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From the Stove to the Skin Horse: Theology, Religion and Mental Disorder

DAVID ATKINSON

In his book *Nature, Man and God,* William Temple wrote: 'If I were asked what was the most disastrous moment in the history of Europe, I should be strongly tempted to answer that it was the period of leisure when Rene Descartes, having no claims to meet, remained for a whole day shut up in a stove.'[1] It was then that Descartes made his celebrated attempt to doubt all things but finding that he could not doubt that he was doubting, affirmed 'I think, therefore I am.' I do not want to discuss either Descartes' *cogito,* or Temple's complaint, except to note that what Temple thought was disastrous was the retreat into rational self-consciousness which considerably strengthened individualistic ways of thinking about what it is to be human. This led to the Enlightenment stress on autonomous human individuality of mind and will and the scientistic divide between facts and values.

By contrast, the Velveteen Rabbit turned to the old wise experienced Skin Horse in the nursery and asked 'What is Real? Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?' The Skin Horse replied 'Real isn't how you are made. It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.' 'Does it hurt?' asked the Rabbit. 'Sometimes,' said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. 'Does it happen all at once, or bit by bit?' 'It doesn't happen all at once'; said the Skin Horse, 'you become. It takes a long time . . . . Generally by the time you are Real most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out, and you get very shabby . . . but once you are Real, you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always.'[2]

In contrast (in several ways) to Descartes, the Velveteen Rabit would learn through relationship, gradually over time and with pain and struggle, to say: 'I am loved, therefore I am.'

1 W. Temple, *Nature, Man and God,* Macmillan, London 1934, p 57.
2 Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit,* Heinemann, London 1970.

I begin with this contrast because it may help to open up discussion about ways in which a theological perspective on mental disorder can make a contribution. We will notice the contrast between an individualistic and a relational understanding of what it means to be human. We will focus on the relation between being and feeling illustrated by the Skin Horse, and the twin themes of love and truth.

As we move towards that discussion, we note first the wide range of definitions of mental health. In *The Religious Experience,* Batson and Ventis open up their discussion of the question as to whether religion contributes to mental health or mental disorder by describing seven different conceptions of mental health, which they have found in a review of over fifty research papers in psychology:[1]

1. *Absence of Mental Illness,* defined by identifiable symptoms of psychopathology.
2. *Appropriate Social Behaviour,* defined by the social group to which one belongs.
3. *Freedom from Worry and Guilt,* building on Freud's specification of the ability 'to love and to work' as the hallmark of mental health, or on Karen Horney's suggestion that self-hate arising from a conception of an unattainable 'ideal self' is the root of neurotic conflict.
4. *Personal Competence and Control,* deriving from psychologies of motivation.
5. *Self-Acceptance and Self-Actualisation:* humanistic psychology's interest in the ability freely to express one's true nature.
6. *Personality Unification,* based on Allport's concept of the healthy mature personality defined as a unified and hierarchically organised personality structure.
7. *Open-Mindedness and Flexibility,* the capacity for change and adaptation.

Batson and Ventis relate these seven concepts of mental health to various ways of being religious. They refer to Allport's two modes: 'extrinsic' religion which is 'means' oriented (a person *uses* religion), and 'intrinsic' religion which is 'end' oriented (a person *lives* religion). They add a third orientation which they call 'quest' – an open-ended search for meaning in the light of existential questions. They then correlate their seven concepts of mental health with these three ways of being religious and find that on the whole 'extrinsic' religion is not very healthy, but on different measures, intrinsic and quest oriented religion can both contribute to mental health.

Clearly underlying this and implicit in all psychology of religion are certain assumptions about normality. The problem of normality is raised for us again cross-culturally. For though it seems that the major patterns of abnormal behaviour recognised by Western psychiatry are found throughout the world, there are important variations in their form, (eg, of depression), frequency, distribution and social implications. Augsburger[2]

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1 C. D. Batson and W. L. Ventis, *The Religious Experience,* OUP, 1982 pp 211ff.

2 D. W. Augsburger, *Pastoral Counselling Across Cultures,* Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1986, chap. 10.

notes how in the West, (let us say the Cartesian West), effective mental health is often indicated by self-reliance, self-sufficiency, inner-directed responsibility for oneself and an internal sense of personal identity. In socio-centric cultures, (perhaps closer to the Skin Horse's nursery), however, mental health is indicated by effective interpersonal relationships, the ability to maintain smooth harmonious group membership, responsibility to others, and accountability for one's own work and role in the community. A belief in spirits is counted perfectly normal in one culture, but can be regarded as a sign of delusion in another. The hearing of voices is a mark of divinity in one culture, but could be taken as a symptom of psychosis in another.[1]

Behind all such cultural and social definitions lies a more basic question about human normality. Most psychological perceptions of mental disorder are multi-dimensional, involving pathological, statistical, socially-defined and existential aspects to the question: what is normal?

At this point, Christian theology has a very particular set of basic beliefs about normal human life – and that leads us to what we may call a *theological psychology.*

A Theological Psychology

Within a theological psychology, we can conceptualise the human person (as Michael Polanyi does)[2], at a series of levels: the physical level, (of the dust of the ground), the biological, (the man became a living soul), the psychological (it is not good that man should be alone), and so on. Each level is dependent on, but not reducible to, the lower levels. Psychology has its own appropriate level of undestanding – its own assumptions and its own limits. But psychology is not reducible to physics and chemistry, nor is the whole human person understood through psychology alone. It has its own level within the disciplines but it deliberately brackets out certain other aspects of our humanness.

Thus we can approach the problems of mental disorder, as we can approach any aspect of human life, from (as it were) the bottom up' – an approach illustrated in Gordon Claridge's book *The Origins of Mental Illness.*[3] The scientific advantages of doing so are clear; but its limitations are seen in the method's need to leave out any reference to the essentially human dimensions of motive and purpose. But as Anthony Storr notes, it is as legitimate to inquire towards which goals a process is tending as it is to inquire from what cause a process derives. Both are important.[4].

Theology gives us a world view within which to draw this series of levels. Theology speaks of the openness of being and of transcendent

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1 W. Oates, *Psychology of Religion,* Word Books, Waco 1973, chapter 18.
2 M. Polanyi, *Knowing and Being,* Routledge, London 1969, chapter 14.
3 G. Claridge, *The Origins of Mental Illness*, Blackwell, Oxford 1985.
4 A. Storr, *The Integrity of the Personality,* Penguin, Harmondsworth 1963, p 28.

realities. Christian theology invites us further to picture the incarnation of Christ – the transcendent Logos who became flesh down to the level of our genes – as the intersecting vertical coordinate which gives all these horizontal levels of being their coherence and meaning.[1]

We will focus the rest of our discussion on this Christological model. Christian theology answers the question of normality by pointing to the Man Christ Jesus. He is, in the words of Luther's hymn 'The Proper Man'. If we want a measure for health and for disorder, for truth and for unreality, Christian theology points us to him. We will develop this Christological model a little further, under several headings.

1. The Image of God

Christ, we are told, is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15). This picks up a concept from the very first chapter of Genesis, in which the Creator says 'Let us make man in our image' . . . 'so God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.' (Gen. 1:26f.).

To be human, in these authors' minds, is to be in the image of God. That is what distinguishes this species from others in the created order, whatever other similarities they may share. Out of the whole range of creatureliness, God calls this one species and says of humans 'You shall bear my image'. An unrepentant speciesism is rooted in this theology. But what does it mean? The image has been taken to refer to a human's upright stature, moral awareness, rationality, the capacity to speak words, the ability to know God, sexual complementarity, and so on. All these are important. But most modern commentators would agree with Westermann's view that 'The image is not a question of a quality in people, but of the fact that God has created people as his counterpart and that human beings can have a history with God. The image of God is only there in the relationship of God and the individual.'[2]

The image, then, is not something that we *have* – it is something that we *are*. It is to do with the fact that God calls us into relationship with him. It is both a gift and a calling. For the human story, according to the biblical witness, is not a static still-life. It is the story of creation and fall, of redemption and healing, of pilgrimage and change, of maturing and growing towards wholeness. In one sense, only Christ is the true Image of God. He is the Human Being. All others of us are, theologically speaking, 'human becomings.' 'It doesn't happen all at once,' said the Skin Horse, 'you become.'

There is, therefore, an ambiguity about our human condition. We are created by God, and yet still on the journey towards God. Sin expresses our sometimes culpable falling short of that calling. It tells us that this whole created order is subject to frustration and abnormality. It requires us to

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1 cf. T. F. Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order,* OUP 1981, p 24f.

2 C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11,* SPCK, London 1984.

speak of a theology of human frailty and disorder. The Image of God is both a gift and a destiny yet to be reached. There is consequently a structural weakness and disorderliness about the human condition. To quote Augsburger: 'Created as free yet finite, responsible yet fallible, capable yet limited, self-aware beings yet always becoming, we have the potential for pathology – mental, social, moral – present in core self and social self. Mental and emotional illness is not a foreign process but an extension, exaggeration or distortion of our essential humanness.'[1]

This theological model is compatible with some other relational, developmental models, which also suggest as a hypothesis that pathology is a potential present within our ambiguous human condition. The possibility of mental disorder is implied in the organisation of the self through the developmental processes of human becoming through relationship. At the boundaries of different levels of being there is the possibility of splits, tensions and imbalances.

2. Persons in Relation

The picture of Christ as the Image of God also points us directly back to the foundation doctrine of God as the Holy Trinity. It is of considerable interest that our use of the word 'person' in Western thought stems from its significance in the struggles of the early church fathers in hammering out the doctrine of the Trinity. Though more recently, since the Enlightenment, 'personhood' has been dissolved into the notion of 'personality' as a description of certain empirical capacities rationally describable, theologically and historically the concept of person relates to the being of God as three persons in one God.

Here we are up against one of the fundamental issues in our study of what it is to be human. We know ourselves existentially to be the sorts of beings in whom there are 'signals of transcendence'.[2] We tend always to reach beyond our physical and biological limits. Empirical man does not represent the fulness of what we mean by 'human person.' So only by setting empirical man against a certain vision of person can we see human 'reality'. And the theological understanding of the concept of Person gives us one such transcendent referent. In the way in which the Trinitarian controversies were hammered out, the crucial step was to speak of God as of one 'substance' in three 'persons'. Person was thus an irreducible category. To be personal is not an attribute of God. God's very being is personal. In the very being of God himself, in other words, there is personal relationship. Being is Communion, to adapt a phrase from John Zizioulas' book.[3]

1 D. Augsburger, *Pastoral Counselling Across Cultures,* Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1986, chapter 10.
2 Peter Berger, *A Rumour of Angels,* Penguin, Harmondsworth 1969.
3 J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion,* DLT, London 1985.

This is part of the reason why Temple was to complain about Cartesian individualism. If the nature of God, that is Being itself, is persons in relation, then we ourselves are persons only to the extent that we are persons in relation to other persons. The Old Testament concept of corporate personality within the covenant and the New Testament picture of mutual interdependence of members within the Body of Christ are both ways of expressing this same point.

There is evidence of recent psychological interest in a 'relational' approach to mental disorder, in work on social skills and the concept of social support. The Velveteen Rabbit becomes real not primarily through self-extension or self-actualisation or self-promoted individuation, but through being loved in relationship.

This all suggests that the tap root of much mental disorder is not only biological, not only to do with structural frailty, but relational. Such a conclusion contrasts with our post-Cartesian world in which much of our culture may tend towards a narcissistic individualism cut loose from the reality that we are part of one another and forcing us into the fantasy of individualised perfectibility.

3. Freedom and Love

Understanding God as a Holy Trinity of persons must include the description of God in terms of freedom and love. The creative freedom of God is defined by the nature of his being in communion – that is his freedom is constrained by his love. And the love of God is expressed in creative freedom – in giving to others their freedom to be.

Now here, it seems to me, we reach a most important insight into the nature of the normal human life. For if Christ is the Human Being in his relation as the Son to the Father in freedom and love, if he is the ideal by which we measure the actual, the goal into whose image we are invited to grow, then our picture of normal human life and therefore of health and wholeness needs to begin with him. In the light of Christ, all of us deviate to some degree from 'normality'. Within this universal deviation there is a degree of disorder in some people's minds which leads them or society to decide that they might benefit from specialist help or from someone else taking responsibility for them. But this lies at the most disordered end of the spectrum of common human frailty and deviation from the normal that we all share. To begin with Christ gives us a picture of normality centred on those aspects of relationship which we see most clearly in him, namely freedom and love. He exhibits in his life that 'where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom'; in him we see the 'love of God made manifest'. We need an understanding of freedom which is 'constrained by' love. And by 'love' is meant the willingness to give oneself, to extend oneself, for the sake of others' growth.[1] A freedom that is not constrained by love becomes a freedom associated – as Erich Fromm makes clear – with fear. It is love, the New Testament tells us, which casts out fear. (1 John 4:18).

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1 cf. M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled,* Simon and Schuster, 1978, 81ff.

Further, we need an understanding of the truth in love which sets others free to be. A false love which does not set free enslaves. A love which is not a willing extension of the self for the sake of others' growth is a love which smothers, or which – to use R. D. Laing's expression – is a love which terrorises.[1] Instead of a slavery in false relationships, the New Testament speaks of Christ as Truth: the truth will set you free. (John 8.32).

Twin Themes

It is these twin themes: the love which casts out fear, and the truth which sets free, that we will elaborate further:

(a) Love and Fear

We noted earlier a way of seeing mental disorder as part of the structural frailty of human nature in a fallen world. Another perspective, inspired by Kierkegaard's theological exploration of despair,[2] suggests a way of seeing mental disorder as an imbalance which leads to fear. Despair, or fear, results from a loss of the self; and according to Kierkegaard such a loss may be due to imbalances in at least three of the major polarities of the human self. Augsburger elaborates Kierkegaard's insight into a picture of three axes. The first is the axis between 'infinitude' and 'finitude'. The sense of infinitude is the sense of being able to transcend life and its limitations which becomes unhealthily exaggerated into perfectionism, self-judgement and built-in disappointment with one's failings. The sense of finitude is of an awareness of the mundane, the ordinary mechanics of life's routine which can become unhealthily exaggerated into a loss of the self in total conformity, being but an atom in the human mass, only one link in the human chain.

The second axis runs between the sense of necessity and the sense of possibility. When exaggerated, the sense of necessity, where all is given, required and unchanging, leads to the loss of hope in a fatalistic pressure of circumstances. At the opposite pole, when exaggerated, the despair of possibility comes from the loss of awareness of what is in fact given and necessary and leads to a world of wishful dreaming or malevolent fantasy. There may be unrealistic hopes or unrealistic dreads.

The third axis joins consciousness to unconsciousness. An exaggerated obsession with consciousness leads to the despair of an over-explored self-examination. An exaggerated swing to the 'unconsciousness' pole leads to a lack of appropriate self-reflection, a failure to recognise the true self within; such a person becomes essentially spiritless.

On this model, health consists essentially in being able to resolve contradictions. When balanced, these three polarities are the source of emotional and spiritual health, using the strengths of both ends of each axis. A 'person finds the means of being authentically grounded in the life-

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1 R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1959.
2 S. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, Princeton 1983, p 29ff.

situation yet capable of transcending it; of actively dealing with the daily necessities of existence yet envisioning possibilities; of living with the free, joyous naivete of childhood yet wth a deep consciousness of self, of others, of life.'[1]

For Kierkegaard, the balance is found, and the contradictions handled, through a commitment of faith in the Creator. At each point, the possibility of despair, of fear, stares at us, because we are faced with ambiguity. Anxiety is the sense of ambiguity which attends the possibility of choice. Anxiety can offer the possibility of growth. Yet partly through our own wilful choices, and partly through the environment around us, we may avoid the creative choice, and live instead with despair and fear.

How does love cast out fear? Through providing an environment in which trust can grow, choices can be made, and ambiguity can be lived with. This, it seems to me, is part of the meaning of 'good enough' mothering in the writings of D. W. Winnicott.[2] Not only in the baby's early relationship with the mother, but in all our contexts of interpersonal relationship – the family, the community, the Christian fellowship – we can either help one another to grow by holding each other emotionally in a facilitating environment in which we can develop the trust to make choices and to live with ambiguity or we can effectively push each other to one of the extremities of Kierkegaard's axes – to the point of despair. A love which extends itself for the sake of the other is a love which can cast out fear.

(b) Truth and Freedom

From love and fear, we now turn to those other twin theological themes which derive from our understanding of personhood in the light of our Christological approach to the personhood of God: truth and freedom.

Christ said not only 'I am the truth', but 'the Truth will make you free.'

We have looked at mental disorder as structural frailty, and an imbalance which can lead to fear. Now we explore the concept of mental disorder as a flight from truth. Once again Winnicott is helpful in his concept of the 'false self' which we tend to build around ourselves or hide in when the truth is too painful to acknowledge.[3] It may be the case that some mental disorder is a flight into the safety of a false self, or a fantasy world, because – as T. S. Eliot put it – humankind cannot bear very much reality. Certainly Laing's work on schizo-affective disorders would fit this pattern:

> Pretence and equivocation are much used by schizophrenics. The reasons for doing this are, in any single case, likely to serve more than one purpose at a time. The most obvious one is that it preserves the

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1 Augsburger, op. cit., p 338.
2 D. W. Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment*, Hogarth, 1965.
3 ibid.

> secrecy, the privacy of the self against intrusion . . . . Despite his longing to be loved for his "real self" the schizophrenic is terrified of love. Any form of understanding threatens his whole defensive system . . . . If the self is not known it is safe . . . .[1]

Because truth is perceived as too painful, we live in unreality. In David Smail's book *Illusion and Reality: The Meaning of Anxiety*[2], he argues that psychological disorder does not arise within people, so much as within the interaction of people with each other and from the nature of our shared world of experience. A great deal of therapy is geared to helping people adjust to their world, as though the world were normal, and they with their fears and fantasies were abnormal. But, says Smail, the tacit belief that the majority of people are pretty well adjusted, contented and lead conventionally well-ordered lives needs to be questioned. In contrast to this belief – and partly because of this belief – most of us keep the way we really feel about ourselves as a deep and shameful secret. Behind many of the symptoms of anxiety lies an injury to the person's self-esteem, an inarticulate awareness that she or he has not lived up to conventional standards of adequacy which we are all complicit in setting and which none of us achieve.

These standards are often upheld by the institutions of our educational, political, social and therapeutic establishments. 'It is my contention', writes Smail, 'that the ideal world in which we profess belief is riddled with myth, and that the secret world of our anxiety and pain in which we actually live our lives is the real one which we truly share.'[3]

He sees his task as a therapist to give his patients a new set of concepts with which to handle their pain, by exposing the truth of the real world in which they are struggling. This seems consistent with our earlier theological picture of a fallen world in which struggle, pain and ambiguity are part of the way things are. Yet by facing that truth we can find a freedom.

To give a second example, we refer to Scott Peck's book *People of the Lie*[4] which is a study of what Christian theology has called the 'demonic'. By looking at various case-studies of very ordinary people, and the bizarre destructiveness in which their lives become enmeshed, Peck suggests that there is a category of human behaviour which we need to name as 'evil'. What characterises each of his case-studies is a web of lies; and Scott Peck relates this to the Satanic influence of what Christian theology has called 'The Father of Lies'. The burden of his book is that the time has come for a careful scientific analysis of this phenomenon, and the recognition that the fragmentation of the self, the alientation of relationships, and the destruction of family and community which is often associated with this web of lies may need to be analysed not only in terms of internal factors but also in terms of the fact that we live in a supernatural universe.

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1 Laing, *op. cit.* p 163.
2 D. Smail, *Illusion and Reality,* Dent, London 1984.
3 ibid., p 7.
4 M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie,* Simon and Schuster, 1983.

Despite some extravagances in this book, there is much which seems to correspond with the deliverance ministry of the Christian church. This ministry has been effectively used in alleviating mental disorders of various sorts in the belief in *Christus Victor* as the Truth who sets free.

4. Forgiveness

Finally, we turn to a central Christian theological theme which holds together much of what needs to be said about Truth and Love, namely forgiveness.

Bishop Stephen Neill makes the following comment in the course of what he calls 'the Three Great Enemies' of the human race: fear, frustration and resentment:

> 'When I read technical books on psychology there is one word which I always look for in the index and rarely find. It is the word 'forgiveness'. . . . If the absence of the word implies also an absence of this central idea from contemporary psychological thought, this may indicate a lacuna the filling of which would be greatly to the advantage of both psychological thought and psychiatric practice.'[1]

This absence is particularly surprising when we reflect that forgiveness is one of the central words of the Christian tradition: 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself'. Moreover, in Christian theology reconciliation is not only between a person and God but within a person's other interpersonal relationships and within himself or herself.

To be sure, there is a moralistic sort of religion which supresses rather than liberates, which increases rather than removes guilt. But that is not the religion of grace to which Christ introduces us.

Forgiveness therefore operates as an attitude and an action within a relationship when that relationship has been disrupted by the partner's consciousness of doing wrong to, or being wronged by, the other. Forgiveness acknowledges the wrong but refuses to allow it to destroy the relationship by resentment. Forgiveness is not mere tolerance: it is an active change of attitude which seeks to build the relationship creatively from this shared facing of what has been wrong. Thus moral guilt can be forgiven.

Forgiveness is about speaking and acting the truth in love. It rests on the model of the human person in which personal responsibility and objective guilt are meaningful – a moral model which includes the 'lower' levels of the human person, but is not reducible to them.

Insofar as mental disorder is associated with the pain of true guilt, the ministry of forgiveness, modelled on the grace of Christ, is appropriate.[2]

The nearest psychological theory comes to the Christian understanding of forgiveness seems to be Melanie Klein's concept of reparation. In Klein's understanding, as a child is working through what she calls the

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1 S. Neill, *A Genuinely Human Existence,* Constable, London 1959, p 209.

2 David Atkinson, 'Forgiveness', *Third Way* Oct/Nov 1982.

Depressive Position[1] (coming to terms with the ambiguity of the world, seeing that the external world is both satisfying and depriving and coming to terms with the guilt that arises through having felt aggressive to the mother who is the source of her sustenance) there arises the desire on the child's part to make reparation – to make good the injuries the child in fantasy carried out upon its mother.

For this to happen, the mother has to hold the child psychologically in time so that this process of making reparation may proceed. Only if the environment is sufficiently facilitating can the child move through to the stage of concern and the capacity to love. And that facilitating environment seems very close to forgiveness. The mother acknowledges that the child is seeking to make good a wrong and in grace offers it the assurance that the wrong will not destroy the relationship. The good enough parent models grace. And at other times of life, we can offer to each other good enough forgiving environments for the grace of forgiveness to the giving and received.

Forgiveness is thus part of the love which casts out fear: a love which extends itself for the sake of the other's growth. Forgiveness is also part of the truth about the ambiguity of the world. Forgiveness is something to do with breaking down idealisations, and recognising in oneself and others both good and bad, and learning to live wih that. By alleviating guilt, forgiveness can be a most powerful contribution to mental health.

Neither forgiveness nor any of the other processes to which we have referred is a rapid, easy solution to mental disorder. They are all journeys which take time, struggle and pain.

Christian theology speaks of a gap between the word of forgiveness being spoken and a lifetime of pilgrimage in which we learn to live out the new life in truth and freedom. It is only in the new heaven and the new earth that there will be no more frailty, no more imbalance, no more evil, no more guilt, and no more pain.[2] It took a long, long time for the Velveteen Rabbit to be loved into Reality, until he could truly say 'I am loved, therefore I am.'[3]

Revd Dr David Atkinson is Chaplain and Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Oxford.

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1 M. Klein, 'Our Adult World and its Roots in Infancy' in *Envy and Gratitude,* Hogarth, London 1975.

2 cf. Rev. 21:1ff.

3 A fuller version of this paper was read at a conference on 'Personality and Insanity' organised by the Ian Ramsey Centre, Oxford in March 1988.