

Unit 6: The secular 1960s

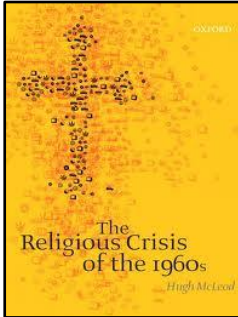


Image of The Religious Crisis of the 1960s by Hugh McLeod

During the 1960s, all the major institutional Churches began to go into sharp decline. This is the more dramatic when it is considered that during the period from 1890 to 1960, there had been no very sharp statistical alteration in religious practice; the Free Churches had fallen, the Catholics had risen, the Anglicans had remained fairly steady (Hastings, *History of English Christianity*, p.551). Now, all the large churches seemed to go into free fall. Each denomination had its own particular crises, but these were sometimes accompanied by moments of opportunity and transformation. In secular and social terms, the 1960s is popularly seen as a decade of turmoil, as people threw off the shackles of respectability in order to enjoy the new world order of soft drugs, casual sex and free rock concerts (cf. Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (2001)). This of course is something of a caricature, and it is easy to over-emphasise the number of people who were affected by late 1960s youth culture. Anecdotal evidence from those who remember the 1960s often emphasises it is as time of prosperity and stability, when many lives remained little changed. For many Christians, one suspects, the values that they espoused in the 1950s lasted well into the next decade. For nominal or non-Christians, however, religious questions began to slip further and further into the periphery of what mattered to them, making the 1960s the most secular decade that the twentieth century had witnessed thus far. The emphasis was on progress, material prosperity, modernity, individualism and technological advancement. Traditional Christianity did not appear to fit into the picture very well. For example, of the fifteen new universities founded in the mid-1960s, none was founded with a Theology department, although two (Kent and Lancaster) added Religious Studies later.

(For an excellent precis of the decade, and the tensions between institutionalism and the new freedoms, see Robbins, England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, pp. 384-96 as well as the whole of Chapter 6, 'The Perils of Prosperity')

Ecumenical relations

Roman Catholic interest in ecumenical relations, which had been put in the deepfreeze with the death of Cardinal Hinsley in 1943, did not begin to thaw until Cardinal Heenan took the initiative after the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism in 1964 (document 6). In 1964, British Catholics became active observers at the Faith and Order Conference of the British Council of Churches. This was seen as an enormous step forward. In that year too, Heenan accepted the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbi to join them in the joint chairmanship of the Council of Christians and Jews, despite the manifest disapproval of the Roman authorities. On a local level, Roman Catholics were also gaining an increasing level of acceptance from non-Roman Christians, and denominational hostilities, in places like Liverpool and Glasgow, wherethey had

always been strong, at last began to crumble. Instead, cooperation became the order of the day, particularly over the sharing of non-sacramental forms of worship like carol services and harvest festivals.

The climax in this process at this period was the highly publicised visit of Archbishop Ramsey to Pope Paul VI in the spring of 1966. This was the start of what came to be seen as the special relationship between the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, a relationship in which the Free Churches very much had to play second fiddle. This special relationship had at its core the assumption that full communion between the two churches, or at least some degree of intercommunion, was the necessary and desirable outcome of the relationship. This process of working towards communion represented a major reversal of the policies which had dominated the Roman Church since 1850, and an end to the total, self-imposed isolation of Catholics from other Christians. More tangible steps towards reunion came in the form of the setting up of the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC). After 11 years work, ARCIC produced what was known as the Final Report in 1981. It amounted to a detailed theological study of both churches' teaching on the Eucharist, ministry and authority, and it was intended as a substantial step along the path to intercommunion. In the following year (1982) Pope John Paul came to Britain. It was the first and only time in history that a pope had visited Britain. Tensions were heightened by the fact that the visit coincided with the Falklands war, in which Britain skirmished in the South Atlantic with Catholic Argentina. Nevertheless, these tensions were smoothed over, and the most memorable part of the programme was the visit to Canterbury cathedral. At Canterbury the Pope was solemnly welcomed, participated in the service, and embraced the Archbishop of Canterbury. All this amounted to a partial enactment of the theological presuppositions on which ARCIC was founded.

Free Church commentators have sometimes remarked rather caustically - and rather accurately - that the Church of England only began to woo the Romans seriously after unceremoniously dumping the earlier candidate for the 'special relationship' - the Methodist Church. On the face of it, reunion between the Anglican Church and the Methodists should have been easier to effect than reunion between any other of the major bodies. Methodism had after all grown out of the Anglican Church, and in many places the distinction between Methodists and Anglicans did not become crystallised until after 1830. There were of course major differences in ecclesiology, but fewer in terms of theology and the general ethos of worship. It is worth noting that during the fifties, Methodist worship sometimes began to move in a more 'catholic' direction, assisted by the work of the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship. Gradually, in some Methodist circles at least, the Eucharist was beginning to displace the sermon as the central focus of Sunday worship. In the late fifties and sixties, many Methodists expressed grave doubts about the wisdom of their Church retaining its separate identity. Falling membership figures were also prompting a need for further rationalization.

Anglican overtures in the direction of Methodist reunion date back to a University sermon delivered by Archbishop Fisher at Great St Mary's church in Cambridge in November 1946. Fisher's sympathies, it should be remembered, were more Evangelical, and Protestant than were those of any of his immediate predecessors. But his tone was characteristically cautious and restrained. In fact, he appealed to the Free Churches to 'take episcopacy into their own system'. What it amounted to was an 'ecumenical' strategy in which the Church of England would do nothing but wait until other Protestant Churches had accepted her conditions by modifying their ministry - a one way process.

Nevertheless, Fisher's sermon was hailed by Anglicans as encapsulating the essence of ecumenical wisdom, and the slow process of negotiation with the Methodists got under way. In fact, when the Report on the subject was published in 1963, it contained a proposal the very opposite of that which Fisher had wanted - namely that there should be 'union in one Church'. In 1965, the proposal was accepted in principle by the Methodist Conference and by the Anglican Convocations, and this was followed by a further three years of detailed discussions. The final scheme for a two stage reunification preceded by a service of reconciliation appeared in 1968. It included a plan for a

conditional reordination of Methodist clergy - and almost all the real and painful concessions had come from the Methodist side. It was agreed that for reunion to go through, a 75 per cent majority would be required on both sides. On 8 July 1969 they voted. The Methodist vote was 78 per cent in favour, the Anglican only 69 per cent. It was a painful slap in the face for the Methodists. After 1970, the Methodists began to look more towards the Free Churches as their natural allies in a Protestant consensus. This is seen for example in their almost unanimous decision in 1971 to ordain women to the ministry on equal terms with men, something which the Congregational Union and the Baptist Union had been doing for years.

In contrast with the failure of the Anglican-Methodist unity proposals, the union which was achieved in 1972 between the Congregational and Presbyterian Churches was generally regarded as a success. This was the one major institutional achievement of British ecumenism in the period. It was, of course, a less ambitious project. Both the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians saw themselves as heirs to the tradition of seventeenth-century Dissent, in the 'Reformed' tradition. In the nineteenth century, their disagreements had been more over church government than theology, and by the twentieth century, even these had been more or less whittled away. Union was achieved on 5 October 1972, the day in which the United Reformed Church came into being. When at last it was achieved, it was in the context of declining church membership, and the decline went on unaffected by the merger.

In Wales the (Anglican) Church in Wales was unaffected by the proposed merger with what was, basically, an English Methodist Church, neither did it commit itself to serious ecumenical fraternization to any other ecclesiastical body. Welsh Anglicans had been involved in the Council of Churches for Wales, the ecumenical body which paralleled the British Council of Churches, since its inception in 1956, but early ecumenical activity was a function on the Nonconformist witness alone (Morgan, *Span of the Cross*, pp. 215-7). By the later '60s and 1970s, however, they could hardly avoid partaking in current unity schemes. There were, in short, two schemes: one which involved the Nonconformists alone, and the other which included a wider unity between Anglicanism and Dissent. The first had faltered by 1970 and the second, though enshrined in a binding covenant ratified in 1975, came to nothing (*ibid.*, pp. 243-6). If all ecumenism was a disappointment and failure. 'Of all the movements in mid- to late-twentieth-century Welsh Christianity, Christian union was the one on which the most energy was expended and whose dividends turned out to be least profitable ... Despite the huge commitment of a host of able, devout and exceedingly conscientious Christian leaders, it had become embarrassingly clear that the ecumenical dream had faded almost to nothing. By the mid-1970s church union was failing lamentably to engage the imagination' (*ibid.*, pp. 243, 246).

Hastings, *A History of English Christianity*, pp. 532-60; Morgan, *Span of the Cross*, pp. 215-7, 243-7.

The Second Vatican Council

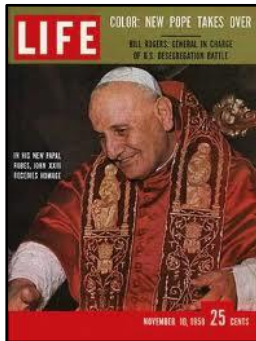


Image of John XXIII on the cover of Life Magazine

The Second Vatican Council was for many Catholics the most significant ecclesiastical event of the twentieth century. It was very much the vision of one man, Pope John XXIII, and it came almost completely out of the blue. John became pope in 1958, at the age of seventy-six. It was thought that he would be a safe conservative, someone who could quell the spiritual and intellectual unrest which was beginning to manifest itself among Catholics in some of the northern European countries. This was a complete misjudgement. Pope John decided that what the Church needed was a change, a bringing up to date, the opening of windows and the letting in of fresh air. Knowing that he might not have long, he began to initiate change almost immediately. He had also embraced something of the ecumenical agenda, and began to talk about the reunion of Christians.

When the Second Vatican Council opened in Rome in October 1962, it attracted huge attention worldwide. In addition to nearly 2,500 bishops and heads of major religious orders, there were theological advisers, and just over forty non-Catholic Observers. It was the clearest possible signal that this was an event with implications for the whole of Christendom, and that discussion of religious matters between Catholics and non-Catholics was now acceptable. The Council met for four annual sessions, closing finally in December 1965. By this time John XXIII was dead, and he had been succeeded by Paul VI. The Council produced a very extensive collection of documents, including the Decree on Ecumenism in 1964 (document 6). By the mid-1960s, the Roman Catholic Church was beginning to change almost beyond recognition, and in matters of liturgy and worship to adopt practices that would make it seem increasingly similar to Protestantism. For Catholics in Britain and elsewhere, the most obvious change was in the language of Sunday Mass, as the vernacular replaced Latin. Underlying this was the belief that comprehension of what was going on, and participation in worship, was what mattered most. For many Catholics, the Council was a cause for excitement and optimism; for others it provoked anxiety and a loss of confidence in the institutional Church.

Romanism: The crisis over *Humanae Vitae*

At the Second Vatican Council, the pope had prevented two particular issues from being debated - birth control and clerical celibacy - on the grounds that they were too delicate for open discussion. Nevertheless, what references there were to birth control in the Vatican documents did seem to be coming out in favour of responsible family planning. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, for example, recognized a moral argument for limiting the number of children, thus moving away from the traditional argument that conception was purely a matter for God to determine. Aware that the issue of artificial contraception would not go away - the contraceptive pill had been launched in 1964, and was being hailed as one of the greatest inventions of the modern

world - Paul VI promised an encyclical on the question, and set up a special commission of largely lay experts to advise him.

The Commission advised in favour of artificial contraception, but his closest ecclesiastical advisers urged him not to diminish the weight of the authority of his predecessors, Pius XI and Pius XII, both of whom had emphatically condemned contraception as immoral. Paul chose to listen to his ecclesiastical advisers, and *Humanae Vitae* was the result. He seems to have been unprepared for the amount, and the violence, of the ensuing public reaction. Unprecedented scenes broke out, which included scuffles on the steps of Westminster cathedral. Bishops were divided. Fifty-five priests publicly broke rank and signed a letter to *The Times* condemning the encyclical. Some priests were suspended. Many other priests spoke against it in private. Others chose to support the pope, and the internal blood letting and spleen venting was violent. The effect was an immense and lasting decline in ecclesiastical morale. Nor of course was the issue simply one of concern to the clergy. The use or non-use of artificial methods of contraception affected Catholic couples intimately, a theme well explored in two of David Lodge's novels, *The British Museum is Falling Down* (1965) and *How Far Can You Go* (1980). In the expectation that the Vatican would soon endorse artificial contraceptives, many Catholics were already using them. They were in no mood to stop. Once the dust had settled, what the furore over *Humane Vitae* revealed was that the Roman Catholic Church could no longer demand that its members submit themselves to the vagaries of 'natural' family planning. Large Catholic families became an oddity rather than the norm. Devout couples restricted themselves to two children. In 1964, the Catholic Church had conducted 137,000 baptisms. In 1976 there were only 70,000. The figures speak for themselves. There was also a sharp and lasting decline in respect for papal authority.

cf. Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales*, pp. 350-9; Hastings, *A History of English Christianity*, pp. 519-31, 473-90.

Anglicanism: The crisis over Honest to God

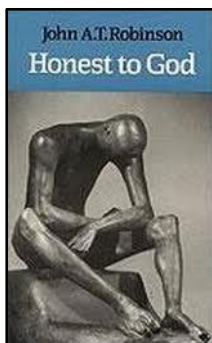


Image: *Honest to God* by John A.T. Robinson

Ecclesiastical turmoil was not just an issue for the Roman Catholic Church during the 1960s. In the Church of England, however, the crisis of the decade took on an entirely different form. One Sunday in March 1963, readers of the *Observer* were treated to a full page, front page article, entitled 'Our Image of God must Go'. It was an extract from a forthcoming book entitled *Honest to God* (document 7) by the Anglican Bishop of Woolwich, John A.T. Robinson. Probably without the publicity generated by nearly a million copies of the *Observer*, *Honest to God* would have sunk without trace in the same manner as so much popular religious publishing. As it was, the book sold out on the first day, went through four impressions in March 1963, and sold nearly a million copies in three years. In the early 1960s, only the Bible could rival it in terms of sales. In retrospect, the book seems mild rather than radical. Robinson - who had taught New Testament at Cambridge

before becoming Bishop of Woolwich in 1959 - had been influenced by the theologians of the preceding decades - in particular Paul Tillich and his concept of 'the ground of being', Dietrich Bonhoeffer's concept of 'religionless Christianity' and Rudolf Bultmann's attempt to do away with the 'mythological' language of the New Testament. Whilst he was immobile with a back problem, he boiled down some of their ideas into a hastily written paperback.

What Robinson wanted to get rid of was not God but what he regarded as the use of outmoded language to describe God. To those of a later generation accustomed to think of religious language as metaphor, this would seem hardly to raise a flicker of controversy. In particular, Robinson wanted to get rid of the language which implied a triple-decker universe - heaven above, hell below and humanity in the middle - because he saw it as implying that God was somehow 'out there'. Instead, he wished to argue (following Tillich) that God was 'at the ground of our being'. In 1963, this insight was perceived by many, both within and without the church, as heretical. Even the gentle, scholarly archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, would give Robinson no support.

Why was Robinson so unpopular in church circles? Partly because of his status as a bishop, which magnified the importance of whatever he said. The same phenomenon had affected Bishop Colenso in the 1860s; twenty years after Robinson, in 1984, David Jenkins, bishop of Durham, would find himself in a similar, though far less intense controversy. Equally, Robinson was already something of a notorious figure and this undoubtedly influenced the reception given to *Honest to God*. In 1961, he had spoken in the defence at the trial of Penguin Books after their publication of an unexpurgated text of D.H. Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Robinson, with an unerring sense of the controversial, not only vigorously defended the work, but also advocated that Christians should read it. A bishop's public enthusiasm for earthy sexuality, even if confined to the printed page, was seen as shocking and led to Robinson being dubbed by the press as the 'Lady Chatterley Bishop'. People were seldom neutral about Robinson; they loved him or loathed him. Hastings's judgement is worth quoting here:

John Robinson was with little doubt the most effective writer of popular religious literature since C.S. Lewis, if in many ways Lewis's opposite. Both were highly persuasive. Lewis was a man for the fifties, suspicious of modernity, unwilling to allow the smallest particle of traditional doctrine to be thrown overboard unexamined. Robinson was a man for the sixties, apparently willing to de-mythologize almost anything of which modernity might conceivably be suspicious. He was both denounced as heretical by many an insider and hailed as a guiding light by many an outsider (Hastings, *History of English Christianity* p.537).

In November 1963, Benjamin Britten gave an interview to the BBC to mark his fiftieth birthday. He was asked about his religious beliefs. 'I'm certainly a dedicated Christian,' he answered, 'but I must confess I am influenced by the Bishop of Woolwich and Bonhoeffer, and those people whom he quotes, and at the moment I do not find myself worshipping as regularly as perhaps I will later' (Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (1992), p.421). Britten seems to have been articulating what at that moment were the views of a significant proportion of the British intelligentsia. But to what extent had they become disillusioned with Christian worship as a result of Robinson, and to what extent had Robinson simply reflected the doubts which they had already felt?

cf. Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales*, pp. 376-8; Hastings, *A History of English Christianity*, pp. 532-60; Morgan, *Span of the Cross*, pp. 224-30.

Further reading

By far the most authoritative recent source on this unit is Hugh McLeod's *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). The notes prepared above should be read in the light of this exhaustive and highly perceptive analysis of the decade.

Callum G Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001), chapter 8.

Mark Chapman, 'Theology in the public arena: the case of "South Bank" religion', in Jane Garnett et al (eds), *Redefining Christian Britain: Post 1945 Perspectives* (London: SCM Press, 2006), pp. 92-105.

David L. Edwards and J. A. T. Robinson, *The Honest to God Debate* (London: SCM, 1963).

A. D. Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain: A History of the Secularization of Modern Society* (London: Longmans, 1980), chapter 6

Michael Hornsby-Smith, *Catholics in England 1950-2000: Historical and Sociological Perspectives* (London: Cassell, 1999).

Eric James, *A Life of Bishop John A. T. Robinson* (London: SCM, 1987).

G.I.T. Machin, *Churches and Social Issues in Twentieth Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), chapter 6

Holder Nehring, '"The long, long night is over": The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, 'generation' and the politics of religion (1957-64)', in Jane Garnett et al (eds), *Redefining Christian Britain: Post 1945 Perspectives* (London: SCM Press, 2006), pp. 138-47.