

# Reviews

**GOD'S TRUTH. Essays to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of HONEST TO GOD.**  
Edited by Eric James. S.S.M. Press, 1988. xii + 227 Pp. £9.50.

The immediate impact of *Honest to God* was so remarkable and its more lasting results so difficult to determine with any confidence that the idea of some sort of reflective commemoration was well worth pursuing. Whether the particular form that that commemoration has taken is a wholly satisfactory one is more open to question. Eric James has added to the labours of his biography of John Robinson by inviting seventeen scholars to contribute essays to this volume. Most of the authors were friends or colleagues of John Robinson, broadly sympathetic to the way of theology that he pursued. The essays are not arranged thematically, but simply presented in alphabetic order of the names of the contributors. The result is that, although they do between them cover a good range of the many issues on which John Robinson wrote, the impact of the volume as a whole lacks any firmness of direction.

Just because of its success, *Honest to God* has been subjected to far more exacting scrutiny than perhaps any other comparable writing. This has led, in my view, to a widely accepted evaluation of the book which is far more dismissive of its many good qualities than is deserved. There is no attempt here to redress that balance. The prevailing attitude is certainly not dismissive; indeed there is warm testimony from many of its personal significance for them. But there is still more about its shortcomings than its virtues. Many of the contributors are tinged with a somewhat nostalgic air of regret. They see the book as characteristic of the 60s as an era of hopes, perhaps unrealistic hopes. But John Robinson was no Joseph, and the dreams of those years were not strong enough to stave off the years of spiritual leanness that were to follow. The hopes did not materialise and have been swallowed up by the mean years of our present conservatism in politics and religion.

No doubt there are good reasons for that sense of disappointment. I did not find the analyses of its causes particularly illuminating. But disappointment never quite gives way to despair. Even the nearly despairing John Kent is convinced that 'the eclipse of "radical theology" will be temporary' (p. 124), because the failure to answer the questions it posed has been so total. Constructive suggestions of the kind of work that needs to be done by those who want to stand in the tradition symbolized by *Honest to God* are most helpfully developed in the contributions by Alistair Kee (well prepared for the task by his close involvement in the thought of John Robinson which has gone into the writing of his recent book, *The Roots of Christian Freedom*), Dennis Nineham and Alan Race.

But perhaps the most striking contribution is (by alphabetical chance) the final one. It is from the pen of Peter Selby, himself a suffragan bishop in the diocese of Southwark of two years' standing, as John Robinson was when he wrote *Honest to God*. Himself much helped and stimulated by its publication, he here makes a passionate plea that we recognise a necessary shift in the theological agenda. We have, he suggests, to choose between the Tillich and the Bonhoeffer whom John Robinson conjoined in *Honest to God*—and the choice must be for Bonhoeffer. Our central task must be 'to give priority to those truths which will defend the growing number of the victims of politically and

religiously supported individualism' (p. 218). If John Robinson was, as he suggests, somewhat deficient in recognising the interaction of issues of truth with questions of power and vested interests, the Church of England as a whole must indeed have a long way to travel on that issue! But I have misgivings about the language of options. The prophetic voice needs to be expressed more effectively. But it must not succumb to the temptation of falling back on a less radical theology in the hope that that will give it a more effective force. A radical theology and a prophetic voice do not go easily together. But if both are to pursue their tasks with integrity, they need one another. To recognise and make effective the complementary nature of their two styles of discourse is one of the most pressing issues for theologians and church leaders of our time, and one that a commemorative recollection of *Honest to God* does well to call to our attention.

MAURICE WILES

**LICENSED INSANITIES: RELIGIONS AND BELIEF IN GOD IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD** by John Bowker. *Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1987. Pp 164. £8.95.*

This book (as the sub-title indicates) is an assessment of the place that religion occupies in the world today. The author begins by maintaining, against injudicious talk about 'secularization', that very many people adhere to religion with a conviction that is shown, however perversely, in the violence with which they defend or propagate it. Having noted differences between religions and their moral demands Bowker concentrates, inevitably, on Christian theism. Here he propounds two main theses. First, against Don Cupitt he holds that we cannot and need not surrender the objective truth claims of religion. Epistemologically he adopts a form of 'critical realism'. In religion, as in ordinary experience and scientific theorizing, we encounter an independently existing order of reality that sets limits to our descriptions of it although the latter are always corrigible and incomplete. Bowker adds that just as the objectivity of sensory experience is confirmed by the persistence of its characteristics, so too the objectivity of religious experience is confirmed by the persistence of its characteristics throughout Christian tradition.

Secondly, Bowker affirms that the various human causes of religious belief (such as the Freudian and Marxist ones) that have been offered do not rule out the possibility that God exists. Even if we are constrained to believe in God for these human reasons they do not constitute a total and sufficient explanation of belief; for there remains the constraint produced by the distinctively religious modes of experience that Bowker states. Both the human causes of belief (such as the desire for heavenly consolation) and the divine cause of it (operating in God's direct, though also mediated, self-disclosure to the soul) may act simultaneously. We cannot validly infer from the presence of a human cause the absence of the divine one. There is a lengthy Appendix on 'Religions as Systems' that was first published in the Anglican Report entitled *Believing in the Church*.

I find Bowker's presentation of the two preceding theses convincing. Although I wish that he had expounded the similarities and differences between religious and scientific language more systematically, that he had developed his mention of natural theology on pp 97–8, and that he had examined the human 'causes' of belief in greater detail, I welcome the book as a forceful, but also properly cautious, defence of theism on experiential grounds against attempts to discredit or erode it.

H.P. OWEN