

Editorial

THE New Reformation? This is the question posed as the title of the Bishop of Woolwich's latest book (*The New Reformation?* by John A. T. Robinson, S.C.M. Press, 142 pp., 6s.). That the Church is in need of a new reformation today is a matter of general agreement; nor should the question-mark in the title of his book be interpreted to imply that Dr. Robinson is uncertain either about the necessity for a new reformation or about the nature of the reformation that is needed. The only query, it would seem, is whether others will fall into line and march behind him. The adjective "new" may, of course, be understood either in terms of renewal or of novelty: it is novelty rather than renewal that is distinctive of Dr. Robinson's prescription for the curing of the ills of Christendom. He calls for a radically new departure involving a break with Christianity in its classical formulations; so much so that one feels bound to ask whether the scheme he propounds should not be described as a "new formation" rather than a "new reformation". Be that as it may, he sees himself cast in the role of a reformer for our time. Indeed, he tells of one writer who "committed the extravagance of comparing *Honest to God* with the nailing of Luther's theses to the church door at Wittenberg". At the same time, Bishop Robinson expresses gratification at the sympathetic reception accorded to his views in Hindu and Buddhist circles—though he is careful to declare that he has "not the least desire to weaken or deny the distinctive affirmations of the Christian faith".

Now it will very properly be asked what precisely, so far as the Bishop of Woolwich is concerned, these distinctive affirmations of the Christian faith are. Dr. Robinson selects the following two categories which, presumably, he regards as of primary importance:

- (1) The centrality of the confession 'Jesus is Lord', in the full New Testament sense that 'in him all things cohere' and 'in him the whole fulness of the deity dwells bodily', and
- (2) the centrality of the utterly *personal* relationship of communion with God summed up in Jesus' address 'Abba, Father!'

On the face of it this looks admirably biblical. But we have learnt to be cautious when contemporary secularizers of the faith quote from Scripture. For one thing, they reject so much that is distinctive of the teaching and outlook of the Bible that it is strange to find them using biblical texts and passages in a manner that would delight a fundamentalist. For another, it is a far from satisfactory procedure to pass over so much in Scripture that is inimical to their position and yet to seize on and brandish certain expressions to which, so they believe, their thought can be accommodated. And again, it is common practice nowadays to impose on biblical statements interpretations

which are alien to the sense as intended by the apostolic authors and as understood in historic Christendom. Thanks to the frankness with which Bishop Robinson has laid bare his mind for us, we are able to conclude that the confession that "Jesus is Lord" and "in him all things cohere", would be interpreted by him to mean that Jesus is authoritative as a universal point of reference and as a paragon of fully integrated, self-giving manhood, and that he would understand the assertion that "in him the whole fulness of the deity dwells bodily" in terms of the subjectivity of God as the depth of the being of the man Jesus which is, in effect, the identification or equating of deity with the ideal of humanity as manifested in the man Jesus. As for "Abba, Father," since Dr. Robinson rules out the objectivity and otherness of God, this has to be explained in terms of human interpersonal relationships, of deep calling to deep, as between man and fellow-man. It is scarcely surprising that the Bishop of Woolwich's questioning of the necessity of what he calls the supernaturalist cast of thought should appear "to Hindus, as well as to modern secular men, to make Christian truth less alien to them". The big question is whether it is in fact Christian truth, and not something alien to Christian truth, which is proving less alien to the non-Christian and the anti-Christian world.

The impropriety of the appellation "reformation" for the radical programme he is advocating is admitted by Bishop Robinson in the sense that he feels that the organized Church is now past reforming. Many churchmen more orthodox than he must share his concern over the excessive institutionalization of the Church, the professionalism of its ministry, and the recrudescence of medieval concepts such as indelibility and of legal fictions regarding the effects of the episcopal consecration of a church or graveyard. As a suffragan bishop he is frustratingly caught up in the workings of the ecclesiastical machinery. However, it is not merely the organization of the Church that he considers to be antiquated and outmoded, but its doctrine also. "Is the Church not an archaic and well-protected institution for the preservation of something that is irrelevant and incredible?" he asks. He applauds the judgment of Professor William Hamilton that the God of the Augustinian-Reformed tradition is not only remote but absent, indeed dead. And yet he speaks of the Reformation of the sixteenth century as a movement of the Spirit; and it is in this respect that he seeks to justify the application of the term "reformation" to the movement which he himself is anxious to promote. He wishes to persuade us that this too is a movement of the Spirit. Sensitivity to what the Spirit is saying is, he admonishes us, the prerequisite of reformation. But here, once again, we come up against the serious problem of semantics. Unexceptionable though such an admonition is to orthodox ears, we must pause and ask what he means by "the Spirit", and the explanation must follow that, given his own premisses, he cannot mean the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, whom we profess in the creed as the sovereign Lord and Life-Giver, totally other than man, but the Spirit of God (for what such words are worth) understood as, in depth, one and the same with the spirit of man.

This helps to throw some light on the Bishop of Woolwich's peculiar methods of appealing to history for vindication of his radicalism. For him, the message of history would seem to be an extreme form of the evolutionistic dogma of a bygone age, that everything must change (and change radically) or perish. The classical doctrine of God as self-consistent and His truth as unchanging, is entirely incompatible with the view that the Spirit is moving us in the twentieth century in a direction radically opposed to that in which He moved the Church in the sixteenth century, so that we are now required to believe that the doctrines of the Reformation (which were, after all, only the re-affirmation of the doctrines of the New Testament) are irrelevant and incredible—unless compatibility is argued on the basis of the identification of the Spirit of God with the inconstant spirit of man and the denial of all absolutes in favour of a complete relativization of reality, which makes it possible, if not indeed certain, that what is true today will be false tomorrow. A similar appeal to history is found in *Honest to God*, where Bishop Robinson seeks to justify the assault now being mounted by him and other secularizers of the faith against the historic understanding of Christianity on the ground that the Apostle Paul assailed the beliefs and "gods" of his day with the "new religious truth" which he was proclaiming. According to this philosophy of history, therefore, it is logical and proper that Paul and his teachings should in turn be assailed and overthrown by the "new religious truth" of our day. The genuinely *Christian* procedure, one would have thought, would be to probe the contemporary ideologies of each succeeding generation, including our own, with the same sword of apostolic truth as was wielded by St. Paul. The whole system of contemporary "secularized Christianity" seems, however, to be infected with a form of casuistry which manipulates history and terminology and by some feat of mental prestidigitation robs them of their classical significance.

The standard of authenticity which we are being asked to accept is that of our own restricted (not to say fallen) humanity, and in consequence the only absolute becomes that of our inescapable relativity. "For," says Dr. Robinson, "as soon as we pass beyond the limited area verifiable in the experiences of our relationships with other people and with things, there is nothing to count for or against the truth of our assertions". This can only mean goodbye to any concept of revealed religion and the loss of confidence in "the great classic doctrines" (to give Dr. Robinson's own list) "of the creation and governance of the world, predestination and election, pre-existence and immortality, the generation and procession of the persons of the Trinity, angels and the Devil, heaven and hell, the last judgment and the second coming"—a pretty large chunk of historic Christianity! What, indeed, is there left to have confidence in except mere humanity, which is precisely the thing in which the Gospel admonishes us to have no confidence?

If the basic problem of the old Reformation was "How can I find a gracious God?" the basic problem of the "new reformation" is, so we are told, "How can I find a gracious neighbour?" And the

solution offered to this basic problem is that we find Christ, not in Himself as unique, but in the identity of each person we encounter. In fact, the uniqueness of Christ becomes purely that of a subjective value-judgment: "Christ is a perfectly ordinary human being . . . who is *unique for me*" (the emphasis is Dr. Robinson's). While, as we would expect, the Bishop of Woolwich rejects the charge that he is an atheist, he expresses every sympathy for the atheism of our day (such as Sir Julian Huxley's) which maintains that the God of classical Christianity is intellectually superfluous (modern science, potentially, has all the answers), emotionally dispensable (modern man must accept responsibility for his own destiny), and morally intolerable ("The God who could have sent 'twelve legions of angels' and did not is exposed as the God who failed even his Son"!—a comment which unhappily indicates a failure, rather, to understand the apostolic Gospel, which is the very heart of the Christian message). No wonder Dr. Robinson advises us that God is dead, "as 'God' has traditionally been understood", and that, placed as he is, he finds himself in an apparently schizophrenic state—"Is not the situation of many of us today that we feel we *must* be atheists, and yet we *cannot* be atheists?"

A slick command of the sales-talk of the new deal in religion is displayed by Professor Thomas J. J. Altizer of Emory University, Atlanta, in an article entitled "Creative Negation in Theology", which appeared in *The Christian Century* of 7 July last. We are not disposed to dispute Dr. Altizer's assertion that "the whole established order of Christendom is eroding about us", but we deny that the necessity logically follows of "opening ourselves to a radically new form of faith". Employing a historical technique similar to that of the Bishop of Woolwich, he declares that, as a result of the Exile, "Judaism was created out of a faith that dared to negate its original forms and structures" (which would seem to be a most misleading statement). This leads to the posing of the rhetorical question: "Just as the Jew was born out of the passage through the death of his own sacred history, may we hope that a new Christian will be born out of the death of Christendom?" We are assured that "the contemporary theologian" (a tendentious generalization, synonymous in this same article with the even more question-begging expression "the Christian theologian") "is not a Christian in any sense that could be drawn from the creeds and confessions of the historic church". On the contrary, he must uncompromisingly proclaim the death of God and attack "the very possibility of 'God-language' in our situation". Moreover, the Christ to whom he points must be "the kenotic Christ, who has finally emptied himself of Spirit in wholly becoming flesh"—so kenotic, it would appear, that "the contemporary Christian" (who is this?) "is perhaps now losing the ability to speak the name of either 'Jesus' or 'Christ'". "Christianity" is reduced to this, that "we speak the Word when we say Yes to the moment before us", and contemporary Christendom is fortified with the glorious assurance that "the Christian Word becomes a new reality by ceasing to be itself"—a prize piece of dialectical jargon which deserves a place of honour in the museum of the meaningless.

Thus the long portended night of theology without God and

Christianity without Christ is rapidly closing in on us. We have a Light to walk by. Let us see that others have it too.

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It should not be imagined that it is only the world of Protestantism which is being invaded by the forces of this "radically new form of faith". There is evidence to show that Roman Catholicism, so far from being, as some like to think, dogmatically impregnable, is already extensively penetrated by this same radicalism. In it, indeed, we may well discern the developing shade of a new world religion in which there will be room for all kinds of faith or none. The contributors of articles to this issue of *The Churchman*—a distinguished Roman Catholic layman, a dignitary with anglo-catholic sympathies, and two scholars of evangelical persuasion (each of whom is, of course, responsible only for what he has written)—share this in common that they are all deeply concerned, especially in the face of current trends, for the propagation of the authentic Christianity of the New Testament. Concerning its truth and its survival they have no misgivings. P.E.H.
