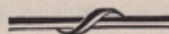


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“OUR IMAGE OF GOD MUST GO” was the startling headline on an article by the Right Reverend John Robinson, Suffragan Bishop of Woolwich, that appeared in the *London Observer* for March 17, 1963. An explanation just a little less startling followed: “‘Honest to God,’ by the Bishop of Woolwich, will be published on Tuesday. In this article the Bishop expresses the main theme of this controversial book: the urgent need to question the traditional image of God as a supernatural Person if Christianity is to survive.” “Image” was an advertising word. What did it have to do with God? “Honest to God” was a blasphemy. What was the Bishop doing blaspheming in public? And how, exactly, had a book become “controversial” before it was published? My hackles were up, and the Bishop’s article did little to pacify me. “Few people realise that we are in the middle of one of the most exciting theological fermentations of the century,” it began spectacularly:

New ideas about God and religion, many of them with disturbing revolutionary implications, are breaking surface. If Christianity is to survive it must be relevant to modern secular man, not just to the dwindling number of the religious. . . . Men can no longer credit the existence of “gods” or of a God as a supernatural Person,

such as religion has always posited. Not infrequently, as I watch or listen to a broadcast discussion between a Christian and a humanist, I catch myself realising that most of my sympathies are on the humanist's side. . . . The new ideas were first put on record by a German pastor in a Nazi prison in 1944: "Our whole 1,900-year-old Christian preaching and theology rests upon the 'religious premise' of man. . . . If one day it becomes apparent that this *a priori* 'premise' simply does not exist but was an historical and temporary form of human self-expression, *i.e.*, if we reach the stage of being radically without religion—and I think this is more or less the case already—what does that mean for 'Christianity'? *It means that the linchpin is removed from the whole structure of our Christianity to date.*" [The Bishop of Woolwich's italics.]

After noting that these historic words about what the Bishop identified as "religionless Christianity" had been written on April 30, 1944, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the imprisoned German pastor, who was executed by the Nazis not long afterward and whose book "Letters and Papers from Prison" was posthumously edited and published by Pastor Eberhard Bethge, a close friend, the article went on:

When his letters were first published—a bare ten years ago—one felt at once that the Church was not ready for what Bonhoeffer was saying. Indeed, it might properly be understood only 100 years hence. But it seemed one of those trickles that must one day split rocks. . . . Modern man has opted for a secular world: he has become increasingly non-religious. The Churches have deplored this as the great defection from God, and the more they write it off, the more this movement has seen itself as anti-Christian. But, claims Bonhoeffer boldly, the period of religion is over. Man is growing out of it: he is "coming of age." By that he doesn't mean that he is getting better (a prisoner of the Gestapo had few illusions about human nature) but that for good or for ill he is putting the religious world-view behind him as childish and pre-scientific.

All this was sensational stuff, even without the authority of the episcopate. The language matched the occasion, as when

the Bishop, doffing his mitre to the boys of "Beyond the Fringe," observed, "Only in the private world of the individual's psychological need and insecurity—in that last corner of 'the sardine-tin of life'—is room apparently left for God." It was the episcopal word with the common touch.