In recent years, it has become a tradition that the Chairperson of the Edinburgh based Guntrip Trust, should initiate a series of discussions on some area of importance to him and the trust. Brian Hardy encouraged an important discussion of ministry and sexuality. My subject has been ‘Religion and Psychotherapy’. Two 24 hour consultations (1) were held at Dunblane, and towards the end of the second, the Scottish Institute of Human Relations Chair, Eileen Francis, suggested we continue the discussion in small groups. A working party of the Trust executive explored this possibility for a year, and then organized a pilot group. This article is some of my personal reflections on some of the thinking of this pilot group. From time to time it refers back to our earlier consultations. Included at the end is a bibliography and an appendix of fairly brief ‘starters of discussion’ from the previous year’s exploration. Our group met 11 times between June 2011 and January 2013, taking as our basis for discussion, papers from Psychoanalysis and Religion in the 21st Century, Competitors or Collaborators (2) by David M Black.

Robin McKie, opening a recent ‘Observer’ (3) review of a book about science and the Bible, said ‘The Good book is many things to different people. For believers, it is a guide to life whose every word was handed down directly from God and must therefore be treated as the literal truth.’ It is an extreme view of belief and it certainly makes it easier for his atheistic argument, but it is true only of some. The underlying philosophy and spirituality of psychoanalysis at the beginning had a similarly impoverished atheist creed, those exhibiting religious opinions being regarded by some therapist as requiring further analysis, but again it was too narrow a view. Psychoanalysis has matured since then to a point where it can now recognize that people who do have beliefs – and who does not? – can still be reasonable human beings. In fact I would go further and argue that it is much wiser to acknowledge what we believe if we are to be more sure that our work as therapists is safe.

‘The Faith of the Counsellors’ (4) was a book published in the Sixties by Paul Halmos, Halmos had interviewed practitioners and came to think that their faith was founded on a belief in love. Few of them actually articulated this to themselves, perhaps because they were nervous that this might inflate their self-conscious. Halmos concluded that this probably did not matter. R A Lambourne, the psychiatrist who inaugurated the Diploma in Pastoral Studies course in Birmingham, in a review of the book, disagreed. He argued that people needed to examine their spiritual foundations, however benign they might think them to be. What they really believed, he thought, was important and would profoundly affect their work. He thought it safer and wiser if they were to acknowledge where their motivation came from.

Discussions in our group tended to move round such concerns, especially what we believed about God and in what way we believed. It was too simple to assume that people were either believers or non-believers, even though this might be true in terms of practice. We reflected a much broader viewpoint. In a recent book about ethics, Nigel Biggar,(5) the Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Oxford, wrote ‘We should recall that the actual world is not always divided starkly into believers and unbelievers, into Church and World. More often than not, it comprises a mélange of dogmatically certain believers, dogmatically certain unbelievers, and infinite gradations in between of more-or-less believers and more-or-less unbelievers.’

This is how we were in our group. We were a clear exemplar of the modern world, a group of explorers wanting to reflect on the underlying beliefs and motivations behind our journeying in the world. One of us was especially struck by the verse in Psalm 25:

Make me to know your way, O Lord
And teach me your paths. (6)
Religion is not, as Freud tended to think, a ‘science-like-thing’ making inaccurate observations about the world which science managed to do so much better, but a cultural construct of values and stories offering a way of living a creative and truthful life.

Religion in general then has to be about this search for truth and one debt it has to psychoanalysis is that its theory so ruthlessly exposes hypocrisy and the false. It demands of religiously minded persons that they be equally ruthless in their analyses of their inner journey, ready when finding out to discard any religious guff that purports to be of God but is more likely to be some inner separating barrier. Psychoanalysis compels faithful people to see beyond their inadequate images of God, requiring them to dispense with rights they think they have to manipulate God to their own purpose or indeed forge the divine into mirrors of their superegos. There is much good news in what psychoanalysis has to say about the inner life and for this reason alone, many gifted pastors have turned to it with gratitude as a way of deepening their understanding of what it means to be a searcher for ‘truth in the inwards parts.’ (7)

One central truth is how we come to form our view of God, how in the early relationships of infants to their mothers the image of God is formed. D W Winnicott as a paediatrician and analyst was in a pivotal position to observe the oneness of newly-born infants and their mothers, the infants as it were under the illusion that they had created the breast from which they sucked. How else could such an object be there? They had made it themselves, a necessary part of themselves which obligingly satisfied their needs. An early moment of growth comes when infants with the help of a transitional object begin to recognise that what they thought was an extension of themselves is in fact a separate object or person to whom they are learning to relate. From this, it would seem that we do something very similar with God, we create God in a similar way, certainly modelling God on what we experience of objects as we grow. Spiritually speaking, the mother is the first to represent God to her child. Psychoanalysis has tended to see this as the end of the story. But it is not the end in any other of our relationships, so presumably not – or possibly not depending on what we believe – in the case of God. It is another beginning of a developing relationship which will grow in the course of a life-long personal journey from seeing God as a projection of good and bad objects, to a discernment of the beauty of holiness within the love of what MacMurray termed the Ultimate Other. At this point our group had wide theological opinions, in the spirit of the Biggar quote above, as to whom, what or whether this Ultimate Other might be. What did seem clear is that if prayer and worship were to be authentic and real, there had to be some kind of act of belief and trust for there to be a relationship.

In one of the sessions we had an interesting reflection on projections in the book of Job. Ronald Britton, in one of the articles in our study book (8) reflected on the significance of the last verse of the poem, Job chapter 42, verse 6. In the New Revised Standard Version, and most translations, this reads:

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear
But now my eye sees you;
Therefore I despise myself
And repent in dust and ashes.

It seems a rather miserable ending after Job’s spirited defence of his integrity before God, even if we take ‘repent’ to mean ‘turn in a new direction.’ The Hebrew words are apparently open to several interpretations and Britton translates it:

Now that my eyes have seen you
I shudder with sorrow for mortal clay (9)

In a further, petulant gloss he writes it in prose as, ‘now I know what you are like I have nothing more to say, you have made your point that you can do anything, and that you will do what you want.’ Angry, certainly not submissive, but very much in the spirit of Job’s argument! Gustavo Gutierrez, the Southern American Liberation theologian offers a less bitter ending.
Now that my eyes have seen you,
I repudiate and abandon my ‘groaning and lamentation’ (10)

In terms of our study this sounds more hopeful, as if the spiritual journey might end in a more mature and less depressive relationship.

Freud famously argued once of one of his patients that his task as a therapist was to change her ‘hysterical misery into everyday unhappiness.’ A realistic therapeutic goal perhaps, but not one to inspire a spiritual journey, such as the challenge Dag Hammarskjöld posed at a significant turning point of his life:

‘For all that has been – Thanks!
To all that shall be – Yes! (11)

Or, as Winnicott put it once in a short prayer,

Oh God, may I be alive when I die. (12)

Religion and spirituality is basically, we felt, about being alive. And here, the writings of Rowan Williams, Marion Milner and Ignacio Matte Blanco (13) spoke powerfully to the group. The final chapter of Williams’s book ‘Lost Icons’ seemed to speak realistically about prayer and spiritual living. Marion Milner’s diaries, especially ‘Eternity’s Sunrise’, reflecting on her journeys in Greece and elsewhere on the different things, the ‘beads’ of each day, she noticed and the happenings and what they said to her spiritually. Matte Blanco, the Chilean analyst spoke about the unconscious as the source of emotion and creative imagination.

There remained still the dilemma of the persons whose image of God has been damaged by their experience of mothering. It has for all of us to an extent, but there are infants, probably most of us as adults, who have an inner capacity to search for the love we have missed, believing that there will be someone who will love, some therapist for example who will respond. Harry Guntrip (14) once observed that patients do in fact perceive their therapists as Christ-figures, as someone who might save them, though he counselled strongly against the therapist imagining him or herself to be such a Christ. Theologically speaking, though, they are – just as mothers are to their infants, in all their human inadequacy, their less or more levels of competence, their weak ability to love, a love they only have because they have been and are themselves loved – journeying to become Christianly speaking by grace and the Holy Spirit, the Christ-like, person we are called to be. What psychoanalysis demonstrates so clearly is that this is a painful and hard way. Perhaps it is not surprising that we are so reluctant to examine the roots of our being and loving.

David Goodacre
May 28, 2013.

NOTES
1. The initial consultation used these papers as the basis of our discussion:
   McKenna, Christopher, 28th Sept 2002, Psychotherapy and Spirituality, London Centre for Psychotherapy.
   Munro, John, July 2007, Is God real or only in my mind? D W Winnicott on maintaining the paradox
   Copies of these papers can be obtained from the Guntrip Trust, £1 each if hard copy.
   Gavin Miller and Chris McKenna led the discussions in the the second consultation.
APPENDIX

In the course of our consultations, the following subjects were raised:

Faith
Many think of faith as the capacity to believe impossible things. People of faith do believe things, but primarily it is an attitude of trust in an Other.

Stories of Faith
‘A shared story of faith can be a vehicle for transformative relationships.’ – (Chris McKenna)

Human Flourishing
A feature of the modern age is that we understand ourselves to be disciplined and hardworking, living in a universe governed by unchanging laws, able to sort our any problems that arise, expecting humankind to flourish. Does human flourishing also require a transcendent dimension, a search for meaning?

Listening, Seeing
In one of Schumann’s compositions, the composer stipulates that between the music of the treble and bass clefs the performer should note a silent space for the inner voice to be heard.

Person
All the words used of persons – ‘person’, ‘soul’, ‘spirit’, ‘heart’ are metaphors. ‘Person is from the Latin ‘persona’, referring originally to the mask worn by actors on stage, and thus to the face, or hidden face. ‘Soul’ and ‘Spirit’ both refer to the breathing, the breath which gives life, ‘heart’ to the centre of the whole body.

Community
Within the history of the Scottish Churches there has been a dominant sense of being ‘a group of persons whose lives were so bound together ... that they could be treated as parts of one common life. (Gavin Miller)

Truth and Reality
Tell of the Truth, but tell it slant
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise

As lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind – Emily Dickinson

Prayer and the Unconscious
‘For though wee through the grace of God can know fully about all other matters, and think about them, ... yet of God himself can no one think. Therefore I will leave on one side everything I can think, and choose for my love that which I cannot think. Why? Because he may well be loved, but not by thought. By love he can be caught and held, but by thinking never. (‘The Cloud of Unknowing, Ch 6, pp67–68 (Penguin Classics)

Forgiveness
Three different approaches to forgiveness: Gordon Wilson in a BBC interview after the 1987 Remembrance Day bombing of Enniskillen during which his daughter died said this: ‘She (Marie) held my hand tightly, and gripped me as hard as she could. She said, “Daddy, I love you very much.” “Those were her exact words to me, and those were the last words I ever heard her say.” To the astonishment of listeners, Wilson went on to add, “But I bear no ill will. I bear no grudge. Dirty sort of talk is not going to bring her back to life. She was a great wee lassie. She loved her profession. She was a pet. She’s dead. She’s in heaven and we shall meet again. I will pray for these men tonight and every night.”

A second story:
Julie Nicholson’s daughter Jenny was killed in the suicide bombing of the London underground on July 7th, 2005. Julie, an Anglican priest, said at the time that she could not forgive her daughter’s killer. Later she wrote a book, Song for Jenny. When interviewed about it recently, she said that she felt a loathing for the bomber, but not hatred, adding, “I really think that it is not a mother’s place to forgive the killer of her child.”

A third story:
The mother of the black teenager, Anthony Walker, who was killed in Liverpool, said at the time that she could forgive the man who had killed her son. She was asked five years later whether she could still do so. She replied, “There is a scripture we use in Romans which says, “All things work together for good...we decided to turn the tragedy round for the good.” (the passage is from Romans 8,28 and continues, ‘for those who love God and are called according to God’s purpose.’

Vocation
The idea of being called by God is central to understanding within a faith community; the call to follow, to discover and use gifts within a particular vocation.

Healing – Psychotherapists work to bring healing to those who suffer from mental torment and psychoanalysis has taught practitioners how to care in a Christ-like way. Chris McKenna commented in one of the papers about the psychoanalytic way of knowing an ‘other’ that had ‘previously been the preserve of the mystics’. The therapist offers an evenly, hovering attention to the person in need, a kind of contemplative listening to the other in need, mediating love and understanding.