



A Forgotten Romance - Psychotherapy and Christianity in post-war Scotland

The popular image of Scottish Christianity and Psychotherapy sets them apart – the one severe in its account of sinful human nature and its need for God, the other striving to cure human sufferings through purely human means. This large interdisciplinary research project funded by [Religion and Society](#) and led by Professor David Fergusson at the University of Edinburgh uncovered a very different picture – of mutual influence, close ties, and serious interchange. The project uncovers a forgotten romance – and in some ways one that needs to be revived.

In the immediate post-war decades Christianity in Scotland, including the majority church the Church of Scotland, felt the winds of wider social and cultural change. Scottish psychotherapy was blossoming at the same time, spawning some significant leaders of the movement, and exporting expertise to New Zealand, the USA and Australia. There was, of course, some suspicion on the part of the churches of a new, modern discipline taking over the traditional role of the pastor; but the project has also uncovered an unwritten history of close interaction between religiously-oriented psychotherapists and psychotherapeutically-oriented clergy.

The team examined the papers of prominent therapists and thinkers of the era including leading lights like R.D. Laing, George MacLeod (who founded the Iona Community), Dr Winfred Rushforth (and the Davidson Clinic she founded), philosopher John Macmurray, Church of Scotland minister and evangelist Tom Allan, and practical theologian David H. Cairns. Many had been influenced by an earlier generation of psychoanalysts such as Hugh Crichton Miller and Ian Suttie, both of whom had moved from Scotland to take up positions at the Tavistock Clinic in London. The researchers also conducted oral history interviews with surviving members of the movement. The project brought together expertise in theology, the theory of psychotherapy, cultural history and the history of ideas in order to make sense of the many strands of influence and interaction, and their enduring legacies.

There was found to be a great deal of common ground and open co-operation. Many Christians from the liberal wings of both the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches were attracted to psychotherapy as a corrective to the churches' weakness in helping individuals in a holistic manner. From the side of psychotherapy, even the R.D. Laing, who assisted on a course on 'human relations, interpersonal theory, counseling and so on' requested by seven Protestant ministers and a Rabbi in Glasgow University's Department of Psychiatry in the mid-1950s, was influenced by George MacLeod's corporate and incarnational theology and Evelyn Underhill's account of mysticism. He visited the Iona Community on various occasions.

After the 1970s, however, psychotherapy and Christianity drifted further apart, despite undoubted gains in the establishment of several important church-based centres for counseling. Pastoral counseling has become an accepted and professionalized aspect of church work, but some theologians criticized the theological weakness of the interaction. Other perhaps even viewed therapy as tainted by the perceived individualism and narcissism of the 1960s. Pastoral theology and new forms of practical theology are often more open to the dialogue, but the price is marginality to the mainstream of theological endeavour. The project concludes that there is loss on both

sides. On the one hand, theology is in danger of drifting further from everyday lives and concerns. On the other, a narrow medical model threatens to dominate professionalized therapy, and to obscure the importance of treating the whole, social, person.

In the light of this impasse, the project argues that desire for some sort of synthesis between therapy and theology is misplaced, but that instead of letting the different parties go their separate ways, there is much to be gained from a renewed, more pluralist dialogue, between psychotherapy, 'secular professionals', theology and the churches.

As a result of the project, Winifred Rushforth's papers are being donated to the University of Edinburgh, becoming a resource for future research. The AHRC has also funded an innovative follow-on knowledge exchange programme led by team member Liz Bondi, which will engage with religious and secular counseling bodies across the UK.

Find out more...

- Visit the project's website: <http://www.theologyandtherapy.div.ed.ac.uk/>, and sign up for their network: <http://www.theologyandtherapy.div.ed.ac.uk/mailling-list.html>
- Access podcasts and reports from the project's [2010 conference](#) and [2011 conference](#).
- Listen to the team presenting the research at the Religion and Society findings conference Sacred Practices of Everyday Life in May 2012: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/spel_conference_david_fergusson_et_al
- Listen to team members Steven Sutcliffe and Gavin Miller discussing the research in April 2010 here: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/steven_sutcliffe_and_gavin_miller
- Follow and read the project's blog: <http://theologyandtherapy.wordpress.com/>
- Look up project publications: Gavin Miller, 'R.D. Laing's theological hinterland: the contrast between mysticism and communion', *History of Psychiatry*, 23.2 (2012), 139–155; Steven Sutcliffe, "After the religion of my fathers": the quest for composure in the post-presbyterian self', in L. Abrams & C. Brown (eds.), *A History of Everyday Life in Twentieth-Century Scotland*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010) 181–205; Alexander Forsyth, 'Walking the Tightrope: The Missiology of Tom Allan for Today', *Practical Theology 2* (2011), 227–245.

You might also be interested in...

- Reading a summary of the findings from Layla Welford's PhD funded by Religion and Society investigating healthcare chaplaincy in the UK: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/chaplaincy_work_in_hospitals_and_prisons_in_flux

- The report from a one-day conference on religion and healing held at Heythrop College London in November 2011 and supported by Religion and Society:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/religion_in_health_and_healing_how_significant
- Reading Linda Woodhead's introduction to Programme book *Religion and Change in Modern Britain* (Routledge, 2012), which charts the welfare state's twentieth century takeover of functions fulfilled by the churches and subsequent collapse of secular utopianism:
<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415575812/>

Project Details

Award Title

Theology and Therapy: Understanding the Encounter between Christianity, Psychotherapy and Spirituality in Scotland 1945–2000

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Cairns Counselling Centre

Cairnmillar Institute, Melbourne

Scottish Institute for Human Relations

Award Type

Phase 3 Large Grant

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