

Introduction

The dimensions of wellbeing

What is human wellbeing?

Christians understand that the universe is destined for resurrection, a conviction that rests on God's self-revelation. However, if they are faithful to the New Testament's theology they will also be clear that they hold this position on rational grounds. That rationality will be affirmed throughout my argument. For this reason the theological anthropology I expound here is important because new perspectives, opening up in recent years, confirm afresh that human nature itself is the location where God starts to reveal himself. I begin with the notion of wellbeing to indicate where psychology makes its contribution to Christian thinking.

Frank Lake used the words being and wellbeing in connection with the two input phases of his diagram that describes the 'dynamic cycle' of psychological life (see fig. 1). This four-sided diagram will be looked at further in chapter 2 but here it is sufficient to say that it concerns the continuous reception and expenditure of personal resources. As the body needs to inhale and exhale air so the self is resourced as person through others. The word 'being' refers to the first degree of support which is warm acceptance, and the second that Lake called sustenance is needed to build up the self with some degree of assured strength from which satisfying interpersonal living is possible for a time. The cycle is continuous because activity is always followed by depletion. Wellbeing therefore stands on being, and if the latter has been deficient the former also will be less secure. Both these input phases in the cycle of the self's enduring existence refer to resources given through the personal presence of others. This resourcing is vital because, as Lake wrote, without access to relationships the individual 'dies', and the one who

enjoys relationships of a generous and gracious kind is enhanced by them in his power of 'being'. The quality of 'wellbeing', good spirits, courage and personal vitality is a

reflection of what has been communicated from others....
 [T]he person who responds to this donative experience
 [has] a worthwhile spiritual 'essence'. (*CT orig.* p.133)

The complete cycle of two input and two output phases indicates a series of truths about the development of the growing individual and his participation in community. One of these is the connection between the quality of sustained emotional support that the child has been given, and the quality of reliable, responsible citizenship that the same individual can contribute as an adult. In this perspective of long-term outcome we can appreciate that the distinction between being and wellbeing is not just a matter of degree, for they refer to two levels of personal engagement in life. At the second level, the person has not only been accepted but is gaining a stability of shared life that enables him to enjoy being himself as one who belongs and contributes to a creative community. Where repeated input phases of a child's nourishment and cherishing have given rise to sustained periods of enjoyable *wellbeing* the consequent confidence of the person concerned will enable him to bear the hardship of times when these resources are not being palpably received. After a time of satisfactory growth the sense of wellbeing does not need to be continuous, because it is now adequately stored in the memory of good times. Then there will be some expectation that the quality of life so far enjoyed should and can be restored when it breaks down. A person in that state knows that wellbeing is proper to his nature. It has been freely given and does not need to be earned or jealously guarded. Others who are seen to enjoy wellbeing do not need to be envied. Wellbeing is no longer in doubt and the danger of falling back entirely into the psychological state of mere *being* has passed. People in this state are usually stable enough to rest in their wellbeing, and so are sufficiently free to engage in the tasks and interests to which their personhood is being drawn. What they most value will include their relationships in which they enjoy their wellbeing but very often they will also have an increasing desire for the One who is the source of that wellbeing.

When wellbeing is not secured

But what of the person who has not begun to experience wellbeing in the earliest period of embodied life? His will be the condition of *being*. It will have some positive features and several negative

ones. There may be little predisposition towards deeper emotional disorders but the person will be liable to depression in some degree. There may also be a tendency to the paranoid condition if a period of warm acceptance has been followed by the sense that such support is being wilfully withdrawn, leaving him deprived. Broadly speaking, being is the kind of condition in which many people always exist, especially in industrialised western societies. They maintain high levels of psychological defence in order to manage their lives and succeed in their chosen projects. In this state there tends to be a considerable rigidity of thought and practice whatever style of life is adopted. The emotional tone of life in work and play can be a combination of interior resignation with aggressive and phrenetic activity, and this tone may dominate the culture of a society as well as its individual members. Enthusiasms are contrived both individually and collectively to subordinate the negativities of existence so that awareness of them is either tolerated or suppressed. The prevailing experience is often one of expected but only partially enjoyed emotional support in which case people are likely to find themselves unable to enjoy life without heavy reliance on stimulants or narcotics.

In contrast, those who have been adequately supported will have reached a stage of interpersonal experience where a different kind of horizon has opened up than the one that is possible on the basis of being only. This is the state of wellbeing that is sufficient to enable psycho-spiritual growth in the direction of mental health. People whose early make-up obliges them to live largely at the level of being, will not be aware that there can and should be a quality of emotional wellbeing, proper to human nature, which is markedly different in quality from what they can experience with the help of drugs. If that is a correct perception, psychodynamic study of personhood and of emotional healing should start from this recognition, with a psychological and theological search for the origin of personhood in the life of every individual. Beginning at conception, I shall argue, a person's wellbeing can grow steadily with the confidence that he is esteemed and acknowledged as a member of the caring community to which, in a non-conceptual way, he knows he belongs. But in the case of a person who lacks wellbeing, the original assurance (at conception) will have been too quickly obscured, requiring effort to be expended to bolster self-confidence. All these remarks are generalisations, for there are no hard boundaries between being and wellbeing.

Wellbeing in response to divine presence

Psychotherapists and academics in this field increasingly agree that mental wellbeing largely depends on good interpersonal relationships in the earliest periods of life. In view of that common ground, the psychodynamic thinking that I am commending can be perceived today, as it should be, in a non-religious, non-sectarian perspective. In moving towards understanding the Christian mission, the theological perceptions that Frank Lake pioneered in relation to psychotherapy are particularly relevant. The theology demonstrates the accuracy of Christian orthodoxy and in particular its communitarian understanding of human nature. The Christian gospel points to what God is doing, and where its non-possessive meaning is recognised the Church becomes a place of emotional healing and human maturing. On this basis I seek to show that all people share a capacity to constitute in community a creaturely embodiment of God's trinitarian relations as the Spirit moves them in responding to other people. Through their healing and maturing they can develop in being fellow-agents with the Creator, and as their sensitivity increases, that joint-agency will lead eventually to the transformation of communities in the properly secular way that God intends.

I hope the book will be read by fellow Christians but also by those on all sides of the religious-secular debate who may be ready to ask whether Christianity has a meaning and a future for the wellbeing of all people, a future that would leave behind as far as possible the tired, self-protective ways of religion which we notice so widely at present. Is there a mysterious core of gospel within all the various Christian traditions that is even more promising than has been apparent in the best days of the Church's history so far? That ancient thread of faith goes back to Abraham and finds its very strange and still growing culmination, initially in Jesus only and then in the community he established. Does this faith actually hold out the prospect of developing wellbeing everywhere, including those areas where communities are most subject to interpersonal disharmony and deprivation? I am proposing that it is not over-optimistic to think so, because underlying the diversity and the internal tensions of the Christian scene, the Church's faith does have a universal significance which takes it beyond the category of religion as commonly understood. The prospect of justifying that claim is now opening up through psychological research and practice, yet it has always been evident in the NT. Taking this seriously does not imply disrespect of the religious cultures and traditions which now exist, and are still needed, but it does challenge the Church to be true to her calling to be

the meeting place where the corporate Christ is formed in the midst of human diversity.

The composition of the person

Much of the discussion to which this book attends concerns human motivation and what constrains it. The psychological side of the enquiry cannot go far, however, unless it is supported by attention to the philosophical aspect of faith and its theology. Because every person needs to be nurtured emotionally and intellectually, I shall be contending that no one moves towards faith in Jesus, or in God, without in some measure recovering the primitive ‘knowledge’ or experience of the divine presence implanted at the start of the individual’s personal existence. Growth into adult faith nearly always involves a measure of heart-healing to enable people to develop beyond the emotional difficulties that tend to prevent them from seeing the world as it is and experiencing themselves as God intends them to be. The world-view I describe in chapter 1 uses the term duality in contrast to dualism. I think of this duality being the-world-and-its-enlivenment with God’s own self-giving. Creation, as Christians understand it, is designed in such a way that it will be transformed eventually into a form that is entirely radiant with the Creator’s personal life. Meanwhile, the universe as now experienced is recognised to be the place in which God is explaining himself, as well as the arena in which we can learn to receive the resources we need.

The discussion will focus on the centrality of personal need and suffering in the divine strategy, and also on the way God’s activity, through which human lives are changed, is operating within the constraints of a community and its culture. So much are we social creatures that the self is always more than the individual, for a “*person ... is not an individual but a plural being ... the identity of each person is spread across the whole extent ... of human personhood ... not hidden in a monadic internal place without extension*”.¹ The individual subject is rooted in the physical organism, but from conception onwards she is being composed as a person, and the personhood that is being built up is corporately extensive within forms of spiritual life to which people commit themselves in their diverse community groups. This concept of personhood is fundamental to the understanding of humanity, and, as we shall see, it helps to explain how people grow towards good or ill under the influence of others, and also how they can become reflectors of God’s love and participants in his creativity.

Humanity intrinsically receptive

Although the dynamic cycle is evident most clearly in babies, it operates perpetually because in the gradually deepening satisfaction of personal neediness lies the fulfilment of humankind's deepest desire. The fact that we are made so helpless and dependent in infancy sets the growth of human creatures in the direction that leads eventually to their maturity. The original formation of the individual through the Creator's presence, which I propose in chapter 1, provides the foundation on which the creature's destiny is reached in a community of relationships. If I am right in this, the spiritual growth process advances by way of need and dependence because receptivity in the created person is intended to be paramount. For this reason I shall suggest that there is in humanity a fundamental priority of the feminine, though it should be noted that this is a distinction of psychological character and not narrowly one of gender and sex.

The hypothesis is strengthened further in the Christian tradition because the doctrine of God's Trinity in its properly orthodox and monotheistic form indicates that the Holy Spirit is constantly at work to facilitate the openness of people to each other and to God. His gracious influence helps them to restrain their anti-social impulses. The receptive side of their nature needs fostering in order to overcome the traits in both men and women, which dispose towards control, possessiveness, and eventually withdrawal from communal engagement. In identifying the trinitarian character of personhood, Christianity makes its basic contribution to the understanding of well-being for individuals and for communities.

The priority of self-questioning

In his book *Lost Icons*,² Rowan Williams affirms the fundamental point in Christian anthropology that I am concerned with in this book: "doctrine and exhortation are meaningless" unless we understand the nature of our humanity. To recover a true engagement with others and with ourselves "we must build a selfhood radically unlike what we take for granted as the modern norm of subjectivity" (p.149). He identifies two ways of becoming more deeply open to God's gracious initiatives, setting "some strands of psychoanalytic" practice alongside the "more primitive" kind of psychotherapy through falling in love (pp.150, 155), for being in love exercises the transcending function which can lift one or both lovers beyond the satisfactions they yearn for. Both therapy and love can enable people to see themselves afresh in a process of learning through frustration and yearning. I am "being shown to myself" as a person "in ways I couldn't have realised

by myself” (p.156): that I am not here in this life for myself or for the one I love. If either the discipline of psychoanalysis or that of being in love are limited to meeting short-term needs, “what is lost in both cases is that vision of the self as *not* there to be possessed” (p.160). In pursuing his theme of human incompleteness, Williams borrows the terminology of Jacob Needleman,³ who writes of the need for a “profound self-questioning”. In the same vein, I discuss personhood in relation to contemporary problems of Church and society as a matter directly relevant to Christian discipleship. To put it in its briefest form, my proposal will be that human growth towards maturity occurs when people start attending, directly or indirectly to those difficult sayings which, in their everyday and social context, Jesus repeatedly addressed to his compatriots as children of Abraham.

Method

In presenting this thesis on personhood and its significance for community, psychologically and theologically, I have drawn on a number of contemporary authors and also on the earlier twentieth-century theologians Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Austin Farrer and Donald McKinnon. In order to show how I have benefited from the more recent writers and where I differ from some of them, I have, in some cases, quoted them at length. This I hope makes the argument clearer, especially for those in busy ministry who may not have easy access to these sources. This comparative way of discussing the subject has also seemed desirable in order to encourage a genuine seeking of common mind and to support the growing tendency for Christian leaders to venture beyond the segregated party positions to which we have become accustomed. My exposition of Christian faith stresses God’s healing and redeeming initiatives in all human situations, as well as the implications for change in the Church. It is a theology of divine presence and activity within a suffering world.

Concerning pronouns for God

I have decided to remain reluctantly conventional and keep the masculine pronouns for God, simply to avoid any clumsy alternative. God is undoubtedly Mother as much as Father, but I shall argue that the Spirit is characteristically masculine. In that regard only the conventional usage is logical. With reference to the first and second persons of the Trinity the language does not provide a satisfactory pronoun.