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ANTI-PSYCHIATRY; Christian Roots

in the Thought of R.D.Laing

It is often supposed that the wonderful catalytic effect of Christianity on man's thought, an effect which initiated the scientific movement, is a thing of the past. This is far from being so. In his article Mr. Isbister who is currently writing a thesis at Cambridge on the development of psychological thoughts in recent years, shows that it was Christianity which gave direction to Laing's thinking - a thinking which has had a profound effect in modern times both in the areas of psychiatry and mysticism. This is of interest to Christians because Laing is often appealed to by non-Christians as if his insights provide a substitute for Christianity.

Introduction

The question, how is the Christian to relate his faith to 'worldly knowledge' is perennial. God's revelation of Himself in Christ has cosmic significance. Many of the writings of the New Testament can be seen as a grappling with the various dimensions of this fact. St. Paul and St. John manifest in their writings a balance which can be paradigmatic for any modern encounter between

biblical faith and secular knowledge. The development of modern secular ideologies affords an opportunity for Christians to explore and develop a biblical poise: a poise which rests between outright rejection of new ideas and complete capitulation to them. The biblical attitude is to reject such superficial responses in search of more sensitive, critical appraisals within any specific area of human activity¹. With regard to psychology and psychiatry the Christian option is similar to that described by Karl Jaspers when he wrote:

An educated attitude has to grow slowly from a grasp of limits within a framework of well differentiated knowledge. It lies in the ability to think objectively in any direction. An educated attitude in psychiatry depends on our own observation... but it also depends on the clarity of the concepts we use and the width and subtlety of our comprehension. (1963, p.50)

For Jaspers, and for the serious-minded Christian, such 'an educated attitude' involves the following activities:

[We should be engaged in] a conscious critique of methods [which] will keep us prepared in the face of enigmatic reality. Dogmatic theories of reality shut us up in a kind of knowledge that muffles against all fresh experience. Our methodological approach therefore... [represents] searching in opposition to finding. (*Ibid.* p.42)

The following essay is offered as part of the development of that educated attitude².

R.D. Laing and Anti-Psychiatry

Within British Psychiatry since the war there have been two opposing features. On the one hand there has been a consolidation of the medical profession's dominance within the field, and on the other hand there has been the growth of a number of significant challenges to the medical profession's right to have such dominance. The former trend is represented by the triumph of cheap physical therapies (most notably drugs and ECT), the establishment of a Royal College for the psychiatrists, the

integration of psychiatric services into the National Health System, and the measures of the 1959 Mental Health Act³. The latter trend is represented by the growth of a plethora of alternative therapies (many of which are just variations on an old theme, psychoanalysis), the rise of clinical psychology as a discipline, the growth of numerous sociological perspectives which have emerged from the U.S.A., and finally the awareness that generally speaking the 'medical approach' is at best only palliative.

'Anti-psychiatry' was one such challenge to the prevailing orthodoxy of British Psychiatry. The term is an umbrella term which has come to be assigned to a small group of dissident psychiatrists who came to prominence in the late 1960's. The names of R.D. Laing, D. Cooper, A. Esterson and J. Berke⁴, all of whom were young politically-active psychiatrists who reacted against their (medical) training, are most usually referred to by this label⁵. It was against the *status quo* that had been established within postwar psychiatry that these writers directed their criticisms. Medicine's temporary palliative solutions were rejected, and the social order which generated the problem individuals came under fire. The elements of social critique within 'anti-psychiatry' were part of a wider cultural dissatisfaction: the events of Paris in 1968, the anti-Vietnam war protests, flower-power were all products of the same questioning awareness. As a movement, anti-psychiatry blossomed, fruited⁶, and withered along with these other radical expressions of youthful idealism. As the establishment weathered these storms, the hard facts of life gave-the-lie to any naive optimism.

Of all the figures prominent at the time, one writer, R.D. Laing, continues to command significance. His writings, particularly his early writings, have not as yet been written-off, or ignored. One psychiatrist wrote of him fairly recently in the following terms:

The writings of Laing are in a special category. As a trained psychiatrist he made useful contributions to scientific writing, then abandoned that discipline as too cramping... In his earlier works, particularly in *The Divided Self*, he examined the position of schizophrenics, and by an intoxicating mixture of existential philosophy, social psychiatry and impassioned poetry conveyed something of the schizophrenic experience and made trenchant

criticism of the medical model approach to people in this position. (D. Clark 1974, p.52)

Indeed R.D. Laing is singled out by G.M. Carstairs in a review of the recent history of psychiatry. He writes:

Two other outstanding figures in modern British psychiatry deserve special mention, Maxwell Jones and R.D. Laing. I find their contributions fascinating because they exemplify the contrasting accomplishments of two charismatic figures, one of whom always kept one foot on the ground while the other took off into the clouds. (1977, p.981)

Assuming that Carstairs assigns 'heavy feet' to Maxwell-Jones (whose work centres around the concept of the 'therapeutic community'), and a 'light-head' to Laing, this reference is none-the-less some indication of Laing's continued importance in this confused field. All, even his most vociferous critics, agree that Laing has made an outstanding contribution to the understanding of the experiences of the schizophrenic, and of madness generally. Some measure of the stature of Laing's significance to the field is provided by the fact that he is now becoming the subject of a whole series of secondary works. The development of his thought is being studied in an attempt to understand, and capitalise on, his insights⁷. As one who has contributed to the understanding of the human *psyche* his work merits critical Christian attention; especially when it is remembered that Laing profoundly influenced the Christian counselling movement known as 'Clinical Theology'⁸. An exploration of his thought from the standpoint of a committed Christian is therefore particularly apposite. Clearly any 'educated attitude' that one might wish to develop towards the phenomenon of madness, would remain sadly partial if it were not to come to grips with the ideas that Laing develops.

The Growth of Laing's Thought

The nature and growth of Laing's thought have been the subjects of two recently published books - Andrew Collier's *R.D. Laing: The Philosophy and Politics of Psychotherapy*, and Martin Howarth-Williams' *R.D. Laing: His Work and its Relevance for Sociology*. These are the latest, and as yet the best, of a

whole series of books attempting to assess Laing's contribution to psychiatry. They raise the level of 'Laing studies' above the polemical level of hard and fast polarities and simple categorical judgments towards a level of competent objective scholarship. Though they both focus attention on the same theme — Laing's ideas and their development — the pictures they convey of Laing end up very differently because they reflect their respective authors' paradigms. In Collier's case the picture is coloured by his Marxist philosophy; in Howarth-Williams' by his particular brand of sociological imagination. The two pictures, however, do complement each other well, for the main thrust of Howarth-Williams' book is detailed exposition, while that of Collier is detailed criticism.

Collier writes as a committed Marxist with a view to providing an overview of Laing's achievements and failures in the light of Marxist ideals. In the past 'the Left' (of whichever variety available) has been less than fair in its attitude to Laing, seeking to dismiss him after convenient labelling of his views. In the wake of the demise of the whole counter-culture of which anti-psychiatry was a part, Laing's analysis of madness and alienation was usually rejected as too superficial. The 'politics of subjectivity' was said by Marxist critics to have failed⁹, and most turned back either to Freud or to his more recent continental interpreters¹⁰. Collier's work, in contrast to the earlier Marxist critics, is a fair attempt to chronicle and summarise the significance of Laing. Naturally, in line with Marxist ideas, and in view of the fact that Laing was critical of the social order which causes the suffering of the mentally deranged, Collier concentrates upon those themes within Laing's work which confirm or elucidate the Marxist diagnosis of society. The idea of alienation as an integral facet of Western society, the critique of normality and sanity, the 'violence' of the bourgeois family, are all Marxist themes which get treated with a particular twist in Laing's work. Collier ably traces these threads throughout the major Laingian works¹¹. Certainly since these themes are an integral part of Laing's diagnosis they cannot be ignored.

However they must be seen within the wider context of other elements in Laing's work. As Christians we might well endorse much of what Laing says, for such themes as the alienation of man from himself and from his neighbour are aspects of the biblical position. However though endorsing the diagnosis; there is no need to accept the prognosis and therapy that Laing appears to be

offering. A Christian response is more radical than some of the superficial Marxist views that pepper Laing's later works. Os Guinness provides one example of such a response to one of Laing's diagnoses:

... R.D. Laing says, "We are all murderers and prostitutes — no matter to what culture, society, class or nation one belongs; no matter how normal, moral, or mature one takes oneself to be." [1967] Jesus was saying the same thing in a far more profound way. Any man who knows the nature of his own heart realises that violence is not another man's problem. It is everybody's problem. It is my problem. "There but for the grace of God go I." Unlike R.D. Laing's demystification that leads to counter-violence, for the Christian demystification leads to penitence. (1973, p.172)

The Christian response to the Marxist elements in Laing's thought should always represent a third way, not that of outright rejection, nor that of dismissal, but rather careful evaluation and analysis.

Howarth-Williams' study, in contrast, is not pre-occupied with the Marxist elements within his subject's thought — his aim is to place Laing's work within a wider context of roughly contemporaneous developments within other social sciences. As a sociologist¹² this author is in a good position to compare certain of the themes in Laing's work with the 'new-wave interpretative sociologies'¹³. Central to the whole of Laing's insight into the nature of the schizophrenic experience is the belief in the intelligibility and meaningfulness of the various actions and utterances that schizophrenics make. When it is placed in its proper context (usually the family) odd behaviour becomes reasonable — indeed highlights the unreasonableness of the other participants in the social setting¹⁴. Howarth-Williams compares Laing's use of the notion of intelligibility with that found in the social phenomenology of Schutz, the ethnomethodology of Garfinkel, and the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss. All of these are examined through the particular spectacles that Howarth-Williams wears. That particular set of spectacles, or his paradigm, is revealed in the introduction where he plunges the reader into Sartrean metaphysics: we are told that '[his aim is] simply try[ing] to show the dialectical intelligibility of a movement of historical temporalisation...

in our case the 'historical temporalisation' is the span of Laing's career' (1977, p.1), and further that: '[the] moment of review thus negates the negating stasis of the first moment, and reaffirms, at a higher level of inner clarity, the living flux of the totalisation-in-process which is Laing's work' (*Ibid.*, p.2)¹⁵.

Least such verbosity should obscure the great value of this work and discourage the potential reader let it be said that this is by far the most comprehensive account of Laing's intellectual development yet published (though, of course, it does not cover everything with sufficient depth - the case of Laing's relation to Freud being one such area). Howarth-Williams has done an admirable job in tracing the development of Laing's thought right from its first appearance in print as a co-author of a paper in *The Lancet* in 1955 through to his more recent 'literary' excursions (as represented by *Knots*, a book of poetry which outlines a few of the knots it is possible for people to become enmeshed in with their relationships). The endeavour with which Laing's utterances have been tracked-down is praiseworthy: neglected typescripts, interviews, L.P.'s, magazine articles and reviews are unearthed to give a very thorough account of Laing's career. We are shown a highly individual career which spans one of the most significant periods of British psychiatry. The combination of these two, that is, original work done in a period of historic importance makes Howarth-Williams' book essential reading for anyone concerned to understand the issues that Laing's work raises.

The Role of Religion within Laing's Thought

The part that religion has to play in the thought of R.D. Laing is enigmatic to most commentators. Though it has received some attention in the secondary literature which has mushroomed-out of Laing's work, rarely has sufficient emphasis been placed on the centrality and persistence with which references to religion appear in his writings. Of course, since Laing's style often included the clever use of religious metaphor (both biblical and other), it is a subject that inevitably receives some mention; particularly as the religious motif increased in importance during the 1960's (this trend culminated in his 'exile' or 'retreat' to Ceylon in 1971 and his later visits to India and Japan all of which were to learn meditation).

To many this strand within Laing's thought is an almost inexplicable adornment to what could otherwise be seen as a *sensible* unfolding of ideas. Neither Collier nor Howarth-Williams come to terms with it; Collier merely dismisses this aspect as one of the 'false exits to freedom' (as opposed to the one true exit to freedom — Marxist revolution) and Howarth-Williams places the religious themes on a side branch to the main development¹⁶.

Accounts of the unfolding of Laing's thought usually follow a pattern something like this. He began work in the early 1950's very much within the bounds of conventional medicine; as the short-comings of the purely 'medical' or 'organic' approach became apparent neo-Freudian psychoanalysis began to provide for him an appropriate paradigm¹⁷; this led to a Marxist critique of normality and society; as his work progressed he found ideas in Sartre's writings which helped him to account for social and personal existence in a way consistent with his ideals¹⁸; next the work of Bateson on the pathology of family communication (most notably the idea of 'double-bind' situations — ones in which whatever strategy is adopted the victim cannot win) was to provide Laing with a number of concepts that were essential to his insight; this combination of neo-Freudian, Sartrean and Marxian insight was the basis of his highly original contribution to the understanding of madness; finally (much to the horror of his new-found compatriots of 'the Left') he became involved in impractical, mystical and religious concerns. The development of his thought can be seen as a layered cake, with the religious motifs as the icing to that cake (whether you accept those religious elements depends upon your prior predilection for icing and is in no way an integral part of the cake).

In this essay I want to suggest that the above account of the way Laing's thought progressed is at best a dim reflection of its true unfolding, at worst a concerted (though not necessarily conscious) attempt to deny and suppress the Christian origins and insights that are present in Laing's work. It is my contention that right at the very core of Laing's insights is a Christian concern that undergirds the whole of the development of his thought. Before backing up my contention, I must explain just what I mean when I say that religious elements are basic to Laing's thought.

Firstly, I am not arguing that since all human thought necessarily stems from religious presuppositions, Laing's thought, since it is a special case of the former, must do likewise¹⁹. Rather I want to show that Laing's insights have their origin in specifically Christian concerns. Secondly, I am not arguing that since Laing widened the scope of admissible evidence concerning madness to include literature and poetry, he therefore began to touch upon the sphere of the religious. I don't believe that the religious is only to be approached in literature or poetry, it underpins the scientific and the ordinary²⁰. Thirdly, I am not providing another illustration of the view put forward by Professor Halmos — that the new secular 'counsellors' all reflect an underlying 'faith' which is basically the old Christian virtue of love,²¹ nor am I fourthly, just contending that since many of the later writings contain religious themes then this shows their importance to him. Many Christians have noted the primacy of the religious within the late writings of Laing and have used this as some sort of social indicator. Thus, Os Guinness in *Dust of Death* relies very heavily on the later writings (in particular *The Politics of Experience*) as an indicator of the counter-culture's world-view²². Similarly Kenneth Leech, coming out of a different tradition, in his useful reading of the times, *Soul Friend*, cites R.D. Laing as opening up once again the realm of the spiritual:

In recent years also there has been a great deal of attention given within therapeutic schools to the issues of spirituality and spiritual values. Both C.G. Jung and R.D. Laing, while their approaches and their language are widely divergent, lay great stress on the importance of the recovery of spiritual life... To Laing... the loss of transcendence in our culture is indicative of its death. What we term 'sanity' is in fact spiritual deprivation. True sanity involves the dissolution and the transcendence of the normal ego... The work of Laing and his colleagues at the Philadelphia Association has helped us to see what we term 'madness' as a journey. Mary Barnes claimed that it was through madness that she found both herself and God. (1977, pp. 105, 106)²³

However, both of these writers draw only upon Laing's late, mystical, writings by which stage his espousal of the East and Eastern expressions of religion eclipse his earlier religious

insights. Indeed, after reading Kenneth Leech or Os Guinness one might well imagine that it was only after he became absorbed in Eastern religions that Laing began to see any value in religion or in the spiritual nature of man. However, the religious themes in Laing predate his late arrival in the Orient (one of his aphorisms was that: "Orientation means to know where the orient is" cited by Guinness p.192). Howarth-Williams writes:

The first writings of Laing of a religious flavour occur [in] 1964, and continue, through 1965-6 to 1967 with 'Politics of Experience' and of course the 'Bird of Paradise'. It is difficult, I admit, to find 'religious' writings in 1968... that being the year of Laing's political commitment... It could be argued, perhaps, that Laing rejected 'religion' in 1968 for politics, became disillusioned with it, and returned to religion thereafter. I do not believe this is the case. For throughout Laing has stressed the dialectic of the political and the spiritual, it was Laing who amazed the political underground in 1964... by saying 'the only way we can define our aim is as this: to reveal the greater glory of God. (1977 p.139)

However, once again it is the late-stage writing which according to Howarth-Williams 'is still on-going' (1977 p.141) that is considered; and though often expressed in biblical terms, it definitely has the flavour of the East. Howarth-Williams, for instance, talks in terms of 'Laing's Buddhism appear[ing] to be of the Mahayana or Zen variety' (*Ibid.* p.91) and Laing himself in one of his late writings, says:

Most people involved in this [quest for transcendence] don't refer to the Christian tradition for their terms of reference. They go not to the Bible but to... the Tao Te Ching... to the Buddhists, Zen, Tibetan and other schools, the Taoists, the Sufis, the Hindus... (Laing 1967 cited in Leech 1977 pp. 7, 8)

Again, it might be concluded that it was the discovery of the resources of the various Eastern religions which provided Laing with religious answers to the existential problems that faced him in understanding madness, and not, as I shall try to show that it was specifically Christian concerns that generated his insights. If we look more closely at the growth of Laing's thought we discover that he was deeply moved by religion long before 1964 and

that religion was an essential and integral factor in prompting his early investigations. The religious strands in Laing's thought do not emerge inexplicably after numerous abortive excursions into scientific fields and are not therefore retreats into mysticism when all else has failed; they are these from the beginning, and at the beginning they are specifically Christian in nature. Only later did they become modified and changed until Laing's late religious phase was mystical, speculative, and oriented Eastwards - but that trend is not our immediate concern.

Howarth-Williams does glimpse at some of the origins of the religious facets in Laing's thought, yet he remains unable to grasp their significance:

As to the question of roots [of his religious sensibility] in this case we clearly have to look further back. There are indeed few occasions prior to 1964 on which Laing has exhibited religious knowledge... That the roots *were* there, of course, we know well, since Laing has spoken of his Presbyterian upbringing. How much this has affected what he feels and says, as well as how he says it, is as he admits, impossible to gauge. I would imagine it to be considerable. (*Op. cit.* p.140)

But Howarth-Williams is unprepared to explore this avenue further, indeed were he to do so it would only be to outline the roots of Laing's later religious writings, and not to point out the centrality of these early religious themes to the whole of his subsequent work.

The knowledge that right at the very beginning of Laing's interests there was a theological concern, and that this was formative in the questions that he posed within the psychiatric sphere - enables the committed Christian to approach the psychiatric sphere with a new tool which is unavailable to the non-Christian commentator. The formulation of Laing's theology, and its development in the light of the psychiatric problems he encountered, are crucial to the Christian concerned with psychiatry. A Christian understanding of madness needs to maintain many of the features of Laing's insight without degenerating theologically into the mysticism and relativism that characterise his late writings. Thus, since we know that Laing began the pursuit of his studies within the framework of a

definite theological position, we can reflect on how that position changed as he was confronted with the problems that presented themselves in the psychiatric sphere, we can hope to identify the points at which his theological development took wrong turns and see what other responses were possible which would have retained his personal, psychiatric and social insights while remaining true to the biblical picture of man.

Examining the place of religion in Laing's early thought we are struck by its centrality. "By the time I was fourteen" says Laing, "I knew that I was really only interested in psychology, philosophy and theology" (cited in Howarth-Williams p.3). He describes his background thus:

I grew up, theologically speaking, in the 19th century: lower middle-class Lowland Presbyterian, corroded by 19th century materialism, scientific rationalism and humanism... I listened to and later partook in long arguments on the existence or non-existence of God... I remember vividly how startled I was to meet for the first time, when I was 18, people of my own age who had never opened the Bible (cited in Howarth-Williams p.94)

He talks further of his early years in *The Facts of Life*. He was warned, he says, of the perils of dancing, (which is part of the story of his non-discovery of the facts of life): and remarks "when I was sixteen...among the Christian boys in my school, of whom I was counted as one" (*Ibid.*, p.16). Laing rejected the personal piety of this narrow form of Christianity, since such a repressive and debilitated theology did not provide answers of sufficient depth to satisfy his sensitive and intelligent mind. However, though he abandoned the all-too-often simple answers of conservative theology, he did not abandon Christianity. He began searching further afield. The writings of Søren Kierkegaard (in particular, *The Sickness unto Death*) inspired him profoundly. He also discovered in Tillich answers which seemed to go beyond platitudes and seemed to speak to his own feelings and those of the patients he was now contacting. Peter Sedgwick cites this as only one of many influences upon Laing at this time. He writes:

For some time — it must have been over a considerable interval — he had been reading deeply in the literature of Freudian and neo-Freudian analysis, as well as among existentialist writers of both a psychiatric and a

literary persuasion... Laing was able to extract fertile insights into psychotic and allied states of mind not only from clinicians of the European phenomenological school (Binswanger, Minkowski, Boss) but from philosophers and artists (Sartre, Beckett, Tillich, Heidegger and even Hegel) who dealt in non-pathological, indeed fundamental situations of human existence. These concepts, in partial conjunction with those of Freudian psycho-analysis, were applied to the knotted thought-processes and behaviour of an obscure group of severely disturbed mental patients, who had been hitherto regarded as inaccessible to rational comprehension. One of the most difficult of philosophies was brought to bear on one of the most baffling of mental conditions, in a manner which, somewhat surprisingly, helped to clarify both. (1971, 1972, p.13)

Howarth-Williams also plays-down the importance of Tillich for Laing. He writes:

Laing is much nearer to the basically 'pessimistic' existentialist than the optimistic Christian... I conclude then that Laing adopts a basically *negative* position towards Tillich - certain elements of Tillich's position carry over to Laing's, but the fundamental assertion is negated in the transformation (*Op. cit.* pp. 151, 152)

However, both of these commentators reach this conclusion only after a consideration of *The Divided Self* (which Laing began in 1956 and completed in draft in 1957), and from reading Laing's revisions of his position in *The Self and Others*. In so doing, both have missed an intermediary stage of Laing's development, in which Laing found in Tillich many of the tools that were needed to account for the experiences he was observing in psychotic individuals.

Tillich's notion of 'ontological insecurity' as *the* fundamental condition of all men is one of the concepts that Laing was to take and use to illuminate madness. Tillich's theory of anxiety, which is outlined in his book *Courage To Be*, is that human existence is poised on the boundary between being and non-being and that this creates anxiety. Anxiety takes three forms: anxiety about fate and death, anxiety occasioned by guilt, anxiety resulting from a sense of meaninglessness. For

Tillich anxiety is met and countered by faith in God who is called 'the ground of being'. It was part of Laing's originality that he was able to make sense of these rather abstract notions, and discern in psychosis the manifestations of them.

As Christians we affirm our belief that human beings are inherently anxious and insecure without God, a fact which generates many psychological problems. As evangelicals we affirm our belief that God in Christ has met that condition and provides a satisfactory answer to it²⁴. Laing, too, in his early stages was not content with vague metaphysics, the problems he was tackling were too urgent and too real to be dismissed with mystical answers. Sedgwick has noted Laing's concentration upon practical issues in *The Divided Self*. He writes:

...this first book of Laing's can be distinguished from his later work... [in that] there is not a hint of mysticism in it, not the faintest implication that there is any further world of being beyond that described by natural and social science (phenomenology being included in the latter). There are no intimations of an innermost substance or grounding of all things and appearances, lying perhaps in some core of inner personal reality beyond the probings of the clinician. Laing has in fact been at deliberate pains, in his borrowings from the more opaque existentialist writers, to demystify their categories. The floating, abstracted concepts of Being and Not-Being, the whiff of dread before death and the hints of the supernatural, characteristic of Kierkegaard and Heidegger, are replaced by transparent, empirical usages. 'Ontological insecurity', which is said to lie at the heart of serious mental illness, simply means a profound personal uncertainty about the boundaries between the self and the world, which can be contrasted with the differentiation of ego-boundaries that takes place in normal child development. 'Being-in-the-world' means social interaction between persons, and Kierkegaard's 'Sickness unto Death' is not the loneliness of the soul before God but the despair of the psychotic. Laing is, in short, naturalising the mystical elements in one current of Continental existentialist thought. (*Op. cit.* p.15)

Thus, *The Divided Self*, which is one step beyond the intermediary stage I mentioned earlier, though it does not contain any explicitly Christian answers to the problems generated by man's fallen state, *does* exorcise any merely metaphysical or mystical attempts at solutions. This grounding of the implications of man's stage, this 'concretising' of the facets of man's fallenness, is a very real part of any Christian understanding of psychosis and neurosis: the Incarnation tells of a God not content with nice sounding words and pretty phrases. God's resources, available in Christ through his Church, for those whose lives have been marred, are very real, practical and 'empirical'.²⁵

However, the importance of the theological aspects of man's existence, and their centrality to Laing's early concerns is missed if only *The Divided Self* and subsequent writings are referred to (both Sedgwick and Howarth-Williams thus miss their role). That Laing was concerned about these questions is shown by the fact that he published a short paper specifically about them right at the beginning of his career. Here we see Laing's original adherence to a Christian perspective in a new form, that of the liberal Christian. This intermediary stage proceeded out of his Presbyterian upbringing, and preceded his retreat into relativism and mysticism. Coming at such a strategic point it provoked and prompted many of his original insights.

Laing's first publication was as a co-author of a paper in *The Lancet* on an experiment conducted in Glasgow Royal Mental Hospital. It was published in 1955 and concerned the effects of transforming a traditional hospital ward into a 'therapeutic community'.²⁶ It is the first of Laing's many contributions to the care of schizophrenics. His second publication (the first to be written by him alone) appeared in 1957 in the *British Journal of Medical Psychology*. Perhaps unexpectedly, this does not describe some further clinical studies, but is a paper entitled: "An examination of Tillich's Theory of Anxiety and Neurosis". Even more interestingly, from our point of view, the first draft of the paper was received in 1954, prior, that is, to the publication of *The Lancet* paper. This paper, then, was written at a crucial stage in Laing's intellectual development (this makes it particularly sad that Howarth-Williams' study omits it completely). The subject-matter reveals Laing's continued interest in Christian concerns, and points to their primacy in undergirding his clinical studies.²⁷ Laing, aware

of the paucity of most of the conceptualisations of man that were prevalent at the time writes:

I wish to give a short account of some of the things one of the most profound of living theologians has to say about anxiety and neurosis... Moreover, it seems only fair that theology should make its comments on psychiatry, since it can hardly be said that the last fifty years of developments in medical psychology have left theologians entirely unmoved. Tillich is not interested in making a destructively critical attack on our theories based on clinical experience, but rather to contribute to their clarification. We must all agree that the basic assumptions of our work are not as explicit as we would like them to be. Tillich believes that such clarification must come from an awareness of our *ontological* presuppositions about man. By this he means that we all carry around with us various preconceptions about the nature of man, but that mostly we do not care to bring these notions clearly before us. If we did we might find them pretty inadequate. So far from it being the case, in Tillich's view, that such clarification of our basic ontological assumptions is a mere exercise in 'metaphysical speculation', as it is often dismissed as being, he considers that the failure to clarify them tends to spread confusion in our theory, to the extent that the basic premises of our work remain unexamined... What I have attempted is to suggest that there may be grounds for supposing that, in what to many people may be the obscure and unlikely context of the writings of a theologian, there are thoughts on a subject which directly concern us, and that these views may help us towards a clarification of our own. (1957, pp. 88, 91)

Implicit in the paper is the belief that a Christian view of man might actually provide a better model for understanding some of the complex phenomena of madness (and 'normality')²⁸. Much later he was to write of such inadequate, reductionist models of man, together with their consequent therapies in the following terms:

If [people with problems] go to a Christian priest, the priest will probably refer them to a psychiatrist, and the psychiatrist will refer them to a mental hospital,

and the mental hospital will refer them to the electric shock machine. And if this is not our contemporary mode of crucifying Christ, what is? (Laing 1967 cited in Leech 1977 p.120)²⁸

However, Laing's commitment to a specifically Christian perspective was not sufficiently grounded in a biblical foundation to remain as pronounced as it was at the beginning. As time progressed, his version of Liberal Christianity lapsed into an all-embracing relativism and mysticism — in doing so, of course he followed a well-trodden route³⁰. Laing peppers that path with many useful psychiatric and social insights, many of which form some part of an adequate Christian account of 'mental illness'. A mature Christian understanding of these problems (together with a consequent hope for sufferers) could lead to re-examination of the interplay between the religious and the psychiatric elements in Laing's work, and thereby discover afresh the resources available in the Good News of Jesus.

Conclusion

To assert, as I have done in this essay, the primacy of the religious, and indeed the Christian, basis of many of Laing's significant contributions to psychiatry is not to distort Laing's position (Howarth-Williams says: "so far as I know, Laing has never publicly aligned himself with any particular religious position explicitly," *Op. cit.* p.102). My interpretation of the roots of Laing's concerns and solutions makes sense of his continuing significance for Christians (such as those involved in Clinical Theology) a fact that Howarth-Williams cannot quite fathom (he writes: "There is even a tendency amongst 'avant garde' Christians to call on Laing for empirical support for their philosophical positions" *Op. cit.* p.150). One need not be too 'avant garde' to concur with Laing though when he wrote in 1967:

We live in a secular world. To adapt to this world the child abdicates its ecstasy... Having lost our experience of the Spirit, we are expected to have faith. But this faith comes from a belief in a reality which is not evident. There is a prophecy in Amos that there will be a time when there will be a famine in the land, not a

famine for bread, nor a thirst for water, but of *hearing* the words of the Lord. That time has now come to pass. It is the present age. (1967 cited in Leech p.10)

Perhaps a realisation of the Christian roots of Laing's insights and concerns, together with a sensitivity to the possible deviations from a biblical perspective, may help to make pastoral theologians more aware of its relevance to people suffering in this area.³¹ Perhaps the rebirth of a Christian theology competent to cope with the complexity of this field would also stimulate a renewed interest on the part of psychiatrists in the relevance of Christ as the Healer. For as Tillich said:

The medical faculty needs a doctrine of man in order to fulfil its theoretical task, and it cannot have a doctrine of man without the permanent co-operation of all those faculties whose central object is man. The medical profession has the purpose of helping man in some of his existential problems, those which are usually called diseases. But it cannot help man without the permanent co-operation of all other professions whose purpose is to help man as man. Both the doctrines about man and the help given to man, are a matter of co-operation from many points of view. (1962, p. 76)

NOTES

- 1 Differing responses of various Christian traditions always seem to fall into one or other of these camps. With regard to sociology the first chapter of Peter Berger's *A Rumour of Angels* contains a useful survey along these lines, his analysis is paradigmatic of many other spheres.
- 2 I have explored the metaphor of 'an educated attitude' within psychiatry elsewhere (1979).
- 3 This feature of the development of British Psychiatry has been well chronicled recently by Geoff Baruch and Andrew Treacher in *Psychiatry Observed*. This book provides a useful account of some of the trends that have been operative in moulding contemporary psychiatry. (See my review of this book in *Third Way* for an indication of its shortcomings.)
- 4 The name of T. Szasz has also come to be associated with 'anti-psychiatry'. There are similarities between Szasz

and these British psychiatrists both in the timing of their critiques and the content. However since Szasz's work emerged from a different tradition, and since it was addressed to a different situation (that of American psychiatry) the conflation of the two is inappropriate. Szasz himself has said recently:

Because both anti-psychiatrists and I oppose certain aspects of psychiatry, our views are often combined and confused, and we are often identified as the common enemies of all psychiatry.

It is true, of course, that in traditional, coercive psychiatry the anti-psychiatrists and I face the same enemy. So did, in another context, Stalin and Churchill. The old Arab proverb that 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' may make good sense indeed in politics and war. But it makes no sense at all in intellectual and moral discourse.

I reject the term 'anti-psychiatry' because it is imprecise, misleading, and cheaply self-aggrandising. Chemists do not characterise themselves as 'anti-alchemists'; nor do astronomers call themselves 'anti-astrologers'... I am against involuntary psychiatry, or the psychiatric rape of the patient by the psychiatrist - but I am not against voluntary psychiatry, or psychiatric relations between consenting adults... the very term 'anti-psychiatry' implicitly commits one to opposing everything that psychiatrists do - which is patently absurd... Actually... the anti-psychiatrists are all self-declared socialists, communists, or at least anti-capitalists and collectivists. As the communists seek to raise the poor above the rich, so the anti-psychiatrists seek to raise the 'insane' above the "sane". (Szasz 1977, p.2)

- 5 I have outlined the essential features of the positions of some of these writers, together with the beginnings of a Christian evaluation of them in my article entitled: "Are the Mind Benders Straight?" This article, together with a letter published subsequently in the same publication, also points out some of the vagaries of the term 'anti-psychiatry'.
- 6 One of the fruits of anti-psychiatry was the Philadelphia Association Ltd., (of which R.D. Laing has been chairman since 1964): "a charity whose members, associates, students,

and friends are concerned to develop appropriate human responses, to those of us who are under mental or emotional stress but do not want psychiatric treatment." Clinical theology could be considered another of the fruits.

7 Even that, admittedly lopsided, series, Fontana Modern Masters has vested in R.D. Laing the dubious privilege of being the only *living* psychiatrist covered. Indeed he ranks with Freud, Jung, Reich (and possibly Fanon) as representatives of psychiatry within this august body of masters.

8 Frank Lake writes in the Preface to his *magnum opus*, *Clinical Theology*:

my psychiatric and pastoral colleagues and I, and, indeed, all the seminar members, owe a great deal to three writers whose work has brought the schizoid position into sharper focus, the late Ronald W.D. Fairbairn, Harry Guntrip, and Ronald D. Laing. The two latter have also encouraged us by their presence at Clinical Theology conferences. (1966 p.xi)

A glance at the index to this work shows some of the extent of the indebtedness.

9 The phrase comes from Jacoby whose book *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Conformist Psychology from Adler to Laing* is a polemical attack on Laing and a call to rediscover the socially subversive elements in Freud. Other Marxist critics who have rejected or modified Laing's answers include P. Sedgwick in his two important articles 'R.D. Laing: Self, Symptom, and Society' and 'Mental illness is illness'; J. Mitchell in her analysis of feminine psychology, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*; G. Pearson in his interesting analysis of psychiatry, sociology, criminology and social work, *The Deviant Imagination*; and Phil Brown in his manifesto for a Marxist psychology, *Towards a Marxist Psychology*.

10 The most notable of these interpreters are J. Lacan in France, and J. Habermas in Germany. (See the bibliography for examples of their work often referred to by these critics.)

11 The major Laingian works usually refer to the following: *The Divided Self*; *The Self and Others* (later revised as *Self and Others*); *Sanity, Madness and the Family* (with Aaron Esterson); *Reason and Violence* (with David Cooper); *Interpersonal Perception* (with H. Phillipson and A.R. Lee); *The Politics of Experience*; *The Politics of the Family*; *The Facts of Life*. For the most comprehensive bibliography of Laing, and works on Laing see Howarth-Williams pp. 206-212.

- 12 The book is in fact a revamp of the author's M.A. Thesis in sociology.
- 13 For a very helpful introduction and criticism of these new 'interpretative sociologies' see Anthony Giddens' *New Rules of Sociological Method*, Chapter 1.
- 14 Laing states in *The Divided Self* that his aim is 'to show that if we look at the extraordinary behaviour of the psychotic from his own point of view, much of it will become understandable' (1960, 1965, p.161, Emphasis mine). Good examples of the reasonableness of psychotics' behaviour are provided by Laing throughout his writings (see in particular *The Divided Self*, pp. 27-31, *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, and *The Facts of Life*, pp. 101-122).
- 15 To understand these terms it is worth referring to Laing's own account of Sartre's terminology. The introduction to *Reason and Violence* is sufficiently non-technical to constitute an introduction to these concepts (unlike the other essays in the volume). The process that Howarth-Williams is alluding to here is described by Laing and Cooper:
- ...many facets of reality can be unified into a consistent view of the world, in terms of which particular events, experiences, actions, find their place and can be construed accordingly. However, another synthesis, equally self-consistent, equally systematic, and seemingly all-embracing, can be found, in the light of which the same happenings or the same situation can be construed in ways that completely contradict the former... Each point of view first seems the whole truth. Then from another point of view the first synthesis of the situation, the first *totalisation*, as Sartre puts it, turns out to be relative... One begins to suspect that no totalisation has the whole truth, that none need, however, be totally false. Each is relative. Yet each can have a relative validity. And in all this one finds oneself making a synthesis in turn of all these other syntheses, and may even pride oneself that one's own synthesis contains the overall truth - until one discovers that someone else has incorporated one's own synthesis into his synthesis, detotalised one's totalisation...
- (Laing and Cooper 1964, pp. 11, 12)

This essay, then can be seen as a detotalisation of Howarth-Williams' totalisation.

- 16 See Howarth-Williams pp. 89-104, 139-141, 150-152 in particular p.140.
- 17 This move was by no means unusual for the time. The Tavistock Clinic was fostering many important excursions into these areas. Michael Balint's *The Doctor, His Patient, and the Illness* (published in 1957) is just one example of the fruit borne by such endeavours.
- 18 Sartre published Volume 1 of *Critique de la Raison Dialectique* in 1960. This 750 page treatise heralded a change in Sartre's philosophy; and in it he set out to provide the foundation of a general science of man, an anthropology, which was to expose the flawed nature of all thinking about society so far (whether sociological or historical); and to elucidate the structural prerequisites for the formation of any social group; and finally to outline the laws operative in the processes of social and group change. Laing's condensation of this volume (*Chapter 3 of Reason and Violence*) adds little to the comprehensibility of many of the facets of the argument.
- 19 The religious nature of all thought is a theme which has been well documented in recent years. The reformed philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd is just one example of an exploration into this area of concern. The best introduction to this whole area is to be found in Kalsbeek's *Contours of a Christian Philosophy: An Introduction to Herman Dooyeweerd's Thought*. For a useful discussion of the role of religion in human thought see V. Brümmer's excellent paper 'The Function of Religion in Philosophy'.
- 20 This, I think, would be the line adopted by Frank Lake. For example, he makes the following reference:
 The existentialists are students, above all, of the schizoid position. It commonly represents their own basic ontological universe. They are struggling, from within this universe, to achieve a standing ground and a point of vision or vantage which is no longer obscured by their own strained and narrowed perspective. It is difficult to know whether to start with Job and certain of the psalmists, or whether to proceed directly to Pascal. But since Pascal himself, with Kierkegaard, Unamuno, Simone Weil, and many others personally acquainted with schizoid affliction regard Job as their great Biblical representative in the Old Testament, as Jesus is their remedy in the New ... This takes us for a while away from the discussion of medical and psychiatric concepts of the schizoid personality.

But when we return to the existential and ontological analysts we shall be better able to understand them. Even as psychiatrists they have roots, not only in medicine but in philosophy, and particularly in Biblical thinking. Job stands behind Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Buber, and therefore behind Heidegger, Jaspers, Binswanger, and Laing. (1966 p.581)

- 21 Professor Halmos' famous analysis of 'the faith of the counsellors' is an important examination of some aspects of one of the trends within the 'Welfare industry' at the time namely the rejection of political solutions in favour of personal and psychological answers. These answers were to be found in the counselling professions. Professor Halmos argues that "the formal-technological jargon, the impersonal clinical manners" are but a gloss upon the counsellors value-laden activity — which is offering love. If anything 'Anti-psychiatry' with its emphasis on the political and upon the spiritual is a counter instance to the thesis that Halmos was presenting here. Similarly with the emergence of radical social work, and political theology there seems to be a reversal of the trend that he was chronicling. He, himself was aware of that reversal, thus his last book was an analysis of this new political consciousness, *The Personal and the Political*.
- 22 Os Guinness quotes from Laing's late writings at least nine times to illustrate his diagnosis of the counter-culture.
- 23 Mary Barnes' story can be found in the book *Mary Barnes: Two Accounts of a Journey Through Madness* by Mary Barnes and Joseph Berke.
- 24 We would, of course, maintain that God's answer is applicable to 'normal' individuals equally — "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3: 23).
- 25 A good example of such practical, real resources is provided by the story of Nancy Anne Smith recorded in her book *Winter Past*.
- 26 The paper is entitled "Effects of Environmental Changes in the Care of Chronic Schizophrenics." The concluding sentences were to prefigure many of the concerns that were to become evident in Laing's later clinical work:
- Our experiment has shown, we think, that the barrier between patients and staff is not erected solely by the patients but is a mutual construction. The removal of this barrier is a mutual activity.
(Cameron, Laing and McGhie 1955 p.1386)

- 27 Laing came to Glasgow in 1953. Another source of inspiration for him, again a specifically Christian concern, was probably John Macmurrary's Gifford lectures which were delivered in Glasgow in 1953-54. The arguments of *The Divided Self* particularly those of the introductory chapter bear a striking resemblance to those of *The Form of the Personal*.
- 28 For a discussion of the use of models in psychiatry see Siegler and Osmond's book *Models of Madness, Models of Medicine*. They discuss Laing's work, but pay insufficient attention to his earlier work, they thus do not discern any specifically Christian origins to any of Laing's models.
- 29 The same idea appears to have come to R.D. Laing's son too. In Laing's latest book, *Conversations with Children* there is a conversation reported between Adam and Daddy (pp. 13, 14), Daddy is explaining that a cross was used to punish people. On hearing that "They don't do that now" Adam replies, "I know. They put them in gaol or treat them."
- 30 Os Guinness' *The Dust of Death* provides a useful chronicle of many of the landmarks of the route from liberal Christianity to relativism and mysticism, and of their shortcomings in particular in Chapter 6 'The East, No Exit'.
- 31 Certainly the blossoming of Clinical Theology has been one development that has initiated some of this work. It too is in need of sympathetic, critical appraisal in both its theory and practice. For a useful prolegomena to such a critique see F.J. Roberts' article 'Clinical Theology' and M.A.H. Melinsky's chapter entitled 'Clinical Theology: a Survey' from *Religion and Medicine* and 'Clinical Theology' by A. Gaskell which is a review of the *magnum opus*.

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