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Two Theological Critics of *Honest to God*

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Abstract

This article looks critically at the arguments of two of Bishop John Robinson's *Honest to God's* most formidable theological critics – Archbishop Michael Ramsey and Professor Eric Mascall.

Key Words

John Robinson; *Honest to God*; Michael Ramsey; Eric Mascall; Owen Chadwick; Eric James

Honest to God poses a problem for theologians. Why did this casual, derivative book sell in record numbers and cause such an intellectual stir? Owen Chadwick highlighted this problem with his pithy summary of the book followed by a succinct comment:

> people's old conventional image of God (if that was what they had!) as a grandfather in the sky kept God out of real life and made Him remote. Yet there must be a basis in God for all the universe, and this basis must be personal, and if the world shrinks from God out there, let them look for God within themselves. In morals nothing is laid down finally except the law of love. And the forms of services in churches have the danger that they create a private or separate 'religious' world which is against the secular world; whereas we have come to the perception that the secular world is sacred, that is, it is God's world [Chadwick. 1990.370].

And now his comment: 'There is nothing about these proposals with which informed Christians could disagree'.

That 'could' is astonishing, yet for me, sixty year ago and still today, appropriate.

Chadwick, like John Robinson's biographer Eric James, noted that by 1963 Robinson was already considered by the press to be a controversial bishop. This was both for defending the novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* at a highly publicized trial and for his article in *The Observer* just ahead of *Honest to God's* publication, entitled provocatively by the paper, which he did not veto, as 'Our Image of God Must Go' [James. 1987. 115]. Chadwick and James also noted that 'some of the language' in *Honest to God* disturbed people with its hyperbole [Chadwick. 1990.371] who may, but probably may not, have read the book from cover-to-cover -- it is, after all littered with Latin tags and references to theological books read by few in the general public. *Exploration into God*, which he published four years later, largely avoided hyperbole, but, predictably, did not sell so well. As an eager first-year theology student at Kings College London, I found *Honest to God* both exciting and liberating, but was

told by otherwise intelligent, older churchgoers that I couldn't possibly understand it or be aware of just how shocking it was to them.

Liberating or shocking? Both of these emotional reactions are evident in the collection *The Honest to God Debate* that Robinson and David Edwards edited and, remarkably, published before the end of 1963, with the blurb declaring: 'Here is a passionate debate, concerned with the deepest subjects which can challenge the human mind'. For those committed to Evangelical or Anglo-Catholic 'certainties', *Honest to God* probably was shocking. Yet for those of us who dissented from such certainties, it could indeed be liberating. Bishop Robinson's deconstruction spoke to us.

Is that all that happened? A careful reading of two of the most powerful critics of *Honest to God* – Archbishop Michael Ramsey and Professor Eric Mascall – suggests that there was another agenda behind this debate that confused and divided Ramsey and Mascall and which was not always recognized at the time or even now. This involved a chasm between inclusive and exclusive understandings of Christian faith fueled by deep fears of growing Western secularity. Robinson had opened a window of inclusivity which Mascall was determined to shut and on which Ramsey notoriously wavered. The contrasting papacies of Benedict XIII and Francis, the first resisting and the second promoting the window opened by Vatican II, have some similarity, albeit at a more exalted level. Is a fear of encroaching secularity best met by a sharply defined church or by a church that is open and inclusive? This remains a theological dilemma, with some proponents of Radical Orthodoxy, say, favouring exclusivism to protect faith and others more inclined to openness to avoid sectarianism.

Chadwick portrays Ramsey as a political, cultural and, even, theological liberal. Brought up as a Congregationalist in a politically left-leaning family, as a student he was deeply influenced by William Temple, wishing eventually to be buried near his grave. Like Temple, as Archbishop he supported a number of important reforms, in his case including abortion, divorce and capital punishment, together with promoting better race and gender relations. Many might have expected him to support Robinson, who, as we know from James, sent him a draft of *Honest to God* for comment ahead of publication (which Ramsey failed to read in time). However, in 1963, Ramsey had only been Archbishop of Canterbury for two years and his predecessor, Geoffrey Fisher, who terrified him, had already publicly criticized Robinson's defense of *Lady Chatterley's Lover.* As soon as *Honest to God* was published on March 19th Ramsey followed suit, but, as both Chadwick and James concluded, in retirement he profoundly regretted this early response (along with a lingering sadness about the failure of his beloved Anglican-Methodist Reunion Scheme).

On April 1st Ramsey was interviewed on television and said, to Robinson's dismay:

> I think he is right when he is trying to find whether some new model of the image of God may be going to help some of the people who are right outside Christianity and the Church. But it is utterly wrong and misleading to denounce the imagery of God held by Christian men, women and children: imagery that thy have got from Jesus himself, the image of God the Father in Heaven, and to say that we can't have any new thought until it is all swept away [James. 1987. 118].

Later that same month Ramsey published a small booklet, *Image Old and New*, making similar, essentially pastoral, points. As Archbishop he was worried that churchgoers were

disturbed by Robinson's hyperbole and iconoclasm. Presumably, he deemed this to be a debate for theologians, but not for the laity. Ramsey, like his successors, perhaps under-estimated his laity.

Mascall's objections to *Honest to God* were more theological. A seasoned theological polemicist, he is depicted by Peter Webster as 'a long-time friend of Ramsey's, with whom relations became strained', evident in a telling 1966 letter, when he accused Mascall of 'gloomy pessimism' [Webster.2015. 46 and 186]. Chadwick recorded that earlier in their career both were considered by the electors of the vacant regius chair at Cambridge, to which Ramsey was eventually appointed. Mascall had published more substantially than Ramsey, but his neo-Thomism (according to Chadwick) did not appeal to the non-Anglican electors. In addition, Mascall, collaborating curiously with conservative evangelicals, was later to play a leading role in destroying the Anglican-Methodist Reunion Scheme. Although both Ramsey and Mascall were Anglo-Catholics, they were radically opposed in cultural terms, with Mascall being instinctively conservative and intensely logical and Ramsey neither.

And Mascall simply could not abide Robinson's radicalism and lack of precision. At several points in his detailed critique of *Honest to God*, he stated:

> I am afraid that what I have been saying in the last few pages will seem to Robinson's supporters to be extremely hair-splitting and fault-finding, but it is, I am sure, very necessary. For Robinson is putting forward an interpretation of Christianity which he himself claims is far more than a restating of traditional orthodoxy in modern terms and is one in which the most fundamental categories of our theology – of God, of the supernatural, and of religion itself – must go into the melting. Now anyone who proposes a revolution as radical as this must clearly expect his programme to be subjected to the most careful scrutiny [Mascall.1965. 134].

Ironically, Mascall admitted that many of the points made in *Honest to God* -- for example, about the analogical status of human language applied to God -- could find support (albeit with greater precision) in Aquinas. Unlike critics such as Alasdair MacIntyre at the time, Mascall never accused Robinson of being an atheist, but simply of being vague and muddled… *and* of being too inclusive. This last criticism is particularly instructive and Mascall made it several times in his critique of *Honest to God*:

> What I think Robinson has in fact failed to see is the importance of discriminating between the essential Christian Gospel and the forms in which it may be expressed at any particular epoch, difficult as it may be to draw the line with absolute precision. The consequence is that, in his warm-hearted desire to claim all good men as his brothers, he allows his sense of truth and falsehood to be smothered. 'Among my intelligent non-Christian friends', he writes, 'one discovers many who are nearer to the Kingdom of heaven than they themselves can credit.'… But I strongly suspect that many of them are thoroughly good men who know pretty clearly what the Christian faith is and quite honestly believe that it is false. It is quite illegitimate to redefine Christianity in order to include within it all men of good will, though… this is what Robinson's programme in fact amounts to' [Mascall.1965. 110].

There is another irony here. Later in his critique Mascall referred positively to Karl Rahner's *Theological Investigations*, but forgot (or ignored) a key feature of Rahner's ecclesiology, namely his category of 'anonymous Christians'. Like Robinson, on this point Rahner,

following Vatican II, was strikingly inclusive, whereas Mascall, the logic-chopper, was not. Mascall wanted clearer lines of demarcation between Christians and non-Christians. It is not too difficult to imagine that, had he lived longer, he would have applauded Benedict XIII but lamented Francis.

Even Mascall's neo-Thomism was one-sided. Aquinas' *Summa Theologica,* despite its hierarchical and sexist assumptions, remains an astonishing logical achievement. It is hardly surprising that it appealed to the mathematically trained mind of Mascall, but that it featured less in the whimsical writings of Ramsey. Yet Aquinas also wrote *Summa Contra Gentiles* with its many explorations of natural law within God's creation and unfashionable, eclectic explorations of Aristotle's philosophy. In effect, Aquinas was much more innovative than Mascall, while also being much more precise than Robinson.

Yet, if my analysis here is correct, Robinson did open a window to younger minds, to make theological connections with secular culture, where possible, while still challenging some of its presumptions and prejudices. Exactly that has been the central theme of the Cambridge University Press series *New Studies in Christian Ethics.* Over more than three decades and more than forty monographs, our aim has been to:

> (1) To promote monographs in Christian ethics which engage centrally with the present secular moral debate at the highest possible intellectual level.
> (2) To encourage contributors to demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate - either in moral substance, or in terms of underlying moral justifications.

I suspect that John Robinson would have approved and I, in turn, remain in both his and Mascall's debt. Robinson (whom I never met) challenged budding theologians to think imaginatively for ourselves. And Mascall, my kindly and holy PhD supervisor, taught me to think more clearly and respectfully. They balanced each other, representing two very different strains of Anglican theology and I, turn, learned much from both.

Professor Robin Gill is Editor of Theology.

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