

Comment

Being honest to God

A quarter of a century has gone by since the publication of Bishop John Robinson's sensational *Honest to God*, which introduced the ordinary British church-goer to 'radical theology' and its bold disturbing questions. Kind readers have asked us to write this month on what Mrs Thatcher had to say on 21 May to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, but her sermon has already got commented on, all over the place. Besides, next month we are printing a major article, 'Understanding Thatcherism', by Nicholas Boyle. We would be using this space better for commenting on current popular opinions about God.

Yet it is getting hard to say anything about opinion trends in Britain, even opinions about God, without saying something about Thatcherism. In this number Maurice Wiles reviews *God's Truth*, the book brought out to mark the first quarter-century of *Honest to God*, and he reflects on the feelings of many of its contributors. They see *Honest to God* as the product of a time of 'perhaps unrealistic' hopes. And 'John Robinson was no Joseph', they clearly think. '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.'

Maurice Wiles does not think 'radical theology' has gone for ever, for 'the failure to answer the questions it poses has been so total'. Who, though, I ask you, who in the world outside seminaries and theological departments, is going to bother to listen to any theology, however intelligent, unless it promises to lead one somewhere? And its capacity to do that partly depends on what the wider world is like. 'Radical theology' budded in a rather different kind of world from the present one. Altizer's argument that through saying 'Yes' to the secular world we might even yet come to 'an epiphany of the sacred' was just believable in the hopeful 60s. Such a theology is only believable in the 80s by an utterly different group of Christians. Most notably, by those conservative evangelicals who, in the U.S., have let Hollywood take them over, the operators and audience of the billion-dollar 'electronic church' and those booming multiplying house churches which are telling their members that Christ says wealth is a sure sign of blessedness. It is these people who

are now the ones well on the way to embracing secularism as the true faith, secularism wrapped up in Christian clichés.

Not long ago highly intelligent sociologists like Peter Berger were telling us that post-industrial society's members tended to see their world as a superstore, with all the life-styles and ideas in it (even what had been sacred ones) up for grabs. But in fact secularism and the right-wing mentality can sometimes go extremely well together. The message is getting around (and it can be made to sound a very moral one) that there is only one authentic voice in the universe: the conquerors'. The Roman emperors had to pretend to be gods to make people believe that. Today such devices are not necessary. David Glencross of the Independent Broadcasting Authority, who is responsible for regulating ITV, recently said regarding the *Tumbledown* controversy, 'There is a climate of intolerance, which isn't entirely coming from the government. It's nothing to do with the portrayal of sex and violence; I'm thinking of the handling of ideas.' The public of the 80s gets more disturbed when the Establishment is knocked, when minorities are heard.

Just possibly, deep deep down, the haves are beginning to realise that the planet Earth is not a superstore but a prison whose inmates are only going to survive by sharing love and understanding, and so they are getting scared—but this is only a guess. What we do know is that we are living in an age not particularly conducive to truth, least of all truth about God. For honest, brave thinking about God puts question-marks over everything. The churches are only going to be honest about God and to God if they solidly help to resist in a non-selective way the movement towards silence and the undermining of human rights that is currently spreading in our society.

Sometimes explicit gospel commands help to make resisting a little easier (when we are fighting for the economically deprived, for example). But what are we to say about the Catholic Church's silence regarding Clause 28 of the Local Government Bill (now on the Statute Book)? In the means it proposed for stopping the young from being educated to be more tolerant of homosexuality, the legislation was in fact undermining some basic human rights which affect everybody, not just homosexuals, and setting bad precedents. The Church could have protested here too without any moral compromise. In the long run its silence is going to harm it more. For, so long as we opt for silence in oppression's face, when our theologians speak of God they will produce little more than noise.

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