

I. Background and Early Influences

‘our relation to God was a matter of the first importance’

On Monday morning, August 18, 1958, the *Daily Mirror* printed a picture of a packed queue of people, which stretched from a building on Holborn Viaduct, London, past the ancient parish church of St. Andrews, then rounded the corner and continued for several hundred yards along Shoe Lane. The picture was captioned with a question: ‘Can you guess what these people are queuing for?’

The answer, which the *Mirror* obviously regarded as extraordinary, was that they were waiting to attend the opening service of a newly re-built church, the City Temple, and especially to hear the church’s distinguished minister, Dr. Leslie Dixon Weatherhead. Unusual though this scene was in the late 1950s, such queues had been normal on Sundays on the Viaduct in the years before the church was destroyed by bombs in 1941. They became a regular sight once again when the church returned to its original home, and they continued to appear whenever Weatherhead preached, even well after he had retired, and long after the days of people flocking to listen to famous preachers were held to be over.

The exceptional interest in this event (which attracted the attention not only of the national press in Britain but of newspapers in several other countries as well) is an indication of the remarkable international reputation that Leslie Weatherhead had acquired, and the influence of his ministry. From the mid-1920s to well into the 1960s, he became established as the best known and most widely popular English preacher. A prolific author of best-selling religious books, he was well known as one of the first and most successful religious broadcasters, as a pioneer and populariser of the use of psychology in the pastoral work of the Church, and as a major influence in the revival of the Church’s ministry of healing. His liberal theology, outspoken criticisms of Christian orthodoxy, and his questioning of the Church’s traditional doctrines and creeds, as well as his interest in unorthodox medicine, spiritualism and psychic research, made him a highly controversial figure. The exceptional appeal of his personality, his rare gifts of communication, and his remarkable ability to enter into the minds of his hearers; to perceive and articulate their anxieties as well as their religious doubts and difficulties, won him a vast following throughout the world, as people listened to him preach, read his books, and found that he knew how to put their thoughts and feelings into words, providing them with answers to their questions in language which they could understand, and answers they found persuasive and satisfying.

Leslie Weatherhead’s life spanned the period of enormous changes that took place during the first two-thirds of this century. When he was born, in Harlesden, in north west London, on 14 October, 1893, into a modest but comfortably off nonconformist family, Queen Victoria was still on the throne, and Britain was at the height of its influence and power. The British Empire spread around the globe, and the nation as a whole shared a confident belief in its continual progress,

through the development of industry, the beneficial findings of science, improvements in medicine and health, in education and domestic comfort, the development of the means of transport and communication, and the generally increasing prosperity which all this had brought about.

This general sense of well-being and progress was particularly strong among the members of the Free Churches, who, at the turn of the century, were more numerous and more influential in the affairs of the nation than at any time in their history, before or since. The great nonconformist pulpit personalities, such as R.W. Dale of Birmingham, the Baptist C.H. Spurgeon, and Joseph Parker at the City Temple, were national figures. In business the nonconformist presence was considerable, including great industrialists such as W.H. Lever, Samuel Morley, Titus Salt, W.H. and H.O. Wills, H.V. Mackintosh and Henry Tate. The Quaker confectioners, Cadbury, Rowntree and Fry, were becoming household names through their products. Within nonconformist circles, and particularly in Wesleyan Methodist families like the Weatherhead's, there was considerable confidence in the strength of their faith and in the future of their churches.

It was into this national atmosphere of confidence and rising expectations that Leslie Weatherhead was born and in which he grew up. Although throughout most of his active life he was regarded as a moderniser, his most basic attitudes and beliefs were shaped by his Victorian background, though they were modified later by his experiences in war and his contact with Indian religions. The various changes in theological and philosophical fashion during the twentieth century left him largely unaffected. He was more excited by the latest discoveries of science, in which he included research into psychic phenomena and the paranormal, and in medicine, particularly psychology and all non-physical methods of healing. His general outlook and underlying religious beliefs remained mainly those current in liberal evangelical nonconformist churches during the late nineteenth century in which he was born, although he was constantly challenging and questioning received religious ideas and encouraging others to do so in the pursuit of truth and the greater knowledge of God.

Leslie's family attended Wesley's Chapel in City Road, London, where his parents had met and were married and taught in the Sunday School. His father, Andrew, who was the manager of a hosiery warehouse, was the son of a baker in Moffat, in the Scottish border country. His family were Presbyterians, members of the United Free Church of Scotland. Andrew's brother James later became its Moderator. Leslie's mother, Elizabeth Dixon, was a schoolteacher, and her brother, W.G. Dixon, was a Wesleyan Methodist minister. Leslie had two older sisters; Muriel, born in 1888, and Alice, born in 1890. When Leslie was two-and-a-half the family moved to Leicester, where they attended the Saxe Coburg (later Saxby) Street Methodist Church.

Leslie Weatherhead's home was typical of that of many Nonconformist families at that time. He greatly admired his father although he seems to have been in some awe of him, particularly as Andrew Weatherhead found it difficult to show warmth and affection. He was a man of strong principles, and actively supported the Passive Resistance Movement against paying rates to finance denominational schools, (particularly strong in Leicester). In January, 1904, some 150 passive resisters were summoned at Leicester Police Court for non-payment of



Wesley Guild outing, Saxe Coburg Church, around 1900. Leslie Weatherhead, front row, far left.

the Education Rate. Andrew Weatherhead avoided both the tax and a police record by coming to an arrangement with the police that when the tax became due he allowed them to enter the house and remove some small article of furniture which he later bought back for the same money. This enabled him to preserve both his principles and his respectability.

Elizabeth Weatherhead is described by her grandson as a Christian of terrible and serious aspect. . . . She seems to have been a great forbiddler; no one in the family could enjoy what she disapproved of, and what she disapproved of covered a wide spectrum of recreations – dancing, smoking, drinking, gambling, theatre, cinema, and a number of other pastimes for weekdays – the list of Sunday prohibitions being of course, longer.¹

Donald Soper, born just ten years later, grew up in a home remarkably like Weatherhead's, with the same strong piety, strict discipline and prohibitions on worldly pleasures and amusements. Not only was Soper's father also 'a man of impregnable convictions,'² he was similarly austere and reserved with his children. Soper's mother was also a schoolteacher, although Elizabeth Weatherhead seems to have been far more dauntingly severe. Leslie's feelings about his mother were very mixed. His daughter says that he was both afraid and fond of her at the same time.³ Her influence on him was very strong. He came to realise later in life that his mother had not wanted him. 'As a boy he feared his mother and yet earnestly desired her love.'⁴

Much of Weatherhead's later psychological understanding was based on his own childhood memories. Describing in *Psychology and Life* the exceptional sensitivity of a child he says,

Probably before birth occurs, the child's mind is sensitive to the mental preoccupations of its mother . . . even now we do not exactly know to what extent the condition of a mother's mind influences that of her unborn child.⁵

Even before he was born, his mother had set her heart on his being a minister, and her schoolmarmish severity towards him, which seems to have been dis-

played more often than maternal affection, was no doubt the expression of her desire to make him as worthy a candidate for his vocation as it was within her power to do. She not only beat him savagely on occasion for boyish misdemeanours, but intensified his punishment by withholding forgiveness. In Weatherhead's later writings, his sermons and his psychology, the need to forgive and to know oneself forgiven is central to his thinking, and a major reason why psychotherapy and analysis need to be allied with religion.

Religious observances dominated the Weatherhead household. Family prayers were held every day, and church attended three times each Sunday, with family prayers beforehand in the morning and a prayer meeting in the chapel after the evening service. Between tea and evening chapel Andrew Weatherhead taught his children the shorter catechism. In a sermon on 'Why People Don't Go To Church', Weatherhead sympathises with those who were forced to attend as children and for whom 'Religion was a dreary duty which had to be carried out in obedience to adult command', yet he does not seem to have resented it himself. In another sermon on 'Religion in the Modern Home' he regrets the loss of the habit of family prayers and gives an affectionate picture of the practice in his own home. He attributes his knowledge of the Bible to his mother's daily readings and says that

into the minds of her children my mother drove a most important consideration, namely the thought that religion mattered, and that our relation to God was a matter of the first importance.⁶

For a lonely and imaginative boy, growing up at that time in a home like his, it was as natural for him to see glamour, adventure and fame in the lives of the great preachers and missionaries as it is now for children to dream of becoming space-explorers or pop-stars. As a child of seven he would play a favourite game of pretending to be a preacher, using a kitchen chair as a pulpit and an old table cloth as a gown and hood. This was one Sunday game that his mother did allow, and no doubt it gave her much satisfaction. In spite of the austerity of his childhood, he remembered his home with real affection:

In my childhood I was brought up in a Presbyterian home which compared with modern standards, would be called very strict. . . . Yet I must add that the Sundays of my childhood remain in my memory as days of great happiness. Frankly, it never occurred to any of us to do anything else on Sunday but attend church and Sunday school. What would have happened if we had suddenly decided to go for a day's picnic, I don't know. Yet, Sunday was not irksome and unpleasant, and I do not think there were many homes in which there was more laughter and fun than mine.⁷

When he was five, Weatherhead entered the Board School in Medway Street, Leicester. His memories of this school were harsh, and he never forgot the effect the place had on him.⁸ Recalling his schooldays over fifty years later, in *That Immortal Sea* (1953) he says

I hated school with all my heart. I can even remember hearing that if you got your feet wet you developed a cold that could keep you from school. I clearly remember taking a jug of water up to my bedroom and pouring water over my feet and getting into bed with them sopping wet, in the hope that in the morning I should have a cold and need not go to school [p.109].

He was never physically robust, and whether from this practice or not he suffered

from colds and bronchitis, which frequently kept him away from school. His absence on one occasion led to an incident that left him all his life with burning sense of injustice and indignation:

When I was seven I was away from school when my classmates learnt subtraction sums. On my return I was humiliated to find that I could not understand how they were done. . . . The teacher was one . . . who caned every pupil who got a sum wrong. I was a very sensitive and nervous child and in continual ill-health, and I was in terror of her violence and her loud, hysterical voice. Finding myself behind the others. . . . I got a large sheet of paper and persuaded my elder sister to set me twelve subtraction sums. How I slaved that evening! I can recall even now how hot my head grew, how shaky and inky my hands! . . . I took it up to the teacher in the morning. I wanted to show her that at least I had tried to understand. I shall never forget that moment. She never looked at the sums. She tore the paper across and dropped it into the waste-paper basket. "Oh, anyone can copy them when someone else has done them," she said. I can remember how I flushed at the injustice. It occurred to me afterwards that she had glimpsed another handwriting because my sister had set them out for me, and deduced that I had copied them. But that happened nearly forty years ago. Yet I can still hear the tearing of that paper. I can remember her name, her dress, her face, her large, white, flabby hands, as clearly as if it happened yesterday. . . . The incident so affected me that I always feel a sympathy for little children sometimes amounting to anguish, and injustice to them makes me more angry than anything else.⁹

At the age of thirteen he moved to the Alderman Newton Secondary School in Leicester. His memories of this school were not particularly happy either. It was strict, and he still received beatings from time to time, but its justice was reasonably fair. He still missed lessons through periods of ill-health, which meant that he often found himself behind the rest of the class and having to strive to catch up. He did, however, have some successes, which must have given him some pride of achievement and strengthened his confidence. In 1909 he was recommended for a distinction in passing a Cambridge University examination in 'The History of Scientific Progress from the Beginning of the 19th. Century'. He took his matriculation with the University of London in 1912. In his last year he was awarded the popularity prize which was voted on by all the boys. The extraordinary appeal of his personality was evidently felt even then. He was absent from school at the time of the vote owing to another of his frequent bouts of illness, and the news took him greatly by surprise.

These years were significant in the development of his religious awareness and his deepening sense of personal vocation. On January 3, 1903, when he was nine, he entered into his diary his determination to serve Christ for the rest of his life. The intensity of his religious feelings was strengthened through an exceptional and mystical sensitivity to nature. During his teens the family regularly holidayed at a farm near Leicester known as Onebarrow Lodge, and he always remembered these times with a special delight. Other holidays were spent at the family's old home in Moffat, and he came to know and love the streams and mountains of the Scottish border country. His son says, 'Never have I known anyone in whom the sights and sounds of nature, especially the

peaceful ones, could induce such unalloyed pleasure.’¹⁰ In a sermon, ‘This Haunted World’, Weatherhead reveals how powerfully the beauty of nature impressed him with a sense of wonder and worship.

Nature just breathes the beauty of God. Who has not known high mystic moments on some lovely morning amidst the Scottish hills, or heard the birds calling on a Yorkshire moor . . . sometimes through the glory of the night sky, or the majesty of the mighty mountains, you have known that this is a haunted world, that behind it or should one say interwoven with it, there are realities of another and you know that essentially it is to that other world that you belong.¹¹

Andrew and Elizabeth Weatherhead both taught in the Sunday School at Saxe Coburg Street, and Andrew became Senior Steward there in 1910. The Superintendent Minister of the circuit from 1910-1913 was the Rev. James Cooke, who had previously spent five years in the West Indies. This missionary connection undoubtedly appealed to the young Leslie, and Cooke’s ministry made a great impression on him. Following a service in which Cooke had preached powerfully on the theme of the Cross, Weatherhead went to see him and made his first serious step towards entering the ministry.

He was further influenced in this decision by the ministry in Leicester of the Rev. Charles Ridge, and by his Sunday School Superintendent, Thomas Ellis. In a letter to Ellis, dated 10 June 1912, telling him of his intention to become a missionary, Weatherhead wrote:

This is the result I think first of the influence of the Rev. Chas. Ridge on my life, secondly of the direct appeal of the Rev. Wm. Goudie but all along I have been impressed and enthused with your tremendous enthusiasm for the cause of Foreign Missions and I feel that much of my enthusiasm is due to you, and for this, in this jolly lame way I thank you.¹²

Saxe Coburg Street had a strong missionary emphasis. Charles Ridge had also spent some thirteen years in the West Indies before serving in home circuits, including Leicester. With his father, Leslie had gone to hear the Rev. William Goudie speak at a missionary meeting. Goudie had served in India and was the Wesleyan Missionary Society’s Secretary for West Africa. Goudie had excited Leslie’s sense of adventure, and he told his father that he wanted to be a medical missionary in India. Andrew Weatherhead said that he could not afford to pay for both medical and theological training and Leslie had to choose which to follow. He chose theology, and determined to go to India as a missionary, but he remained interested in medicine all his life.

He preached his first ever sermon on 3 September 1911, just six weeks before his eighteenth birthday, at the village chapel in Houghton-on-the-Hill, six miles from Leicester, on the text from St. Matthew’s Gospel chapter 11. ‘Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest’. He was so nervous that he succeeded in unpicking the cord from around the cushion on the pulpit desk without realising what he was doing. Returning from the chapel he had what he described as ‘the crowning experience’ of the presence of Christ which deeply affected him and profoundly influenced his understanding of the nature of the Christian faith. In order for lay-preachers to get to their destinations the circuit provided a pony and trap. Those who were going in the same direction set out together, but as Leslie was going furthest he was left driving the trap on

his own, and had to drive it all the way back by himself. He had never driven a horse before and the weather was bitter, with hard frost and snow. Going home in the dark after the service it was snowing, and he was terrified as the horse slithered on the icy ground. He says,

Then a most liberating thought came to me. How small was all this compared to the sufferings of Him whom I had set out to serve! How cowardly to be afraid! I began to pray aloud, and then it happened – I don't know how – but as I prayed and longed for Him, He came. He seemed more real than the snow. My heart just sang with that kind of joy which is full of awe and wonder and wild delight.¹³

Throughout his life he always placed the greatest value on such mystical experiences, and belonged to an important tradition in Methodism, going back to John Wesley, which emphasised 'experiential religion', which to Weatherhead meant the 'personal experience of Jesus'. He acknowledged that such experiences were rare, but this made them particularly important and precious. In later life he had a number of other such experiences: during a service in a Y.M.C.A. hut in Mesopotamia in the First World War; in a railway carriage at Vauxhall station; watching a sunset in Charnwood Forest; among the foothills of the Himalayas. He wrote:

These for me have been times when the sun has shone out in all His splendour. The presence of Christ then has been so real that to lift the head and see a form would not occasion surprise.¹⁴

His preaching at Houghton was well received. The Leicester Wesleyan Methodist Messenger, reporting the Local Preachers' Meeting on 8 September 1911 said, 'A good report was given of the preaching and general conduct of the Service taken by Bro. Leslie Weatherhead at Houghton and he was unanimously recommended to be put on trial.' When his trial sermon was preached at Saxe Coburg Street some months later, The Messenger again reported,

Those who heard Bro. Leslie Weatherhead preach his trial sermon at Saxe Coburg Street on August 29th. had a treat. And his examination confirmed the impression that he is "called" of God to preach. The Brethren had a very great joy in supporting his nomination to the position of a fully accredited Local Preacher.¹⁵

It appears from this that Weatherhead was only 'on trial' for a year – an unusually short time then, and impossible now.

After taking preliminary examinations in theology and the Bible and preaching more trial sermons, Weatherhead entered Cliff College to begin training for the ministry in October 1912. Cliff was intended to provide laymen with theological and evangelical skills and there was no requirement for ministerial students to spend time first at Cliff, but many chose to do so before their candidacy was accepted for the ordained ministry. As Weatherhead's period on trial had been so short, it may have been considered wise for him to have an initial period at Cliff before going on to a ministerial training college. He entered Cliff the same year that its first Principal, Thomas Cook, died and was succeeded by Samuel Chadwick, who was noted for the brilliance of his biblical exposition. Chadwick possessed great gifts of spiritual insight, and encouraged the use of imagination in a detailed study of the texts. He had the power – which Weatherhead also possessed, and may have first discovered here – to bring

*College Student, Richmond,
1913.*



them vividly to life. But Cliff did not suit him. Chadwick's stiff regime of classes in the morning and agricultural work in the kitchen gardens every afternoon he found heavy going. At the end of the Easter term he left and, in September 1913, entered Richmond College, London.

Richmond had a long missionary tradition. It was founded originally through the Centenary Fund of 1838, commemorating the conversion of John Wesley a century before. In 1863 it was taken over by the Missionary Society, and until 1885 only those preparing for work overseas were trained there. This segregation of training from those preparing for the home ministry was then recognised as being unhelpful, but Richmond retained its strong missionary associations and continued to attract many of those wishing to go overseas. Weatherhead enjoyed his time there and got on well with his fellow students who, during his first year, elected him secretary of the year, during his second, chairman of the year, and in his third year, chairman of the college. Among the members of the staff who made a lasting impression on him were the Principal, W.T. Davison, from whom he acquired his theological foundation, T.H. Barratt, 'a great soul and a great saint', and Harry Bisseker. When he was leaving he asked Davison for a signed photograph. Davison said, 'I wonder if any of the other men would care to have a copy?' Leslie found half-a-dozen who said they would. Davison 'seemed so pleased to be assured of the affection in which he was held.'¹⁶

The member of the staff who impressed him most and had the most lasting influence on him was Bisseker, who taught Biblical Literature and Classics. It was Bisseker who was responsible for awakening Weatherhead's interest in psychology. Weatherhead later dedicated *A Plain Man Looks at the Cross* to him, describing him as 'My first tutor in Greek Testament and Psychology, and still my teacher and my friend.'

That Bisseker was teaching psychology in a theological college as early as 1913 is remarkable. The explanation must lie in the fact that psychology was traditionally a branch of philosophy. The ancient Greek philosophers were interested in the human soul – the psyche – and their works of philosophy and ethics were also about psychology. It was not until the late nineteenth century that psychology came to be treated as a separate experimental science. Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* appeared in 1899, and the International Psycho-Analytical Society, which grew out of Freud's circle in Vienna, was established in 1910. Freud's *Totem and Taboo* was published in 1913, the year Weatherhead entered college, and *The Ego and the Id* was not produced until 1923. There were other Methodists interested in psychology as well as Bisseker: George Jackson had used psychological insights in his Vanderbilt lectures, *The Fact of Conversion* in 1908. The 'New Psychology' was, nevertheless, still very new, and it was only much later that it came to be accepted in the training of ministers. Weatherhead was among the first to press for it to be introduced.

The outbreak of war in 1914 disrupted the life of the college. Many of the men enlisted at once and although enlistment was left to each individual to decide for himself, by March 1915 twenty-two men had left the college. Weatherhead hesitated, feeling it was not right to fight, but not right to remain in safety when others were sacrificing their lives. The choice was made for him when he was rejected as medically unfit. Then, in 1915, his college career was suddenly cut short when Richmond was taken over by the Westminster Training College, whose premises had been commandeered by the Australian forces. The first and second year students were moved to Manchester, and the third year men were given appointments. Weatherhead became minister of the Methodist Church in Farnham, Surrey, close to the army base at Aldershot, and he was also given charge of three churches in the neighbouring villages.

Weatherhead began his ministry with a missionary zeal for the conversion of individuals, and a clear message to preach of the real presence of Christ, which he later defined as the 'transforming friendship'. There was also a disciplined, if naive and puritanical, piety. He had acquired an imaginative rather than an academic approach to biblical exposition, a good knowledge of New Testament Greek which he carefully maintained (often later referring to the original Greek in his exposition of a text), an enthusiasm for psychology and a frustrated interest in medicine. But the fact that his theological education was ended before he could take his degree undoubtedly affected him. He never regarded himself as a scholar, and treated those whom he did consider to be such with considerable respect.

1. Kingsley Weatherhead: *Leslie Weatherhead, A Personal Portrait* (H. & S. 1975) p.17.
2. William Purcell: *Portrait of Soper* (Mowbrays 1972) p.39.
3. Private conversation with Mrs Caunt.
4. K. Weatherhead, *op. cit.*, p.18.
5. Leslie Weatherhead: *Psychology and Life* (H. & S. 1934) p.168. In his notes for his biographer, he says that it was his period of analysis with J.A. Hadfield that enabled him to recognise the effect of his childhood, and particularly of his mother's attitude on him.
6. Leslie Weatherhead: *The Eternal Voice* (S.C.M. 1939) p.154.

7. Leslie Weatherhead: *When the Lamp Flickers* (H. & S. 1948) p.128.
8. *Leicester Evening Mail* 19 October 1960. 'Those were terrible days. I was very unhappy there.'
9. *The Eternal Voice op. cit.*, p.144f.
10. K. Weatherhead, *op. cit.* p.28.
11. *That Immortal Sea, op. cit.*, p.57. Weatherhead's delight in nature made a strong impression on his Australian host, Gordon Powell, in 1951. 'He told us how he drew strength from beauty. He was particularly fascinated with the beauty of gum trees. He pointed out the wonder of a flock of birds in flight.' [Powell to Travell, Letter and article, 7 July 1991].
12. Letter, 10 July 1912. Weatherhead to Ellis. Copy in my possession.
13. Leslie Weatherhead: *Jesus and Ourselves* (Epworth 1930) p.19f.
14. Leslie Weatherhead: *His Life and Ours* (H. & S. 1932) p.363.
15. *The Wesleyan Methodist Messenger* October 1912.
16. Richmond College 1843-1943 (Ed. Frank Cumbers) (Epworth 1944) p.63f.

SAMPLE