

Evangelical Breakthrough

JOHN A. T. ROBINSON reviews

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In all the flak that hit me after *Honest to God*, two regrets alone stick in my memory. The sadness was that there were two groups with whom it seemed at the time impossible to have any genuine dialogue. The first was Moral Re-armament. Enough to say here that 'absolute honesty' was not the most notable characteristic of the reaction from that quarter; and reaction it was, in every sense of the word, rather than response. The other group were the conservative evangelicals, with whom I had always had most amicable personal relationships, and still have. But the Lord had evidently stopped their ears from hearing or wanting to hear the issues involved. I remember remonstrating with a most charming and Christian vicar (who happened to be of this stripe), asking him how he thought that I could possibly have made the statement which he had joined in decrying, I think in a letter in *The Times*, without ever stopping to check if I had. They just didn't seem to want to know—and were only too ready to believe the worst. In fact the only real dialogue I can remember having was one with John Stott, Oliver Barclay and others kindly set up by my friend Norman Anderson.

The contrast with the Roman Catholics was very notable. They had started just as far back—not least on 'the new morality'!—but fast became my most creative ecumenical contacts and perceptive reviewers. Whether they agreed or not, they saw the issues.

Rather the same process has taken place in the area of New Testament criticism. Sometime in the 1950s and 1960s there was a breakthrough in Catholic biblical scholarship. With the silent demise of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, they re-joined the family, started reading our books and we theirs. Now, if anything, they need to be held back from swallowing too easily critical positions that we, or some of us, are wanting to detach ourselves from! It has been a longer time coming, but the same now appears to be happening from the evangelical side. It is, alas, evident, if *The Truth of God Incarnate* is anything to go by, that they do not yet seem to have grasped the issue raised, albeit so confusedly, by *The Myth of God Incarnate*. The very opposition of the titles shows that 'truth' and 'myth' are still being thought of in barren antithesis. But after the dismaying experience of reviewing both these books it is a relief to turn to the present symposium, which is on altogether a different level.

Here we have a real and positive welcome of the critical disciplines which have hitherto tended to mark off 'radical' from 'evangelical' scriptural scholarship. My only criticism—and it is a fault on the right side these days when there is so much more demolition than construction—is that if anything it is too positive!

A high level of scholarship

Unlike the other symposia I have mentioned, it maintains an impressively even standard. It is a circus of seventeen players of which Mr Kerry Packer would be proud. There is not one that needs to be hidden in the field, though equally I would prefer not to be invidious by isolating any for praise. There is a high level of scholarship throughout, combined with refreshingly sane judgement, good print and nice paper (if only the footnotes were in the right old place!). In fact it gets better and better as one goes along. For I detect among the contributions something of a difference of aim. Part of it, and it happens to be true mostly of the first half, seems to be concerned with the necessary, though to the rest of us not very groundbreaking, task of surveying what has been happening in New Testament criticism, introducing it to their fellow evangelicals (as Roman Catholics had to do to theirs) and saying in effect, 'Don't worry, *it's all right*'. But then we move on to some more original and constructive contributions which should add a good deal to the general conversation. Whether they will do so remains to be seen, as I am not convinced that current German, American and some British New Testament scholarship is much more open to self-criticism. Indeed it is at this point that I should like to have seen some sharper critique of the presuppositions (as opposed to the tools) of much that sails under the flag of form- and redaction-criticism. And while it may still be true (and it certainly needs in some circles to be said) that 'at present there is more danger of neglecting the new hermeneutic than of pressing its claim too far', there is also a fair amount of gentle deflation to be done.

But let us rejoice that the hermeneutical gap really is being recognized. As one of the writers says, 'The "classic" evangelical treatments of Stibbs and Berkhof simply assume that if you can understand a passage's "meaning", the question of its "significance" will look after itself. Consequently, all that is required of the preacher is "to say again what St Paul has already said".' I well remember listening to Billy Graham giving a brilliant exposition of his version of evangelism to the serried ranks of the Anglican establishment in Convocation and realizing that it was simply the *opus operatum* of the Word instead of the Sacrament. Preach what 'the Bible says', in its own sacred syllables—and God will look after the rest. In these essays not only is the great gulf of presupposition and self-under-

standing between twentieth-century and first-century man (of which the debate about 'myth' is just one part) acknowledged, but there is an open and not merely half-hearted acceptance of critical scholarly disciplines as entirely compatible with the authority of Scripture. This message has still indeed to work down through a good many layers—not least in university Christian Unions. But here is a clean, clear beginning. It would be interesting to see one of this team reviewing James Barr's *Fundamentalism* and to discover what dialogue is forthcoming.¹

Hard-core issues

My main hesitation is whether the writers have not made it all a bit too easy for themselves by skirting some of the hard-core issues. It is fairly painless to illustrate the revolution by reference to St Paul on ladies' headgear (a topic which receives disproportionate mention), and even the ordination of women is only addressed with a string of questions, some of which are no doubt intended to imply the answer 'Yes'. But what even of the stock examples of whether Jesus could ever have been mistaken (as even Bishop Gore refused to admit to the end of his life), for instance, on the authorship of Psalm 110 or the duration of the world? Is this a genuine possibility, *whatever* explanation is given? And nothing is said on the uniqueness of Christ or of the traditionally exclusivist interpretation (in these circles) of salvation by 'no other name'. There is a remarkable avoidance too of any discussion of the atonement (except to say the obvious, that sacrificial categories are dated) or of the one-sided, if not positively unbiblical, doctrine of penal substitution which has been such an evangelical shibboleth. Nor is there any discussion of the interpretation of New Testament ethics. Nor is there any sign of the new look on the front of political theology, which has been a notable and welcome feature of some transatlantic evangelicalism, combining right-wing theology with some very radical political witness. English evangelicals, liberal as well as conservative, have had a distressing tendency to political innocence.

But we can't have everything at once, and this book shows the marks of its four years of parturition. Yet a break-through has been made; and the general open conversation we may hope for could be much more creative than if those who are clearly, on this evidence, some of the best young New Testament scholars in the church, go on talking to themselves, even in the distinguished circle of the Tyndale Fellowship.

¹This was in fact done by John Goldingay in our last issue, published after this article was written.

BISHOP JOHN A. T. ROBINSON is Dean of Trinity College, Cambridge.