older laws that had entrenched

injustice. The question this development generates for Christians and especially their leaders is how they respond to the perception that the country's moral high ground has now passed to secular forces.

The third reality in the realm of ethics in South Africa is the growing evidence of very serious and worsening evils in the country at present, such as violence, crime, abuse of women and children, corruption, poor service delivery, unemployment, and destitution. In 1963, Robinson believed that positive, ethical developments in secular society were harming the ethical credibility of his church. In South Africa, at the time of writing, it is the lack, as viewed from a standpoint outside institutional Christianity, of a powerful, church-based impact on serious new evils on a national scale that can be regarded as undermining the moral credibility of our churches, none more so than, it can be contended, the Black church because of its great numerical strength. The statements about, and commitment to social justice and other ethical values of courageous, individual Christians, some of them academics, are acknowledged and applauded. However, from the perspective of the present article, the disturbing fact remains that the practical impact of Christianity in South Africa on the ethical challenges in the wider society is at times ambivalent, for example in terms of sexual orientation and gay marriage in the churches, and even at times negative, for example in terms of Islamophobia or our small and vulnerable community of atheists.

To conclude: Bishop Robinson's voice in *Honest to God* over fifty years ago is at present highly relevant to the country's churches and in urgent need of being heeded, lest a great faith run the real risk of condemning itself to pietistic irrelevance. For this reason if not others, Robinson merits the perception of him as, in a new sense, a missionary bishop who sought to take the gospel of love founded by Christ into a church and nation where its transforming power is in danger of being eclipsed by secular forces hostile to religion (Edwards 1963:240). As his friend and fellow theologian Eric James (2004:156) mentioned in his memorial sermon to Robinson in Cambridge in 1984:

Honest to God was supremely the work of an evangelist: of a missionary as passionately concerned with mission as St. Paul: mission to the secular city.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOWDEN, J. (ED.)

1993. *Thirty years of honesty: Honest to God then and now*. London: SCM Press.

DAWKINS, R.

2006. *The God delusion*. Boston, NY: Houghton Mifflin.

- EDWARDS, D. (ED.)
1963. *The Honest to God debate: Some reactions to the book Honest to God*. London: SCM Press.
- FLETCHER, J.
1966. *Situation ethics: The new morality*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press.
- GANDHI, M.K.
1963. *An autobiography: The story of my experiments with truth*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House.
- HART, T.
2004. Religion and belief: The reduction of religion to ethics. In: C. Slee (ed.), *Honest to God: Forty years on* (London: SCM Press), pp. 83-110.
- HICK, J.
1989. *An interpretation of religion: Human responses to the transcendent*. London: Macmillan. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/9780230371286>
- HITCHENS, C.
2007. *God is not great: How religion poisons everything*. London: Atlantic Books.
- JAMES, E.
2004. John Robinson: A memorial sermon. In: C. Slee (ed.), *Honest to God: Forty years on* (London: SCM Press), pp. 152-161.
- MICKLETHWAITE, J. & WOOLDRIDGE, A.
2009. *God is back: How the global rise of faith is changing the world*. London: Allen Lane.
- NÜRNBERGER, K.
2010. *Richard Dawkins' God delusion: A repentant refutation*. Bloomington, IN: Xlibris LLC.
- OXTOBY, R.
2014. *The two faces of Christianity: A psychological analysis*. Winchester: Christian Alternative.
- PERCY, M.
2004. A lasting legacy? In: C. Slee (ed.), *Honest to God: Forty years on*. (London: SCM Press), pp. 26-36.
2014. Personal communication, 15 March.
- PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY.
s.a. Progressive Christianity. [Online.] Retrieved from: www.progressivechristianity.org. [2016, 16 April].
- PROZESKY, M.
1993. *A new guide to the debate about God*. London: SCM Press.

ROBINSON, J.A.T.

1960. *On being the church in the world*. London: SCM Press.

1963. *Honest to God*. London: SCM Press.

1964. *Christian morals today*. London: SCM Press.

1987. *Where three ways meet: Last essays and sermons*. London: SCM Press.

RYAN, C.

2004. The language of theism; irony and belief. In: C. Slee (ed.), *Honest to God: Forty years on* (London: SCM Press), pp. 46-69.

SPONG, J.

2005. *The sins of Scripture: Exposing the bible's texts of hate to reveal the God of love*. New York: HarperOne.

VAN HUUSTEEN, J.W.

2006. *Alone in the world? Human uniqueness in science and theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

WILLIAMS, J.

2004. 'To bring God completely': *Honest to God* and Christology for the twenty-first century. In: C Slee (ed.), *Honest to God: Forty years on*. (London: SCM Press), pp. 133-151.

WRIGHT, T.

2005. Doubts about doubt: *Honest to God* forty years on. *Journal of Anglican studies* 3(3):181-196. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1740355305058889>

Keywords

Ethics

The churches

John Robinson

Honest to God

South Africa

Trefwoorde

Etiek

Die kerke

John Robinson

Honest to God

Suid-Afrika