CHAPTER 3

THE PERSONS IN RELATION PERSPECTIVE

_Counselling and Psychotherapy in the Contemporary World_

_Key words and themes: religious and political inheritances, the good other, religions as imaginative nourishment, loss of the good other, negative view of the self, basic inner situation, ideal object and central ego, rejecting object and anti-libidinal ego (internal saboteur), libidoal object and libidinal ego, aggression arising from separation-anxiety, aggression turned against the needy self, praise of the good other, getting your self-rejection in first, ethical values in society, the primacy of the other._

INTRODUCTION

This third paper in the persons in relation series was first delivered as a keynote presentation in Athens in the spring of 2006, at an international conference in the Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, organised by the University’s Department of Psychology, the Greek Association for Counselling, and the European Association for Counselling.

The original version of this paper included discussion of the contributions of John Macmurray and Ian Suttie, which are now omitted. Here I concentrate on the work of Ronald Fairbairn, and social, religious, and political dimensions of the synthesis.

THE PERSONS IN RELATION PERSPECTIVE

The idea that life has to be lived forwards and can only be understood backwards has powerful resonance for me as I look back over my own trajectory and the enormous transformations of European society and culture since the end of the second world war. I became conscious of beginning to form a personal point of view in the early 1960s, one that has gone on developing ever since then. But it is only in the last 15 years or so that I have felt the need to articulate and elaborate that point of view as a perspective, one which tries to unite a way of living, practising and relating, with a way of thinking which integrates psychotherapeutic, religious, and political inheritances to engage with the present and contribute to shaping a possible future.

I call it the persons in relation perspective, a phrase borrowed from the title of a series of Gifford lectures given by the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray at the University of Glasgow in the 1950s.
The resources I have drawn on for this paper are Scottish, with international connections. I don’t see that as an expression of national chauvinism, but of my groundedness in a distinctive inherited culture, a culture which prides itself on its openness to Europe, the Middle East, and the wider world. I hope that our dialogue today will involve encounters between the particularities of my culture and yours. A question which therefore arises is: what are the personalist or persons in relation resources accessible to colleagues in Greece, Serbia, Turkey, Russia, Palestine, Israel, France, Holland, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, England, and so on?

I aim to do three things: first to identify the (for me) Scottish sources of the perspective and suggest how they come together in a synthesis. Second, to link this perspective with some of our common religious and political inheritances. And third, to suggest some challenges for counselling and psychotherapy as they position themselves in contemporary European and Middle Eastern society and culture, and in the wider world.

First, the sources and the synthesis. The more experienced I get as a counsellor and psychoanalytic psychotherapist, the less satisfied I am with an exclusive focus on our clients’ inner worlds. I am equally dissatisfied with an exclusive focus on their interpersonal worlds. And I am exasperated by social-scientific commentaries which seek to reduce all meaning to the impact of broad socio-cultural, economic and technological trends or so-called ‘structural’ factors.

What I am seeking, and what I think our clients need, is a way of seeing, a theoria, which succeeds in integrating genetic, somatic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, socio-cultural and ethical dimensions with reference to our experience as persons and our practice as counsellors and clients.

The value of religious ideas and practices

What ground is available that will enable us to see these factors as belonging together? My answer is that we can find solid ground, a secure base for our theory, in the view of human beings as persons in relation most eloquently articulated by John Macmurray and Martin Buber. Martin Buber has declared that there is no significant difference between his view, as articulated in his book I and Thou, and that of Macmurray. He describes himself as the poet of this perspective, and Macmurray as its philosopher. I take that comment at face value, and today I will confine my contribution to considering John Macmurray’s work.

For Macmurray, as for Buber, the ultimate reality of the other lies in God. Not everyone will feel able to go all the way with them on this point. I acknowledge, for myself, that I do not believe in the literal existence of a God present within and transcending all time, space, matter, and energy. What I do find real is the imaginative impact of the idea of God, when it is conceived of as symbolising (among other things) the good other, and our experiences, communications and relationships with good others, past and present, in our lives. I have, relatively recently, come to the understanding that religious practices, traditions, stories, buildings, attitudes, and imagery are best understood as providing deeply needed communal and spiritual nourishment. (I am a slow developer, and I acknowledge