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Richman, Naomi (2021) Gavin Miller, Miracles of Healing: Psychotherapy and Religion in Twentieth-Century Scotland. [Book Review]

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Gavin Miller, *Miracles of Healing: Psychotherapy and Religion in Twentieth Century Scotland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020; 175 pp.); reviewed by Naomi Richman DOI: 10.3366/pah.2021.0371

Gavin Miller's *Miracles of Healing: Psychotherapy and Religion in Twentieth-century Scotland* serves as a noteworthy example of the recent scholarly interest in the regional histories of psychotherapeutic traditions. The discussions offered by Miller in this monograph speak to important conversations in the medical humanities about the interactions of health care with spirituality; here Miller explores in considerable detail the deployment of Christian theology and New Age spirituality by psychotherapeutic thinkers in the modern Scottish context. The book tracks the efforts of internationally recognized Scottish psychotherapists like R.D. Laing and W.R.D. Fairbairn, as well as lesser known figures like Winifred Rushforth, to incorporate and at times altogether reconceive the methods and goals of psychotherapy in line with Christian (and post-Christian) notions of communion, rebirth, holiness and mystical experience.

In the first chapter, Miller sets out his contention that the links between Scottish psychotherapy and religion should be understood 'as a nexus' of psychotherapeutic practices that 'emerged from cross-fertilisation with ideas and practices from Freudian, Jungian and Adlerian psychotherapy, as well as from religious traditions such as existentialism, personalism, Christian mysticism and contemporary vitalism' (p. 3). Whilst Miller highlights the value of regional and national differences in telling the histories of psychotherapy, he is also keen to underline his commitment to a 'wider transnational approach to history' that attends to external cultural influences upon, and emerging from, the Scottish context (p. 4). In an important, if dense, discussion, Miller draws on David Bloor's 'symmetry principle', which stipulates that 'social-scientific investigation of scientific knowledge should be "symmetrical in its style of explanation" so that "the same types of cause" are used to "explain [...] true and false beliefs"' (p. 6; cf. Bloor, 1991, p. 7). This, Miller argues, will motivate him to seek out 'psychosocial causes' and 'extraneous historical factors' not only for beliefs that appear irrational or wrong, but also for those that seem rational or scientific. Miller suggests that adherence to this principle will allow him to resist the temptation to causally privilege, by cultural default, the validity of epistemic truth-claims made by psychotherapeutic approaches, over and above those made by religious cultures (pp. 6–7). He explains that this approach is not an 'assault upon scientific rationality' but rather allows the cultural historian to 'neglect, suspend or bracket scientific validity and justification, in order to concentrate upon the kinds of explanation where socio-historical reasoning gains purchase' (p. 7). Aspects of this epistemology broadly speaking have gained considerable traction across social scientific theory in recent years, and so its usefulness for understanding the discourses under investigation in this monograph could be brought out further with more constructive and sustained engagement with macro-level discussions on post-secular approaches to theorizing contemporary religiosity that are unfolding in, for instance, anthropology and theology, but these are unfortunately absent from this text. Nevertheless, the explanations are clear and well considered, and Miller is careful in setting out the various intellectual positions that direct his historiographical reading of the texts in question.

Following the introduction, the book, which is organized roughly chronologically, discusses three major themes that emerge from the Scottish therapeutic intellectual context. In Chapter 1, 'The Self in Communion', Miller explores the rejection of Freudian models of the self by the Scottish psychotherapists on grounds of solipsism, and the emergence of a more relational vision of human psychic life. Influenced by a 'late-Victorian Christianised interpretation of Darwinian natural history' that Miller suggests was pervasive in Scottish intellectual life in the inter-war period, the understanding of psychology that was ultimately developed by Fairbairn and others saw 'human life as evolving, both biologically and socially, towards ever-greater altruism' (p. 12). Miller tracks the emergence of this 'distinctly interpersonal theory of psychoanalysis' (p. 16) from this optimistic reading of Darwinian evolution as a process that tends towards sociability and love, rather than egoism and competition. This understanding of Darwin, Miller demonstrates, was inflected through a Christian lens by various Scottish thinkers who came to view 'evolution as the historical revelation of a providential plan for the creation of Christian virtues' (p. 23). Christian evolutionism then came into contact with another set of discourses widely in circulation at the time: anthropology – and, in particular, William Robertson Smith's explanation of sacrifice as a ritual communion between humans and their gods. All this pointed to the fact that religion was not a 'stubborn pre-rational residue' rendered null and void by Enlightenment critique, but rather was supported by biological and, now, anthropological evidence (p. 28). Evolution 'validated a Providential narrative of evolutionary progression towards the emergence of Christian love' which was exemplified in 'communion between mother and child in the act of suckling', the 'paradigm of the social bond' (p. 28). Fairbairn, for instance, thus came to see religion as an ancient form of psychotherapy and contemporary psychotherapy, in turn, as a 'scientifically rationalised successor to some (though not all) elements of religious practice' (p. 31). True to his word, Miller then considers the exportation of these beliefs to New Zealand through the work of C. Maurice Bevan-Brown. Bevan-Brown argued strongly against those psychotherapists who upheld a 'taboo on tenderness' between mothers and their infants; 'love', exemplified most of all in the mother-child relationship, is the central tenet of Christianity and so psychotherapy that aims to pursue love is therefore an 'expression of true Christianity' (p. 52).

Chapter 2, 'Interpreting God's Psychotherapeutic Will', examines the application of Christianized psychotherapy in the post-war Scottish context through the activities of Laing and Rushforth. Rushforth, who set up the Davidson Clinic for Medical Psychotherapy in Edinburgh, is thought to have worked in close collaboration for at least some time with various local churches, including the Church of Scotland. Rushforth saw divine action at work in the psychotherapeutic healing practices conducted at the clinic, and a number of essentially Christian practices, such as prayer circles or the laying on of hands, gradually became commonplace therapies. Against the tide of secularism, Miller argues, 'Christian psychotherapy' 'offered a new, psychologically reinterpreted and scientifically authorised template for Christian life narrative, thereby recovering and continuing diverse narrative elements such as conversion, rebirth or regeneration, miracles, providence, salvation and spiritual healing' (p. 71). From here, Miller moves on to Laing's work, which he also regards as responding to the threat of secularization through the development of its 'corporate,

incarnational theology' that advocated bringing the mentally unwell into a functioning social community, amongst other things (p. 103).

Chapter 3, 'Scottish Psychotherapy in the New Age', further explores Laing's and Rushforth's careers as the two therapists became increasingly captivated by New Age spirituality in the 1960s. This brought Laing's thought into tension with mainstream Christian ideas, which he tried to remedy by reconnecting with the Iona Community in the 1980s. Rushforth became particularly interested in vitalism via the work of French Catholic theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Her New Age approach was a response to the surrounding secularizing culture, by allowing 'the life narratives of discursive Christianity' to live on via her style of psychotherapy, which she 'grafted into a vitalist cosmology', Miller suggests (p. 127). Rushforth's psychotherapeutic legacy emphasized the holistic interdependency of spiritual and psychological 'flourishing' and survived beyond the Davidson Clinic in the form of three other wellness organizations, all of which advocate the use of various forms of psychotherapeutic spiritual practice (pp. 111–12). Finally, Miller turns his attention to the Schauder–Lefébure dialogues, which were published in the 1980s and billed as a conversation about counselling between a 'Doctor' and a 'Priest'. The dialogues, Miller suggests, 'consistently argue that the evocation of spiritual experience is essential to counselling', although the historical connection Miller posits between them and the Davidson Clinic, or the other figures explored, is not especially persuasive (p. 114).

Miller's book offers a detailed historical construction of the intellectual life of several twentieth-century Scottish psychotherapists and is an important piece of scholarship that serves to challenge the mainstream popular assumption that European psychology is, or has always been, a wholly secular enterprise. The writing is highly expository, however, and it would be satisfying to see Miller elucidate more explicitly the significance of and rationale for this piece of writing, including its intended contribution to theoretical discussions within the many disciplinary approaches and fields in which he is engaging. Only at the end does Miller finally acknowledge that this research could speak to and 'inform conceptualisation of the relationship between psychology and religion' (p. 135), gesturing towards theories of science–religion engagement proposed by Ian Barbour and Graham Richards. Even here, though, Miller shies away from engaging more critically with these debates, keeping the conversation tightly bound to the historical context with which he is concerned, rather than to the theoretical perspectives that have directed this piece of work as a whole. Finally, his treatment of the Christian concepts in question might also be enriched with more robust explications of the theological content of these beliefs and practices, especially understandings of divine love and sacrifice, the ministry of spiritual healing and Marian devotion vis-à-vis the mother–infant model. Nevertheless, Miller's book undoubtedly stands as a valuable contribution to local histories of psychotherapy and an example of good historical scholarship on the interface between psychology and religion.

Reference

Bloor, D. (1991) *Knowledge and Social Imagery*, 2nd edn, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.