

"OUR IMAGE OF GOD"

INTRODUCTION

It was on the 17th day of March last year that the London Observer published an article by a Bishop of the Anglican Church, Dr. John A. T. Robinson. The article carried this headline: "OUR IMAGE OF GOD MUST GO". In the article, Dr. Robinson proceeded to summarize his book, "Honest To God" which was published on the following Tuesday by the Student Christian Movement Press.

His book, "Honest To God" has stirred up a great deal of controversy and discussion - in the press, the pulpit, the class room, and on the street. It has stirred up more controversy than any other book of its type since the one published in 1959 by Charles Darwin, "On the Origin of the Species". For many, the book has opened the door to a new understanding of God and religion. For others, it has sounded like the end of the Christian era. It has made a great many people think about God who haven't thought a great deal about him in a long, long time.

The book, overnight a best seller, already translated into nine languages, is now available in the paper back edition. It has been followed by a second book, "The Honest To God Debate". Some of you have already been introduced to the book. After Easter, we shall use "Honest To God" for the text book of our Sunday morning Adult Discussion Group. I do not intend to discuss the book this morning, but rather to help you think about God by raising this question: do we need a new image of God?

WHAT IS AN IMAGE OF GOD?

What is an image of God. Is it a figure made out of metal that one puts on a mantle piece, or an on altar. It's not taht for us, although it is that for a great many people. But when we speak of the image of God, we aren't speaking of anything made out of metal or any other material. But rather it is something mental, made out of our capacity to think....to picture things we cannot see.

For instance, I have an image of the Equator. I have never been near the equator and if, one day I should get near it, the chances are I wouldn't see anything....but I have a vivid image of the Equator, one that I have had since I was a boy, and it is that of a black band running around the globe. Also, I have an image of the North Pole. You probably have one, too. I have never been to the North Pole, nor do I have any desire to go there, and if I should one day go there the chances are that I wouldn't see anything, but I have an image of the North Pole that's as vivid as though a flagstaff had been planted there at the point by Admiral beary or whoever it was who got there first.

We all have an image of God. We have never seen him, but we have a picture of him in our mind's eye. For some, it is nothing more than a blank. For one man, it was, by his own admission, "an oblong blurr". For others, it is a picture of a sort of overgrown man who sits on a throne and manages the affiars of the universe. For some, it is an abstract principle. The law of gravityt isn't anything you can see - neither is the law of love. The law of love is an abstract principle which for some is an image of God.

Everyone has an image of God. Even Nietzsche, the German philosopher, had a picture of God. He said that God was dead. His picture of God was that of a corpse. We all have an image of God.

THE IMAGE CHANGES

Now.....from that fact....let us proceed then to the fact that a person's image of God is not always the same. It changes, I'm sure, across the years of a lifetime. When you were a child, God may have been very near to you when you knelt down by your bedside and with your mother or father by your side, prayed, "God bless mummy and daddy, and help me to be a good boy or girl". When you became a young person and were confronted with all of the complexities of life and saw before you the riddles of the universe and of existence that were beyond your comprehension, God may not have been quite so close. In fact, he may have disappeared completely from your view. And then, perhaps, when you grew a little older and became more mature, he may have come back....but not in exactly the same way he was when you knelt down by your bedside as a child. He is vaster....greater.

And this too - during the lifetime of the human race the image of God has been changing and changing constantly. In the primitive days of mankind, the image of God was the image of a spirit that dwelt in a river, or in a tree, or at the top of a mountain. We can understand that...understand how it came about. But what you can't see quite as easily is that one small group of people came to the point where they saw the real image of God was the spirit of justice and righteousness. It really is amazing when you stop to think about it that the Jewish people had that tremendous insight into the nature of God that none of the other people living around them had....that God was the spirit of justice and righteousness...the spirit of that which is caught up in the 10..

Don't be alarmed if your "image" of God changes as you grow. I think it ought to; be alarmed if it doesn't. It changes because we change. We know more about the world than we once did. The man, for instance, who pictured the world as a flat patten, around which the sun and stars and planets revolved, had a picture of God that is quite different than the man would have who pictures the world in terms of interstellar spaces - outer space - light years. He is bound to have a different image of God....unless he keeps these two things in absolutely air-tight compartments. If he does that he may be "religious" in the sense in which Robinson and Bonhoeffer so deplore it - religion as a separate compartment of life - unrelated to business, to politics, to morality - irrelevant to the time and circumstances of our changing world.

THE "OLD" IMAGE OF GOD

I think one of the things that Dr. Robinson is saying in his book, "Honest To God" (as I understand it) is that more people than we realize still have the "old" image of God. They tend to picture him as a thing "outside", and therefore apart from the universe and the life we live. As they picture him, he made the universe, he keeps it going. He watches over it. He once came into it, and from time to time, he comes to us when we need him. But by and large, he is apart from us "totally other" - out there somewhere, so to speak.

He makes this judgment on the basis of the way people seem to behave rather than the way they talk. For instance, he sees them going about their daily existence without paying any attention to God at all. They act as though He were completely apart from life - the life they live. They go about their business, making their decisions, with no reference to God whatsoever. When they pray, it's as though they were praying to someone who is not always with them - it's like a long distance telephone call made in the time of an emergency.

Perhaps this illustration will help to shed some light on all of this. Suppose you were attending the rehearsal of a play - the final rehearsal of a play soon to open on the Broadway Stage. It comes to your mind that you would like to meet the author of the play for you have been stirred by what you have seen in the first act or two. It's the intermission. You ask some people who are standing down near the front if they've seen the author. They shrug their shoulders and shake their heads "no". You begin to look around on your own. You go up to the edge of the stage and look up there into those dazzling lights and various platforms thinking that he might be up there helping to direct the players. No sign of him. You look in the wings. You think he might be there ready to rush in at any moment to tell a poor actor who forgets his lines or does something the wrong way....but he isn't there. Ah....then it comes to you. He must be sitting out in the darkened theater....on the last row, watching the play, sitting alone, away from every one else. You go out there and make your way through the endless rows of seats. He isn't there. Well, maybe he's stepped down into the lobby to have a cigarette. He's not there. Maybe he's up in the balcony, and so you make your way up to the balcony. He's not there, and so you eventually come to the conclusion that the author isn't there at all.

What Dr. Robinson is trying to say is that you're looking for the author in the wrong place. If you want to meet the author look for him on the stage, in the play, where the action is taking place. You may not meet him face to face, or have the opportunity to shake hands with him personally, but the deeper you go into the play, the more you will come to terms with the mind and the spirit, the purpose and the meaning of the author who created it. That is where you will meet him - not in the wings, not in the last row of the theater, not up in the balcony, but on the stage itself. What he is saying to some people is that if you want to meet God, don't go higher and higher into space, but go deeper and deeper into your own life, - into the relationships you have with other people, into the mysteries of life and death, and as you go into those depths you will meet him who transcends everything that you can ever think or do or be.

DO WE NEED A NEW IMAGE OF GOD?

Back now, for a moment, to the question: do we need a new image of God? I think some people do. Many are still trying to nourish their lives on the image of God that they had when they were children; there are persons who still cling to immature conceptions of God, seeing God as something of a heavenly Santa Claus, handing out gifts to those who are good, available to be reached by long distance in moments of emergency. This book may be helpful to

some of you. Others of you may not need it. Your image of God is of a living presence - of mind - purpose - power - love - the kind of image the Psalmist had in mind when he wrote the 139th psalm.

ONE FINAL WORD Remember this. In the New Testament there is a new image of God. As far as I can see, if the concordance is correct, the only reference to the "image of God" in the New Testament is the one that is made in reference to our Lord who is referred to as "the brightness of God's glory and the express image of his Person". J. B. Phillips puts it this way: "He is the flawless expression of the nature of God"

Begin with Him. Begin with Jesus of Nazareth. Begin with the concrete and move out from there into the abstract. For most of you, I think that is the way. It may not be for everyone. Begin with the concrete and move out into the realm of the abstract.

Let me give you an illustration of what I am driving at. As a boy, I loved music. I still do. I was brought up in a town that was some distance away from any cultural center - from the concert hall. We had a phonograph and one or two shellac records. They were expensive. We couldn't afford them. This was just about the time the LP record were first coming out. I remember one summer, back in 1946, how one of the teachers in the local high school invited me and a close friend to go with him over to Tanglewood, in the Berkshires, to a Thursday night concert. I had never heard of Tanglewood. This was the first concert I ever attended. We went; it took us about three hours to get there. I remember hearing Brahms First Symphony. I don't know who played it or whether it was played well. I can still hear the power and majesty of that opening first movement. It was thrilling. For me, it was the image of the Symphony. It was the concrete. I know there is a great deal more than that about symphonic music, and I hope I have gone beyond it, but I began with that vivid image that was concrete and this I will never forget as long as I live.

When it comes to an image of God - begin with Jesus - with the way he lived, the way he managed his life, the way he loved and cared for people, the way he trusted them, the way he lost his life, the way he now lives in the hearts and minds of people....AND, if you begin with him, you may come to have a glimpse of the very being of God.

LET US PRAY:

Immortal, invisible, Thou God only wise.
In light in accessible hid from our eyes.
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.

Help us, O God, to be real in all of our relationships with Thee. Deepen our religion and fill it with sincerity, truth, and love - until thy image becomes so vivid that we know Thee and love Thee and follow Thee to the ends of our days. Amen

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His book, "Honest To God" has stirred up much controversy and discussion - in the press, the pulpit, the classroom, and on the streets. It has stirred up more controversy than any book since the one published in 1859 by Charles Darwin, "On the Origin of the Species". For many, the book has opened the door to a new understanding of God and religion. For others, it has sounded like the end of the Christian era. It has made a great many people think about God who haven't thought a great deal about him in a long time.

The book, available in the paper back edition, is not a long book. Interestingly enough, it has been followed by a second book that is much longer called "The Honest To God Debate". Some of you have already read the first book. After Easter, we shall turn to it as the basis of our Sunday morning Adult Discussion Group. I do not intend to discuss the book this morning, but rather to help you think about God by asking this question: do we need a new image of God, now?

WHAT IS AN IMAGE OF GOD

What is an image of God. Is it a figure made out of metal that you put on a mantle, or on an altar. It's not that for us, although it is for a great many people in other parts of the world. But when we speak of the image of God, we aren't speaking of anything made out of metal or any other substance. Rather it is something mental, made out of our capacity to think...to picture things we cannot see.

For instance, I have an image of the Equator. I have never been anywhere near it and, if I should some day get near it, the chances are that I wouldn't see anything, but I have a vivid image of the Equator that I have had ever since I was a boy and it is that of a black band around the globe. Also, I have an image of the North Pole. You probably have one too. I've never been there and I have no desire to go there, but if I should one day be there the chances are that I wouldn't see anything. But I have an image of the North Pole that's as vivid as though a flagstaff had been planted at that particular point by Admiral Peary or whoever it was who got there first.

We all have an image of God. We have never seen him, but we have a picture of him in our mind's eye. For some, it is nothing more than a blank. For one man, it was, by his own admission, "an oblong blur". For some, it is a picture of a sort of overgrown man who sits on a throne managing the affairs of the universe. For some, it is an abstract principle. The law of gravity isn't anything you can see - neither is the law of love. The law of love is an abstract principle which for some is an image of God.

To some people, the picture is as clear as day. For others it is murky. The outlines are not clear at all, but dim. But every one has some picture of God. Even Nietzsche, the German philosopher, had a picture of God. He said that God was dead. His picture of God was that of a corpse. We all have an image of God.

A CHANGING IMAGE

Now, from that fact, let us proceed to the fact that a person's image of God is not always the same. It changes, I'm sure, across the years of a lifetime. When you were a child, God may have been very near to you when you knelt down by your bedside and with your mother or father by your side, prayed, "God bless mummy and daddy, and help me to be a good boy or a good girl". When you became a young man or woman, and were confronted with all of the complexities of life and saw before you the riddles of existence that were beyond your comprehension, God may have not been quite so close. In fact, he may have disappeared completely from view. And then, perhaps, when you grew a little older and became more mature, he may have come back - but not in exactly the same way he was when you knelt down by your bedside as a child. He is vaster, greater.

Also, during the lifetime of the human race the image of God has been changing and changing constantly. In the primitive days of mankind, the image of God was the image of a spirit which dwelt in a river, or a tree, or on the top of a mountain. We can understand how this came about. But what you can't see quite so easily, I think, is that one small group of people came to the point where they saw the real image of God was the spirit of justice and righteousness. Isn't it amazing that the Jews, so despised by everybody around them, had that tremendous insight into the nature of God that nobody else had - that he was the spirit of justice and of right and wrong.

Don't be alarmed if your "image" of God changes as you grow. Be alarmed if it remains the same. It changes because we change. We know more about the world than we once did. The man or the woman, for instance, who pictured the world as a platter, around which all the suns and stars and planets revolved, had a picture of God that is quite different than a man would have who pictures the world in terms of interstellar spaces - light years - outer space. He is bound to have a different image of God, unless he keeps these two things in absolutely air-tight compartments. If he does that he may be 'religious' in the sense in which Bonhoeffer and Robinson so deplore it - religion as a separate compartment of life - unrelated to business, to politics, to geography, or morality - irrelevant to the time and circumstances of our changing world.

THE "OLD" IMAGE OF GOD

Now, I think, one of the things that Dr. Robinson is saying in his book, "Honest To God" is that more people than we should like to think have the "old" image of God. They tend to picture him as a Being outside, and therefore apart from the universe and the life we live. As they picture him, he made the universe, he keeps it going. He watches over it. He once came into it, and from time to time, he comes to us when we need him. But by and large, he is apart from us - out there, so to speak.

He makes his judgment on the basis of the behavior of people rather than on what they say. Two things come to mind...in connection with this. The first is the fact that most of the time they don't pay any attention to God at all. Therefore, they act as though he were completely apart from the life they live every day and had nothing to do with it. They go about their business - making their decisions - with no reference to God whatsoever. And the second is the fact that when they pray, they pray to someone who is not always with them in the time of an emergency - the way you call an ambulance, or fire department, or doctor - over the telephone.

Perhaps this illustration will bring light on all of this for we're moving through deep waters. Suppose you were attending the rehearsal of a play - the final rehearsal - a play that is soon to open here on the Broadway Stage. It comes to your mind that you would like to meet the author of the play. You ask some people who are standing around talking if they have seen the author. They shrug their shoulders and are of no help. So you begin to look around on your own. You go up to the stage and look up there into those dazzling lights and various platforms thinking that he might be up there helping to direct the players. There's no sign of him. You look into the wings. You think that he might be there, ready to rush in at any moment to tell a poor actor who forgets his part what to say....but he isn't there. Then you look in the prompter's box, but he isn't there. Then you think that maybe he's sitting out there in the darkened theater....on the last row, watching the play, sitting alone, away from every one else. So you go out there into the darkened theater and look through the endless row of seats. But he isn't there. You go down into the lobby; perhaps he is down there having a cigarette. You don't find him there, and so you eventually come to the conclusion that the author isn't there at all.

What Dr. Robinson is trying to say is that you're looking for the author in the wrong place. If you want to meet the author look for him on the stage, in the play. You may not meet him face to face, so that you can shake hands with him, but the deeper you go into the play, the more you will come to terms with the mind and the spirit and the purpose of the author who created it. That is where you will meet him - not in the wings, not in the theater, but on the stage itself. What he is saying to some people is that if you want to meet God, don't go higher and higher into space, but go deeper and deeper into your own life, into the relationships you have with other people, into the mysteries of life and death, and as you go into those depths you will meet him who transcends everything that you can ever think or do or be.

DO WE NEED A NEW IMAGE OF GOD?

Back now, for a moment or two, to the question: do we need a new image of God. In a sense, you and I need a new image of God at every stage of our growth. Every time you grow, you need a great image of God. Many people are trying to nourish their lives on the image of God that they had when they were children; there are many persons in our churches who are still clinging to immature conceptions of God, seeing God as something of a heavenly Santa Claus handing out gifts to those who are good. Perhaps this book, "Honest To God" will be helpful to you. Others of you may not have an image of God as a glorified man. Your image of God is of a living presence, of mind,

purpose, power, love - the kind of image the psalmist had in mind in the 139th psalm.

ONE FINAL WORD One final word. There is one thing to remember. In the New Testament, there is a new image of God. As far as I can find out, if the concordance are accurate, the only reference to the "image of God" in the New Testament is the one that is made in reference to our Lord who is referred to as the "brightness of God's glory and the express image of his Person". J. B. Phillips puts it this way: "He is the flawless expression of the nature of God".

Begin with him. Begin with the concrete and move out from there into the abstract. For most, that is the way. It may not be for everyone, but for most it is. Begin with the concrete and move out into the abstract.

Let me give you an illustration that points up what I mean. When I was a boy, I loved music. I still do. I lived in a town that was some distance away from a cultural center, from the concert hall and symphonic halls. There were the old shellac records. They were expensive. We couldn't afford them. This was about the time the LP's were just coming on to the market. I remember one summer, back in 1947, how one of the teachers in the local high school invited me and a close friend to go with him over to Tanglewood, in the Berkshires, on a Thursday night to hear a concert. It was the first time for me to hear a concert. It took us about two and a half hours. I had never heard of Tanglewood before. The concerts there were just starting out. We went and I heard the First Symphony by Brahms. I don't know who played it, or whether it was played well or not, but it is still for me the "image" of the Symphony. It was the concrete. I know there is a great deal more than that about symphonic music, and I hope I have gone beyond it, but I began with that vivid image that was concrete and this I will never forget as long as I live.

Begin with Jesus - the way he lived, the way he managed his life, the way he loved and cared for people, the way he treated them, the way he lost his life, the way he now lives in the hearts and minds of people and if you begin with him - you may come to have a glimpse of the very being of God.

Immortal, Invisible, God only wise.

In light in accessible hid from our eyes.

Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,

Almighty, victorious, Thy great Name we praise.

LET US PRAY Help us, O God, to be real in all our relationships with Thee. Deepen our religion and fill it with sincerity and truth, until Thy image becomes so vivid that we know Thee and love Thee and follow Thee to the end of our days. Amen