

The text of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon is not word for word the same as that of the King James version. Of 433 verses of Isaiah in the Nephite record, Joseph Smith modified about 233. Some of the changes made were slight, others were radical. However, 199 verses are word for word the same as the Old English version. We therefore freely admit that Joseph Smith may have used the King James version when he came to the text of Isaiah on the gold plates. As long as the familiar version agreed substantially with the text on the gold plates, he let it pass; when it differed too radically he translated the Nephite version and dictated the necessary changes.

The same basic reasoning has been employed by Dr. Sperry to explain parallels in the New Testament and the Book of Mormon, for Latter-day Saints believe that Christ delivered the same sermons and taught the same concepts to His "other sheep" in America as He did to the inhabitants of Palestine.

Another weakness of his work is that Davies has failed to include in his suggestions for further reading many excellent books discussing the beliefs of the societies considered. Because Davies primarily discusses doctrines rather than history, his selected bibliographies should include works such as *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald, 1957); James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1924) and *Let God Be True* (Brooklyn, N. Y.: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1946) or *Things in Which It is Impossible for God to Lie* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1965).

In one respect, Davies's book indicates a failing of Latter-day Saints. In the preface to the third edition Davies writes that he is grateful for criticisms, both positive and negative, and trusts that the latest edition reflects the benefits of helpful suggestions. From these comments it seems that no Latter-day Saint has written to Professor Davies about the obvious errors in his book. Probably no Latter-day Saint was invited to review the first two editions, indicating a definite need for a publication such as *Dialogue*. In the past, Latter-day Saints have too frequently failed to reply to authors who have perpetuated myths about Mormonism.

This work further indicates a need for Latter-day Saints to produce more scholarly books on Mormonism and to promote their placement in libraries. Many non-Mormon authors have been greatly influenced by well-written but biased and unreliable works. When better books on Mormonism are available, critics are more likely to present the history and beliefs of the Latter-day Saints with greater accuracy.

## THEOLOGY FOR A NEW AGE

*Karl Sandberg*

*Honest to God.* By John A. T. Robinson, Bishop of Woolwich. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963. 143 pp. \$1.65 (paper). Karl Sandberg is Associate Professor of French Literature at the University of Arizona, where he recently published *At the Crossroads of Faith and Reason: An Essay on Pierre Bayle*; he observed European Christianity first-hand as an L.D.S. missionary in France.

The Church of England, the heir of a nineteen hundred year Christian tradition, has fallen upon evil days. At least such is the assessment of The Reverend Nicholas Stacey, Rector of Woolwich, in a recent issue of *Harper's*.<sup>1</sup> Far removed from the mainstream of modern life, the church is an ineffective eddy in a secular society, whose values are shaped without reference to the divine. In spite of a sustained reactivation program, the Rector's own parish of 10,000 members situated in an industrial area can scarcely muster enough souls on Sunday to create an atmosphere of worship. For most people the church has become a religious club, Stacey says, where God is isolated from people except for one or two hours a week. It would appear that the church has suffered a worse fate than ceasing to be true — it has become meaningless.

It is against this background that one must read *Honest to God*, a challenging and provocative little book by the Bishop of Woolwich, Dr. John A. T. Robinson. The work attempts to re-establish contact with the world and to relocate the sense of holiness in a secular society.

Bishop Robinson's point of departure is that the modern world is secular, in contrast to the time when most of society stood on the common ground of a revealed book and ethic. Though men sinned against it, they acknowledged a transcendent standard of morality. Secular society repudiates the standard itself.

The experience of and necessity for God have largely disappeared. Bishop Robinson affirms that the hypothesis of God, once necessary to explain the creation and continuance of the universe, has been replaced by materialist explanations which seem just as plausible. Personal weakness and dependence on the elements once compelled people to rely on divine protection; today science and technology have made men the masters of nature. More important, the sanctions of the traditional Christian morality, deprived of their theological foundations, have largely disappeared, and secular society has fallen into a sterile ethical relativity, which threatens the worth and dignity of the whole human venture.

As a "defender of the faith," Bishop Robinson refuses to confine himself to the shrinking "religious remnant" which still accepts Christian presuppositions. He seeks a common ground which can give meaning and direction, if not to all men, at least to the ethically oriented for whom traditional Christianity has become impossible. His procedure is to emphasize the role of Jesus in Christianity and to suggest a radical revision of the traditional notions of God, ethics, and the spiritual life.

The traditional idea of God (based, it might be noted, upon the Platonic dichotomy between form and matter) is that God differs essentially from His creation. The practical result has been to picture God as a Person (inaccurately, in the Bishop's view) "up there" spatially or "out there" metaphysically, occasionally entering into relationship with His creation, but possessing a nature totally foreign to it. This God has become remote, unnecessary and, in a scientific age, incredible. To be meaningful, God must be present "in the center of life."

How does one get God back in the world, or in other words, how does one recover or discover the holy and transcendent in a secular world? Here Bishop Robinson leans heavily on the writings of the late Paul Tillich. Frankly

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<sup>1</sup>"The Decline of the Church of England," *Harper's Magazine* (March, 1966), pp. 64-70.

parting company with the idea of God as a supreme person, whose existence or non-existence becomes a matter of argument, Bishop Robinson and Tillich assert that God is by definition that which is ultimate in the universe. Beneath the flux of surface phenomena, beneath the changing and transitory, is the Eternal. God is not thought of as "a" being, but as Being itself. When Tillich speaks of "God," says the Bishop, he speaks of "our ultimate concern, of what we take seriously without reservation" (p. 46). For him the word "God" denotes "the ultimate depth of all of our being, the creative ground and meaning of all our existence" (p. 47). When we say, "God is Love," we do not refer to a person who embodies love perfectly. We mean that "in pure personal relationship we encounter, not merely what ought to be, but what is, the deepest, veriest truth about the structure of reality" (p. 49).

Jesus was not the God-Man described in the traditional understanding of the Incarnation. "Jesus never claims to be God, personally," says Bishop Robinson, "yet he always claims to bring God, completely" (p. 73). He could say "I and the Father are one. . . . The Father is in me and I am in the Father," because in Jesus there was nothing of self; He was "utterly open to, and united with, the Ground of His being" (pp. 74, 76). Jesus is the "man for the others" and it is in His life that we find "the love whereby we are brought completely into one with the Ground of our being" (p. 82). As Bonhoeffer says:

To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to cultivate some particular form of asceticism (as a sinner, a penitent or a saint), but to be a man. It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world (p. 83).

The experience of the divine is to be found in the depth of the world, in relationship with people, and not out of the world. The only atheists are those who hold life to be shallow. And Bishop Robinson offers the way of unconditional Christian love as expressive of the ultimate depth of life.

In questions of ethics, the Bishop casts the traditional molds into the melting pot in his attempt to confront the secular twentieth century. He departs from the absolutistic morality, whose precepts are "given, objectively and immutably" (p. 107). For example, one Christian view of marriage holds that it not only should not but *cannot* be dissolved. Wedlock creates an indelible union; once two people are married, they can no more cease to be man and wife than a brother and a sister can cease to be related. Bishop Robinson feels that the chances are small of commending this view to a modern world which has rejected the metaphysical suppositions upon which it rests. Binding Christianity to such a doctrine would simply discredit the one with the other (pp. 108-109).

The precepts of Jesus, he says, were not meant to be understood legalistically. The one absolute constant in ethics is the command of unconditional love of God and man, and Jesus did not spell out what love demanded in every situation. His teachings are simply illustrations of what love might require. At one time it might mean sacrificing all one possesses, at another giving one's clothes, lending money without question, or violating the accepted rules concerning the Sabbath. The rightness or wrongness of any given act is determined not by a *priori prescription* but by the consideration that "the

deepest welfare of these particular persons in this particular situation matters more than anything else in the world" (p. 114).

To a couple contemplating a divorce, Christian counsel would not be, "Don't, because divorce is always wrong." The "new morality," as Bishop Robinson conceives it, would rather pose the question, "What will serve the deepest interests of the people concerned?" To a young man asking in his relations with a girl, "Why shouldn't I?" the answer is not, "Don't, because it is a sin." He should be helped to see for himself that if he does not love the girl deeply, his act is immoral; and if he does, he will respect her too much to use her or take liberties with her (pp. 118-119).

Such a morality would rely upon the guidelines of tradition and the "bank of experience," but it would insist that each person find for himself the application of the law of love in his own situation. More demanding than the old ethic and potentially dangerous, this morality, the Bishop maintains, is the only way possible between the morass of relativism and the unworking rigidity of the old absolutism.

A common Mormon approach to the Sabbath is very similar to what Bishop Robinson advocates as a general rule of conduct: the principle is stated, a few strong recommendations are given, and the application is left to the individual. Can this approach be used in all questions of ethics? I believe Bishop Robinson's approach has much to recommend it. The fruits of the morally absolutistic Puritan religion or the rigidly legalistic religion of the Pharisees were far from being universally admirable. Yet the history of casuistry shows that often the principle is accommodated to conduct before conduct is made to square with principle. To avoid either excess, it is necessary to provide the individual with both principle and freedom and let him find his own way. This approach may be strengthened by the Mormon idea that man and God cooperate in a universe governed by law. Moral stability does not come by absolutes imposed from without but by increasing knowledge of one's present self, of the cause-and-effect nature of his environment, and of his eternal potential.

The chief weakness in the book may be precisely in the use of the word "God." Before reacting too vigorously to the phrase "God is dead," used popularly and somewhat inaccurately to refer to the whole of the radical theology, I would want to know which God is reported to have died. Having spent two and one-half years talking about religion in European industrial cities, which must strongly resemble Woolwich, I have to agree that the traditional idea of God has become meaningless to most people. It is possible, however, that this condition does not result from making God too personal but rather from a doctrine making him too remote. Although popular Christianity pictures God in some personal form, it insists that He is wholly different from man, existing above and beyond His creation, in a state of uninvolvedness with it. He exists mainly as an intellectual necessity to explain the world. A remote and uninvolved God or a mere hypothesis cannot but become meaningless to human beings.

Consequently, I cannot get very enthusiastic about depersonalizing God as a means of getting Him back in the world. It is true that for many Anglicans and others the Bishop's approach has had a rejuvenating effect, making the concerns and questions of religion real and immediate by insisting that God is not "out there" but "in the midst of us," and that the Gospel has to

do with the world and not withdrawal from the world. He has no doubt made the idea of God accessible to the subtle intellect, but I wonder to how many others. It is significant that the more he insists on the impersonality of the Ground of all Being, the more he emphasizes the personality of Jesus and the personal element of religious encounter. Personality seems to be such an indispensable element of religion that the vagueness of "the Ground of Being" may ultimately make it as meaningless as the God "up there."

Fortunately, the alternatives are not restricted to the traditional idea and the "Ground of Being." The Mormon concept of God differs essentially from both. The idea of God as an explanation for the world has had almost no part in Mormon writings. And Mormons have never accepted the Platonic dichotomy between spirit (mind) and matter. The whole effort of Mormonism is predicated upon God's direct and continued involvement in the world to bring all of mankind to a higher level of existence. God surpasses man incomprehensibly in degree but is not essentially different from him in nature.

Mormonism, in fact, looks upon God as a divine Parent whose purpose is, through the experience and knowledge to be gained in the world, to bring mankind to an eternal and divine quality of life. Men are thus regarded as eternally progressive beings. Given desire and obedience to presently discovered truth, they will continue to increase their knowledge of their environment and consequently their control over it. The "autonomy" of men in this sense is consistent with the bringing of them to the condition in which they become "free forever" (II Nephi 2:26).

But an increasing human independence and maturity does not push God out of the universe. As men become freer, they are not cut off from God. They are rather invited to cooperate more intelligently and more effectively with Him and with each other in fulfilling the divine plan.

Space permits neither an elaboration of these views nor an attempt to forestall the veto which some will prepare. But such a view of God and man is at least consistent with the modern emphasis on action and the discovery of progressive qualities in human beings.

These doctrines may also have the virtue of evoking the latent powers in men as they encounter greater demands and greater opportunities to participate with God in resolving the problems of life. A religion becomes vital only as it communicates the feeling that God's purposes are being worked out in and through the world, and what is vital in Mormonism may be attributed in part to its success in imparting this sense of immediacy.

But in spite of reservations and basic differences of point of view, I find Bishop Robinson's book significant and important, first of all for its candor and honesty. To throw overboard the forms and beliefs which have become established and venerable through long tradition is not a task lightly undertaken, and he has not hesitated when these forms and beliefs become hindrances to the meaningful life. Without such honesty there is perhaps no authentic religion.

More important, the very writing of such a book suggests that the sectarian age is moribund. When the challenge to Mormonism was to defend its position among other churches in a society still basically Christian, it did so with energy and intelligence, as is seen in the writings of the Pratts and B. H. Roberts. Today, in a society which is basically secular, the challenge to Mormonism, as to all religions, is to direct its voice to the issues of a new age.