

“Island Spirituality, spiritual values of Lewis and Harris”
by Alastair McIntosh, The Islands Book Trust, 2013, ISBN
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This book is from a lecture given by Alastair McIntosh in October 2012 to the Islands Book Trust. Alastair, now a Quaker, was brought up in the Lewis Presbyterian tradition. Now he works in ecological theology and holds honorary fellowships at both Glasgow and Edinburgh Universities. The book is consequently a scholarly work: the first 88 pages are the talk, then there are 60 pages of notes, 16 of bibliography and six of index.

I took on reading it as a chore, sure I was going to be wearied with mooning over God in nature and standing stones, or, worse, God in modern science (one of my bugbears). Instead I was delighted to read a history, albeit a coloured one, of the Presbyterianism of the Long Island (Harris and Lewis), which has dented my liberal Quaker prejudice against the “Free Kirk” and its religious oppression. The Calvinist doctrine of predestination, that only the “elect”, not the “damned”, will achieve salvation whatever the behaviour of either, was strongly repudiated in 1676 by founding Quaker Robert Barclay (whom Alastair quotes). The islands were converted to this unremitting form of Protestantism at the instigation of the government of George I, as part of the cultural suppression after the 1745 Jacobite rising. Alastair describes the life of Lady Mary Stewart Mackenzie, patron of zealously evangelical preachers, such as Alexander McLeod who in 1824 put “a sense of fear, amounting to well-nigh terror” at the wrath of God into his congregation.

The text is, I imagine, Alastair McIntosh’s attempt to come to terms with this awful spiritual past and his discomfort at the relief of

shaking free of it. He seems to be trying to prove that Free Church Calvinism “wasn’t that bad” or was “understandable in the circumstances”. He recounts going to Donald McLeod, retired Principal of the Free Church College in Edinburgh, with the question “Do you believe in the doctrine of limited atonement that follows from predestination?” He gets the straight answer “yes”, but chooses to interpret it ambiguously by quoting two other sages in the paragraphs between the question and answer, both of whom say that the question should not be put, because it is beyond the remit and competence of humans.

A little of the history: Calvinism is the backbone of both the Church of Scotland and the Free Church, both using the “Westminster Confession” drawn up during Cromwell’s republic. That was influenced by the Dutch version that also led to the Dutch Reformed Church that supported apartheid in South Africa. The Church of Scotland failed John Knox’s original ideal of a church owned and governed by the people, because the nobles acquired the former Catholic church lands and the power to appoint ministers. As ministers let landowners carry out the Clearances, the people formed the Free Church in 1843 (unfortunately the painting of this momentous assembly is so poorly reproduced in the book that we cannot appreciate the points Alastair draws from it). England threw out the Westminster Confession in favour of episcopalianism (the current Church of England) at the Restoration in 1690 but Scotland kept it and had bloody conflict between the episcopalians and covenanters. Alastair points out that the seeds of British and Dutch colonialism around the world were sown in these centuries: “the oppressed, by now duly insensitised, could join the oppression of faraway lands”. It’s a relief to read that in 1986 the Church of Scotland, recognising, I suppose, that such a doctrine is incompatible with a role as a national church in a modern diverse nation, asserted the subordination of the Westminster Confession to Holy Scripture and dissociated itself from the nastiest anti-

Catholic clauses.

Calvinist doctrine has in modern times been summed up (and oversimplified) as "TULIP". No, not the elegant flower: "T"otal depravity of all people; "U"nconditional election of "the elect" regardless of their actions; "L"imited atonement - Christ's sacrifice saves only the elect; "I"rresistible grace - the elect cannot resist being turned towards Christ (hence no non-Christian can possibly be among the elect); "P"erseverance of the elect (saints) - they can never fall away from grace. This summary is popular in U.S. Calvinist churches. The "appeal" of such a doctrine to the islanders is couched by Alastair in psychology as "Stockholm syndrome" following their self-worth being cut down by oppression after the Jacobite risings and their betrayal by their clan chiefs who instigated the Clearances to farm sheep profitably. The God of predestination also mirrors the role of the sea in island life, as a source of bounty but also an indiscriminate taker of life.

Alastair is at pains to point out the chinks of light in the most rigidly Calvinist church. As a "reformed church" it is capable of further reformation (succinctly in Latin, "Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda"). Most obvious of these is the 1990 Rustenburg declaration in which the South African Dutch Reformed Church repudiated apartheid. He quotes a prominent Free Churchman's "Stornoway Gazette" column challenging readers to consider whether a much prayed-for Christian revival might lead to other churches than theirs filling with new members. He also describes the church's silent accommodation of the "second sight" possessed by numerous inhabitants of the Western Isles (some known to him), notwithstanding the same church's legacy of witch-burning.

The sixty pages of "end notes" are dense in both history and illumination - so much so that the 124 notes could be read one-by-one as daily spiritual inspiration. It is here that you find

quotes like "What is said to be believed at a head level, and is often an obstacle for liberals, is less important than what is manifested at the level of the heart." Alastair also draws in the modern Greek Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov's view of Hell, as contrast to the Calvinistic one, as self-made or, quoting Dostoyevsky, "the suffering caused by not being able to love any more... the flames of thirst for spiritual love." He also quotes an Indonesian view (he wrote the book while working in Indonesian Papua on local spirituality) that, in both Christianity and Islam, "when the emphasis shifted from oral traditions to the written word, a hardness set in, the head came to dominate over the heart, and the indigenous sense of the spiritual feminine and the animation of nature was suppressed", to which he responded by citing St. Paul, "the word killeth but the letter giveth life" (sic - he meant "the letter killeth but the Spirit giveth life", 2 Cor 3:6, quoted by the Elders of Balby in the preface to *Advices and Queries*) (this, other errata, notes and reflections are at <http://www.alastairmcintosh.com/islandspirituality.htm>).

Recommended - wish I'd been at the live lecture. Sheila Peacock, July 2013.



Dunblane Cathedral

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