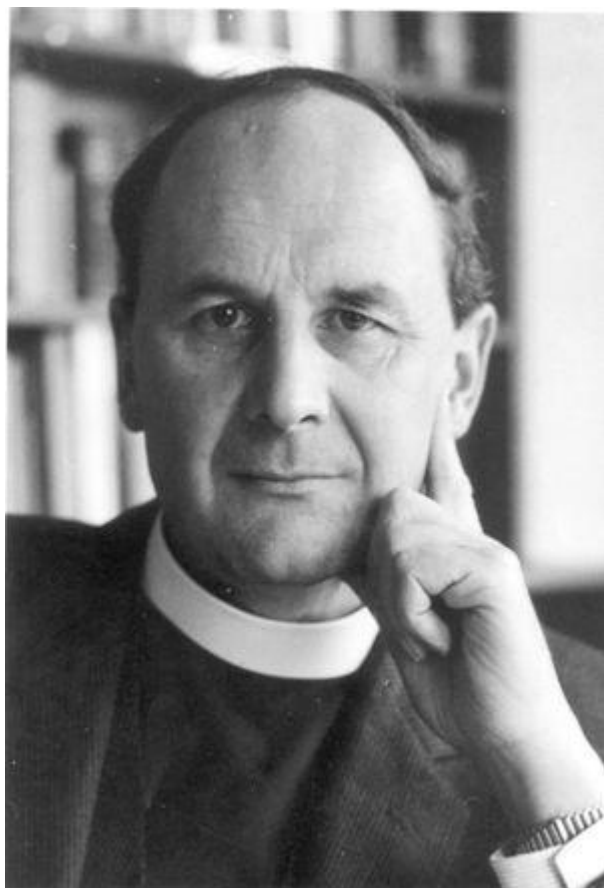


John Arthur Thomas Robinson



1919-83. Dean of Chapel; Bishop of Woolwich.

Robinson came from a family of Anglican clergy: both his father and his mother's father were canons of Canterbury Cathedral, and six of his uncles were ordained. A foundation scholar of Marlborough College and Rustat exhibitor of Jesus College, Cambridge, Robinson won the Burney prize and the Burney scholarship for 1942–3 to Trinity. His thesis, *Thou who art*, gained him a PhD in 1946. After training for ordination at Westcott House, Cambridge, Robinson became curate in Moorfields, Bristol, before serving as chaplain at Wells Theological College, where he wrote his first book, *In the End, God... a Study of the Christian Doctrine of the Last Things* (1950)

Made Fellow and Dean of Clare College in 1951, Robinson pioneered the liturgical revision described in *Liturgy Coming to Life* (1960). His second book, *The Body* (1952), was much acclaimed. His third, *Jesus and his Coming* (1957), was delivered as lectures at Harvard University in 1955. He wrote most of *Twelve New Testament Studies* (1962) at Clare. In 1953 Geoffrey Fisher, Archbishop of Canterbury, made him examining chaplain and in 1958 one

of the six preachers of Canterbury.

In 1959 Mervyn Stockwood, Robinson's vicar in Bristol, became Bishop of Southwark and invited Robinson to become his suffragan Bishop of Woolwich. Despite contrary advice from fellow academics and from the Archbishop of Canterbury, Robinson accepted, and was consecrated on 29 September 1959. He pioneered the Southwark ordination course, a 'theological college without walls'. Elected a proctor in 1960, he spoke in the convocation of Canterbury and the church assembly on the ordination of women, pastoral reorganization, the deployment and payment of the clergy, crown appointments, synodical government, intercommunion, the sharing of churches ecumenically, suicide, capital punishment, and other topics, and was soon recognized as the leading radical of the Church of England. *On being the Church in the World* (1960) confirmed his stature.

The year 1960 made Robinson notorious. He appeared in court to defend the publication of the unexpurgated edition of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. He claimed that Lawrence 'tried to portray this relationship as ... an act of holy communion' (James, 92). The Archbishop of Canterbury censured Robinson; but he did not regret what he said. He was vociferously supported and equally vociferously attacked.

In 1961 the back trouble began which was to be with Robinson for the rest of his life. He produced *Honest to God* (1963) lying on his back. Preceded by a summary article in *The Observer* headed 'Our image of God must go', it sold over a million copies and was translated into seventeen languages. With liberal quotations from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich, Robinson argued that the imagery in which God was presented made him unreal to people of a secular scientific world. Opinions were again violently divided. Robinson received more than 4000 letters. Many who spoke for and against had not read the book, and he was censured by the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey. In October 1963 *The Honest to God Debate* was published, with Robinson as co-editor. He developed the chapter in *Honest to God* entitled 'The new morality' into three much publicized lectures, *Christian Morals Today* (1964). Lectures at Hartford Seminary, Connecticut, and at Cornell University occasioned Robinson's *The New Reformation?* (1965). Lectures at Stanford University, California, afforded further opportunity for *Exploration into God* (1967).

Robinson was made BD of Cambridge University in 1962 and DD in 1968. After ten demanding years as Bishop of Woolwich, and with the invitation to deliver the Hulsean lectures in 1970 - *The Human Face of God* (1973) - Robinson returned to Cambridge in 1969 as lecturer in theology, and Fellow and Dean of Dhapel at Trinity. *Christian Freedom in a Permissive Society* (1970) garnered the fruits of the Woolwich decade. In May 1970 Robinson was present in Westminster Abbey as a translator of the New Testament of the *New English Bible*. In 1976 he produced *Redating the New Testament*. His New Testament scholarship also led him to concern himself with the Turin shroud.

The appointment to Trinity enabled Robinson to lecture frequently throughout the world. In 1980 he was made an honorary DCL of the University of Southern California. As visiting professor at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, in 1982, he was also able to pursue his long-standing concern with nuclear disarmament.

Robinson the radical reformer was at the same time the diligent diocesan pastor, awkwardly shy, incapable of malice, of profound faith and childlike integrity. He worked productively

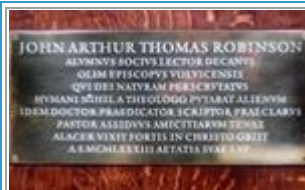
throughout the six months of suffering from the pancreatic cancer which killed him, only two months after preaching his final sermon, *Learning from cancer*, to a packed College Chapel.

Memorial inscription

JOHN ARTHUR THOMAS ROBINSON
ALVMNVS SOCIVS LECTOR DECANVS
OLIM EPISCOPVS VOLVICENSIS
QVI DEI NATVRAM PERSCRVTATVS
HVMANI NIHIL A THEOLOGO PVTABAT ALIENVM
IDEM DOCTOR PRAEDICATOR SCRIPTOR
PRAECLARVS
PASTOR ASSIDVVS AMICITIARVM TENAX
ALACER VIXIT FORTIS IN CHRISTO OBIIT
A.S.MCMLXXXIII AETATIS SVAE LXV

Translation

John Arthur Thomas Robinson was Student, Fellow, Lecturer and Dean. He was formerly Bishop of Woolwich. He carefully examined the nature of God and believed that a theologian could ignore no aspect of human life. He was a remarkable teacher, preacher and author, energetic in his pastoral work and a loyal friend. He lived a life full of spirit and, brave to the last, died in Christ in 1983 at the age of sixty-four.



Brass located on the north wall of the Ante-Chapel.
Inscription text by C.F.D. Moule.