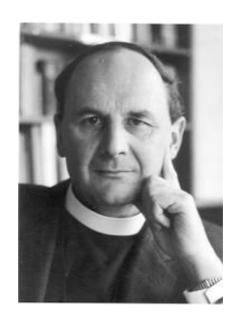
Briefi ng

Free to Believe



Summer 2013

CONTENTS

1	Honest To God, 50 years on	Martin Camroux
4	Honest to God: Two Memories	Tony Tucker John Churcher
7	A Plea for Help	Richard Freeman
8	A Response	Chris Avis
10	Book Reviews	Gerald Gibbs
12	The Misunderstood Magdalene	Jack Dean
16	Windermere Reading Party	Jayne Strang, Roger Cornish, and Nick and Mary Hunwick
18	Richard Holloway Reading Party at Launde Abbey	Mike Playdon
19	Prayer of Longing and Letting Go	Kate Compston
20	An Appreciation of Geza Vermes	Ron Lewis
22	Useful Website Links for Liberal Christians	
23	Banker's Order Form	

COVER

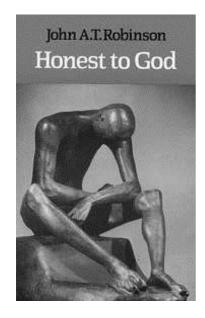
The cover photo is of John Robinson, 1919-1983 one-time Bishop of Woolwich, author of *Honest to God*.

John Robinson's Honest to God, 50 years on

Martin Camroux

The nineteen sixties began with an eager, optimistic hope that renewal of the church was possible. As Dominic Sandbrook points out, "Although the sixties are often seen as a secular, even post-religious age, in few decades of the twentieth century were religious ideas so hotly and enthusiastically debated". At the heart of this was a vibrant, if sometimes intellectually chaotic, revival of liberal theology. One sign of this was in February 1963 when some 1,500 Cambridge students regularly trudged through the snow to hear a series of open lectures on "Objections to Christian Belief" by theologians such as Alec Vidler and Harry Williams. A month later came John Robinson's *Honest to God*.

Honest to God was an extraordinary religious phenomenon. John Robinson had until then been a relatively obscure academic, and Dean of Clare College Cambridge. In 1959 he was appointed Bishop of Woolwich. South London shook his complacency. Here were declining churches, burnt out clergy, and above all a sense of the irrelevance of traditional Christian faith to much of the population.



In 1961 Robinson suffered from a bad back and was forced to rest: he used the opportunity to write a short paperback book which would try to make sense of the Gospel for contemporary men and women. Its impact was boosted by an article by Robinson published by the Observer on 17th March 1963 with the headline, "Our Image of God must go". The result was amazing. Honest to God was translated into 12 languages and by 1967 had sold over a million copies. Even this understates its significance. For a considerable number of young

people it shaped their religious vision for the rest of their lives. It was debated as no other theological book of the century was. Tony Benn noted in his diary, "Honest to God is certainly the most helpful Christian theology that I've ever come across and I'm sure millions of others feel the same".

Honest to God was not, nor intended to be, a work of great theological novelty. But it caught the hope, optimism and idealism of the 1960s. It seemed to offer the hope that the Church could break out of a religious ghetto and make God real for those to whom traditional faith was a closed book. As Robinson put it, "The intention of the book is a missionary one. Its whole argument depends upon the fact that I am trying to help those who are on the fringe of the Faith, or outside it. This concern determines almost every line of what I wrote".

Religion was certainly brought into public debate in an unprecedented way. The broadcaster David Frost, who started his series the *Frost Report* in 1966, later wrote, "As the series progressed we found ourselves wanting to give more and more attention to matters of morality and faith" (Frost, 1993, p222-3). And one public school headmaster wrote to John Robinson, "This is a tremendously exciting time to be alive in the history of the Church."

Re-reading *Honest to God* 50 years on, it is almost impossible to believe the effect it had. Partly this is because, with its mix of Bultmann, Bonhoeffer and Tillich, it contained almost nothing original. Partly it is because, today, we live in a different world. Christianity is much more marginal to our culture and the churches have mostly lost their self-confidence and retreated into inward looking ghettos. In that sense *Honest to God* failed.

But to me, as a sixteen year old schoolboy struggling to make sense of my faith, it was a liberation. I doubt if in retrospect it actually did help me very much to find faith in God but it seemed to say that that there was nothing to be frightened of in questioning and you could bring a total honesty to the religious search. Without that I could never have been a Christian. So I and huge numbers of those who have remained committed to that conviction remain grateful for John Robinson and that wonderful little book.

[&]quot;... I suspect that we stand on the brink of a period in which it is going to become increasingly difficult to know what the true defence of Christian truth requires." From the Preface of *Honest to God.*

The Impact of *Honest to God*: Two Memories

From Tony Tucker

When *Honest to God* was published in 1963, I was 32 years old and was focused on building up a new congregation. John Robinson's

insistence that 'our image of God must go' rang bells, as I had long abandoned the belief (if I had ever held it) in a three-decker universe. It was an exciting time, though some of our more traditional members felt threatened. A more theologically adventurous congregation might have set up a study group to wrestle with the issues. We were not of that kind and most would have struggled with the language of Tillich and Bonhoeffer.

Honest To God influenced me personally in a number of ways. I joined the Samaritan movement - also founded in 1963 - which sought to minister to people who were alienated in the depths of their being. Samaritans and the counselling and psychotherapy movement that emerged in the second half of the 20th century are strongly linked. John Robinson's suggestion (from Bonhoeffer) that ministers should get involved in the so-called 'godless' secular world led me (with the support of the congregation where I was then minister) to combine for some years ministry in a local pastoral ministry with what came to be known as 'ministry in secular employment'. Re-reading Honest To God fifty years later it remains a challenge to thought and action. Some of the occasionally non-inclusive language now jars, as does the amazing absence of the voices of women. Robinson's book was a conversation between men; except for a reference (p 4) to Dorothy Sayers, women are silent. The Church in the 21st century needs a more inclusive Honest To God in which the voices of women and men are equally heard.

From John Churcher

Honest to God was published a year before I started going to church. Therefore its publication was irrelevant. However, when I

was 'converted' in an evangelical Baptist Church in 1964, I was told that Robinson was the devil incarnate *(almost!)* and the book was from the devil's library and had to be attacked but never read!

Thus I did not get around to reading it until as recently as 13 years ago...When I did find it, during my training for Methodist ministry, I decided that it contained nothing that had not been said by theologians and philosophers for more than 150 years before. But what was fascinating for me was the way in which Robinson balanced the opposites of Bonhoeffer and Tillich, but also built upon the existentialism of Kierkegaard and the 'other' of Barth - from which one can trace the beginning of the development of the mix and match, 'all is relative' theologies of today. 13 years ago I warmed to the way in which Robinson was so obviously influenced by Bultmann's demythologizing of Christianity, and also by Harvey Cox in the development of secular theology.

I did not find it an easy read and I suggest that Robinson failed in communicating a secular theology to support the laity to whom he so wanted to offer a greater say in the running of the Anglican Church. Robinson pointed out that the words and concepts regularly used in churches were increasingly irrelevant to ordinary people both within and beyond the Church. He stated that unless there was a fundamental rethinking of what the Church said and proclaimed, the gulf would continue to widen.

I recognised that that was still relevant to the Church in 2000. Robinson was correct and the institutional church made a mistake in ignoring his desire to create a secular and situational theology that would equip Christians to better engage with the social changes of the Swinging 60s. *Honest to God* it was - it still is, and it remains a prophetic signpost for the future of the institutional church in this country.



2013, by David Hayward

"...there was nothing to be frightened of in questioning ..."

Martin Camroux

I am a member of a group of Free to Believe readers who belong to the URC at Bury St. Edmunds in Suffolk, and who have been meeting together for some while to discuss matters of faith and belief. Our Minister (who has seen and approved this 'plea' in draft) is supportive, but is rightly conscious of the fact that most of our Church members could fairly be described as 'middle of the road' rather than 'liberal' in their theological views. She has recently suggested that we might like to consider planning and conducting a form of worship service which reflects our views, at a time which does not clash with the Church's normal Sunday morning service.

We are in difficulty as to the best way forward. We are small in number; usually no more than six of us gather together, and most of us are in our 70's or 80's. Individually we are at different points on our respective theological journeys. We are together in finding that 'normal' worship is, to a greater or lesser extent, failing to meet our needs. We are however unsure as to what, if anything, can be put in its place which we would all find more meaningful.

We guess that we are not alone in our difficulty, and that there are other readers of *Briefing* who share our problem and who, perhaps, have found how best to deal with it. There may even be a similar group of people in another Church close enough to Bury St. Edmunds for us to meet and learn something from them. If anyone feels that they may be able to help us, we would be most grateful if they would get in touch. My email address is: randa@Freeman21.plus.com

Dear Richard

The dilemma with which you and your friends are faced is as old, I suspect, as liberal theology itself, namely how can ancient church liturgies break free from primitive theology and become compatible with informed contemporary Bible scholarship? The following are a few of my own personal views, as debatable as anyone else's of course.

Your group may find it helpful to try planning your service without God or Jesus being directly implicated - a startling statement perhaps! I think conventional church worship is trapped in a kind of 'divine paradox', where the humanly created interventionist 'god' often becomes a barrier to the universal God present in humanity and all creation. Participants are then left with a posited uneasy (for many?) relationship with a god requiring flattery, mercy-begging and pleading in order to satisfy faithful 'believers'.

As luck (or whatever!) would have it, I have just completed three of the six 'Reflections' (Kate Compston is doing the remainder) to be used during the FTB Windermere Reading Party in May, where I have deliberately made no more than a passing reference to God, and no use of conventional prayers. I will gladly send you a copy on request at chris.avis2@hotmail.com.

I have also made use of the beautiful prayers and poems of Gretta Vosper (you can Google lots about her) which I think you could use without theological discomfort, and with Gretta's blanket permission (subject to acknowledgement).

And why always Bible readings? Lectionary-bound or not, it is rare for any traditional church to offer readings from any other source, even though 'God's Word' in literature did not cease on completion of the Bible (and some may even consider that his writing has improved since then!). There are innumerable writings available to enhance Christian services by relating directly to relevant human conditions, not least from the likes of Spong, Holloway, Crossan and Borg.

As for hymns, although thousands have long passed their use-by date, there are growing numbers of poetic, intelligent songs compatible with contemporary theology. The likes of Alan Gaunt, Brian Wren and Shirley Murray come to mind, not forgetting the late great Fred Kaan of course. Do hymns always have to be sung? Sometimes great words can be muffled by a tune, especially an unfamiliar one. I think there are occasions when a shared 'reading' of a hymn, either congregationally or by pre-selected able readers, might increase its impact and helpfulness.

As for preaching, I'm afraid there isn't room here for a sermon...

Yours,

Chris



The Liars' Gospel
Naomi Alderman
Penguin / Viking £12.99

The Testament of Mary Colm Toibin Penguin / Viking £12.99

Two new novels, one religious theme, one publisher: how encouraging is that! Both works concern the testimony of witnesses to Jesus: Naomi Alderman takes four Gospel characters, Miryam, his mother, lehudah of Qeriot (Judas), Caiaphas and Bar- Avo (Barabbas). The book is well-researched researched (did you know that when the high Priest entered the holy of holies he had a rope tied to one ankle in case a catastrophe happened?) and it bases itself on the fact that all biographers are embellishing the truth. It weaves a compelling web of greater or lesser truths for the reader to untangle.

What the book makes clear is how often we miss the really significant events happening around us, showing the relevance of the book's epitaph from Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts', with the world going about its business as Icarus falls from the sky; "how everything turns away quite leisurely from the disaster."

Colm Toibin's Mary looks back on her son's life, being cared for by two of his disciples, close to Mary Magdalene, and trying to sense out of the story they tell her of the importance of her son, always remembering his death, and her earlier visit to a scene of crucifixion, a line of "screaming trees" on the roadside. She lives in hope of finding "a strange place of souls, an opal set in emerald, filled with plenty, a city filled with walls and trees, with a marketplace laden with fish and fowl and fruits of the earth." She finds it impossible to believe when her minders tell her that her son will change the world: "I can tell you now, when you say that he redeemed the world, I will say that it was not worth it."

Two books to set you thinking, and to move you profoundly.

Free to Believe National Conference, 27–29 March 2014, at the Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick.

The Challenge of Christmas and the Meaning of Easter

with John Dominic Crossan.

Please contact Linda Harrison if you would like a further copy of the booking form which accompanies this *Briefing*:

52 Salisbury Avenue, Colchester,

CO3 3DN or e-mail linda.harrison@colchsfc.ac.uk

The Misunderstood Magdalene

When Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* hit the headlines, it provoked strong reaction among many religious people, particularly Catholics, at whose understanding of the Christian story it appeared to take a heretical swipe. That response ought not to surprise us, with its supposition that the Son of God married Mary Magdalene and raised a family.

I was more surprised at the level of disturbance created within the non-conformist ranks. A visiting preacher at my local United REFORMED Church forcefully voiced his condemnation of the *novel* - note that word - claiming that it had no historical basis. He stated quite unequivocally that the Bible says that Jesus was not married. Despite careful scrutiny of the New Testament, I have yet to find any direct reference to Jesus' marital status. Since the Gospels, our only record of his life and sayings, portray a fully human man, is it not conceivable that Jesus would have behaved like a normal man?

However, we do find several clues which hint at a possible married state for Jesus. Mark and Luke both inform us that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus, took spices to the tomb intent on embalming his body. In those days, only female next of kin - mother or wife of the deceased - would be permitted to perform that rite. So Mary the mother was there and might we assume that the other woman was the wife?

This persistent woman refuses to be excluded from the band of Jesus' intimates and appears in the much later Gospel attributed to John, albeit a single attestation. Whilst seeking Jesus at the 'garden' tomb, she encounters someone she assumes to be a gardener. She responds to his enquiry by saying "they have taken away *my lord*". That was quite a normal way for a woman to refer to her husband.

We go further. Jesus was an itinerant sage and therefore, like the much earlier hunter-gatherers, likely to have shunned the impediment of children. That does not necessarily preclude the possibility that he could have been married. In 1st century Palestine, it was generally assumed that any women who associated with roaming teachers and their retinue of men were either relatives or 'good-time girls'.

In Jesus' day, it was customary for men to marry and raise families. We read also that Jesus was sometimes called *Rabbi* and although this may have been used as a respectful term for *teacher*, it may have been a proper attribute. This being the case, we should note that a rabbi would be married with a family, as they are to this day.

Perhaps the Church's assumption of a bachelor status for Jesus is the basis for certain sections of Christianity to insist on celibacy for folk in holy orders. As an aside, we might note that Simon Peter, usually regarded as the leading disciple, was married and one wonders if, like the great St. Augustine, he ultimately abandoned his family in order to follow his Master. We will never know.

So who was this Mary Magdalene and why did she become something of an irritant in the Christian story - the story in which the Church has made such efforts to underplay her role? Biblical scholars seem to accept that she was a figure of history, unlike Joseph of Arimathea with his custom built tomb, whose authenticity is widely doubted in scholastic circles.

It has sometimes been inferred, though without foundation, that this Mary was, or had been, a prostitute. Even if that were true, it would not have barred her from Jesus' companionship, since we read that he was often accused of keeping company with such 'sinners'.

Luke's Gospel conveys the impression that Jesus met Mary for the first time when her sister Martha welcomed him into their home in Bethany. How then did she become known as Mary from Magdala? Whilst he was enjoying the hospitality of those sisters, Mary, reprimanded for neglecting her domestic chores, showed a keen interest in Jesus' discourse.

As we follow the course of Jesus' life, we see Mary as a constant. She may have been a camp follower from that first encounter in Bethany, being one of the women who supported Jesus 'from their means' right through from Galilee to Jerusalem. We are given clear indications that she was never far from the action. Clearer still is the implication that she was the first person to 'see' the risen Jesus, though Paul, who authored the earliest Christian literature, never mentions this encounter.

It is my conviction that Jesus' resurrection was neither a physical act nor something paranormal. I sense that at some moment, maybe days, weeks or even months, after the execution of Jesus, the penny dropped for Mary, when the message and mission of his life suddenly dawned on her. After all, she had hung on his words from the outset and doubtless had frequently questioned him. I can imagine the situation developing as she cajoled the disciples back from their old working lives and gradually brought these men, who we are told were 'slow to understand', to comprehend that Jesus had been calling them to action, to live his dream, to work towards realising his vision of God's realm on earth - in short, to live a new life. She had become the chief disciple, the leading exponent of the Jesus movement - indeed, the first Christian.

I am convinced that Mary was the important link between Jesus and the first 'church'. She was probably the first person to experience the new 'risen' life we call resurrection. This change in her perception eventually opened the eyes and minds of her fellow disciples, changing them from cringing, fearful people into emboldened men and women who dared to follow their Master, sometimes to pay the heavy price as he had done before them.

Unfortunately, women have been allowed little influence in what became the church - universal male supremacy ensured that - and male dominance is still fighting a rearguard action, guaranteed to safeguard this gender inequality in the present church, despite a growing movement for equal recognition. If the Magdalene has been misunderstood, even misrepresented, so too has the human Jesus of Nazareth.

Our Reading Party at Windermere in May

Discussing Leaving Alexandria, with Richard Holloway.

Some comments from participants.



Richard Holloway at Windermere

I guess I am among those whom Spong would call "Church Alumni": and for me it was refreshing to meet so many like-minded individuals all in the one place. I was pleased to see the 'locals' coming along to listen to Richard, it made me feel that there was some hope for the future. However, I think that the best bit for me was Richard himself. Although I feel the book is a little sad, it is an honest story of his "crisis of faith". I really felt, listening to him, that his real journey of faith is just beginning. Jayne Strang

During Bishop Richard Holloway's long spiritual journey he has held many different theological positions, including High Anglican, Charismatic, & Liberal. His questioning has meant that he has often had to abandon old ways of thinking when they no longer worked for him. I warmed greatly towards him as, in so many ways, I have had a similar journey. I was impressed by his openness, passion, honesty and his willingness to bare his soul and share his weaknesses, which is rare. He expressed regrets that the church has often been unwilling to do the right thing and has misused scripture to justify itself. Leaving Alexandria has made a deep impression on me and the Free to Believe reading party was great! Roger Cornish

Leaving Alexandria is a searingly honest exploration by Richard Holloway of his journey from humble beginnings to the trappings of power in the Church of England and to his resignation from it. To listen to the man himself – imposing, erudite and just as honest – was a real privilege. Drawing on personal anecdotes and discussions with many contacts in the world of religion and philosophy, he added to the story told in the book.

The institutionalized attitude to gays and the place of women became a "sovereign cruelty" and led to his departure from it, bruised but unbowed.

He presented "Ethical Jazz" – four interweaving themes of modern day ethics which showed how attitudes must change to suit the moment, and included a coloured spectrum of present day beliefs – (are you deep blue or a deep pink.....?)

Surrounded by caring (and highly spiritual) people, in a favourite area, it was highly stimulating - we hope to come again.

Nick and Mary Hunwick

A set of **four CDs** of Richard Holloway's talks from the Reading Party (with some excerpts from Q and A sessions) can be ordered, **once the word goes out from Martin Camroux that this is available**. The set will cost of £11.00 (p. and p. included); order note and cheque, please, to Chris Avis, 37 Clifton Road, Exeter, Devon. EX1 2BN. Or email and pay via Paypal: chris.avis1@tiscali.co.uk

And in case you missed Windermere

Mike Playdon

Launde Abbey has organized a Reading Party, from 6.00 p.m. October 29th until 9.30 a.m. October 31st 2013, with input from Richard Holloway.

The one-time Bishop of Edinburgh's *Leaving Alexandria* is a hugely powerful memoir subtitled "A memoir of faith and doubt". His book contains some insightful criticism of the Church and, in the words of Karen Armstrong, "lays bare the ludicrous and entirely unnecessary mess we have made of religion."

Participants would benefit greatly if they had read the book and thought about how it impinged on their spiritual journey, so that they were fully able to join in the discussions. An introduction will be provided to each of the book's four sections and Richard will respond to these. At the last session he will give a talk on the way he sees the religious situation of our day.

Richard Holloway resigned as Bishop of Edinburgh and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church in 2000 and is now regarded as an outspoken and controversial figure. He has taken an agnostic world view and comments widely on issues concerning religious belief in the modern world. His own theological position has become increasingly radical and he has recently described himself as an "after religionist."

Cost: £165.00 including all meals and en-suite accommodation.

Bookings: Launde Abbey, East Norton, Leicestershire, LE7 9XB. Tel: 01572 717254 info@launde.org.uk

A Prayer of Longing and Letting Go

Kate Compston

Pulse of Life,
Mystery at the heart of all things —
we wait for you.
Unknown, unheard, invisible,
you have a thousand names and none.
Reach towards us, as we reach out for you,
and be known in the encounter,
heard in the stillness,
seen in the mist and the darkness,
and named fleetingly.

And then enable us to let go again of the knowing the hearing the glimpsing and the naming content to be poor in spirit and to travel light, emptied of all desire to bind, restrain or define you, seeking always to be attentive to you in the present moment, where you are lively and new and always surprising.

Geza Vermes – Spokesman for Jesus the Jew Ron Lewis

Emeritus Professor of Hebrew and Jewish Studies at Oxford, Geza Vermes died on 8 May this year aged 88. Our reading party speaker Richard Holloway spoke glowingly of him. There were major obituaries in the quality newspapers. Born of Jewish parents who converted to Roman Catholicism in Hungary to avoid anti-Semitism, but who still went to concentration camp and vanished, he became a priest, a monastic, and escaped the Holocaust. He left the priesthood to get married and became an outstanding scholar, later to return to Judaism.



He was a leading researcher of the Dead Sea Scrolls and produced an English translation whilst at King's College, Newcastle. Later he became Professor at Oxford. Interested in Jewish-Christian dialogue, he produced a series

of books on the Jewishness of Jesus and on the Jewish religion in New Testament times, notably *Jesus the Jew*. He had a fondness for Jesus, whom he regarded as second to none among Jewish teachers and prophets – but not as divine. It was not possible to have a full appreciation without understanding the Jewish background and references.

Vermes' *The Authentic Gospel of Jesus*, looking further for the historical Jesus in the synoptic gospels is another valued book. A smaller paperback, *The Passion*, seeks to uncover what happened, with some helpful background that doesn't always get appreciated, and a Methodist magazine recommended the book for preachers.

His last book, *Christian Beginnings from Nazareth to Nicaea AD 30-325*, was reviewed by Rowan Williams and described as "magisterial"; it is an eye-opener about the political and factional skirmishes. No doubt Vermes' apparent debunking discomforts some Christians; and Dr. Williams thinks he is a little unfair about the Trinity and the Gospel of John and exaggerates the polarity of Jewish and Greek mindsets. For myself, I believe too many Christians underrate this difference. Perhaps if the Gospels had come to us in Hebrew or Aramaic this would have become more obvious. On the other hand, sometimes Vermes makes a point without a full enough explanation – he was, after all, only human and had his prejudices.

Geza Vermes has probably made the greatest impact any Jewish writer could make on Christian readers, the only comparable Jewish scholar in this field, to my mind, being David Flusser of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Useful Website Links for Liberal Christians

www.pcnbritain.org.uk charterforcompassion.org www.explorefaith.org

www.spiritualityandpractice.com

"If there is a God, it's going to be a whole lot bigger and a whole lot more incomprehensible than any theologian of any religion has ever proposed."

(Richard Dawkins - atheist)

https://cac.org
www.christiansaware.co.uk
www.affirming-liberalism.org.uk
https://www.secure.agoramedia.
com//manage_spong.asp?
www.changingattitudes.org.uk
www.radicalchristianity.org.uk

Submissions for the next issue of *Briefing* by 30th September, please, to the editor: Kate Compston, The Flat, 1 Morwenna Terrace, Bude, Cornwall, EX23 8BU, or preferably by email to kate.compston@googlemail.com

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