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# Island Spirituality

SPIRITUAL VALUES OF LEWIS AND HARRIS

ALASTAIR MCINTOSH



Published in 2013 by The Islands Book Trust

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ISBN: 978-1-907443-45-9

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Web page for this book with supporting material:  
[www.alastairmcintosh.com/islandspirituality.htm](http://www.alastairmcintosh.com/islandspirituality.htm)

We are grateful to the Frances Camfield Trust for its support  
in the production of this volume

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Isle of Lewis, HS2 9QA. Tel: 01851 880737

Typeset by Erica Schwarz ([www.schwarz-editorial.co.uk](http://www.schwarz-editorial.co.uk))

Cover design by Raspberry Creative Type

Printed and bound by Martins the Printers, Berwick upon Tweed

All royalties from this publication go back into the Islands Book Trust



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## A Spiritual Place and People

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### The Universe and Being

I shall start with some introductory remarks about such loaded terms as God, spirituality and the religious life.

We live in a world where many of our problems – war, poverty and environmental degradation – can ultimately be traced to a loss of soul. But how can soul be called back? How can meaning be infused back into the world if we prefer to doubt the very existence of a spiritual underpinning to reality? How, when even love itself, or the beauty of music or of nature, or of an act of human kindness, get routinely explained away as chemical secretions at the synapses of the brain?

The Hebridean isles of Scotland are a good place from which to ask such questions. If you go outside on a clear night and look up, you see that you and this whole world are held in a much greater shimmering cosmological context. This poses a challenge to the nature of reality. Cold logic, on its own, would predict that there ought to be *nothing*. But amazingly, there is *something*. The universe *is!* And in this welter of *being*, *I am* and *we are!*

If we now turn the telescope around and peer into our inner lives, we see that all of this is knowable only because we are *conscious* beings. Just as our brains are able to respond to a stimulus like the starlight because it *exists*, so we must ask whether our response to less tangible qualities like love, beauty and a sense of meaning is because they somehow exist too. Could it be, for example, that people who “feel” the presence of God, are feeling something real?

## God and Spirituality – Some Definitions

Let me define my use of certain terms. “God” has become a loaded word. For many people it carries negative baggage. This may be for narcissistic reasons, for egos too big to permit room for anything more than themselves in their lives. Or it may be that they have suffered from spiritual abuse. They may have experienced religious violence, including prejudice if their way of life does not conform to the expectations of others. They may have had religion forced on them in childhood. But just as rape must never be allowed to destroy the wonder of true love, so forced religion – which is a blasphemous thing – must never be allowed to destroy the potential wonder of discovering God’s love (Walker 2004).

Some people believe that the spiritual world is make-believe that arises out of our material nature. Others, known as dualists, believe that spirit and matter are separate. Still others, and I am one of these, believe that reality is ultimately spiritual. The material world of energy and atoms is held in a divine hand, and as Teilhard de Chardin is credited with saying, “we are spiritual beings having a physical experience.”

I do not believe that the Christian worldview has to be the only way to see these things, or to put that another way, Christ may be more cross-cultural and inter-faith than many Christians have allowed (Panikkar 1981, 2010). But for me, the Christian way is my culture and primary path. Christian theologians call what I am describing an “incarnational” worldview. This understands the Holy Spirit – the spirit of God as light and life itself – as being interwoven or infused right through the “carnal” world (Genesis 1:3; John 1:3; Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:15–17).

When today’s theologians, speak about “God” they often invoke descriptions like “the ground of our being”, “our ultimate concern” and “life’s deepest motivation”. These suggest that God gives cohesion to our inner conscious lives just as the material universe – “the Creation” – gives cohesion to our outer lives of flesh and bone. To speak of the Creation in this way should not be considered incompatible with the findings of

science as the geologist and pillar of the Highland church, Hugh Miller, was well aware (Miller 1857).

“Theology” is the study of God and is something that we think about. The “spiritual” goes deeper, into the realm of feeling as well as thought. Spirituality is concerned with the “interiority” of outer reality; with the *metaphysical*, where *meta* means that which is “beyond” or “behind” the physical. I therefore use the term “spirituality” to refer to the inner essence of all things. With varying nuances of meaning this is also called the quick, quiddity, quintessence, suchness, thisness or haecceity – the latter word having been coined by the thirteenth century theologian, Duns Scotus who, according to North Uist traditions, was briefly a student at *Teampall na Trianaid* – Holy Trinity Temple – the old Hebridean university at Carinish (MacLeod 1997, 66). A plaque on the chapel’s wall commemorates this belief.<sup>1</sup>

The very word, “essence”, comes from the Greek *esse*, meaning “being”. The Greek took it from the Proto-Indo-European root *es-*, from which we get our most basic existential word, “is”. The spiritual therefore *is* that which is emanates from the innermost nature of *being* (Wink 1992). Above all, it is that which gives life, and specifically, life as love made manifest.

### The Salmon and the Cabarfeidh

Why God? Why not just have a “godless spirituality”? I think the answer is that spirituality is “all about love” (Hooks 2001), and love is the paradox of freedom within the profound relationship of interconnection. Paul said that we are all “members one of another” (Romans 12:5). Jesus said that our lives grow as branches from the Vine of Life (John 15). The vine yields wine which, in Middle Eastern poetry, symbolises spiritual inebriation. The Bible is a treasure chest of many locks, the keys to which lie waiting in the human heart. Of course, some people maintain that it should only be read literally. If that is so, then Jesus at the wedding feast at Cana, added nine hundred bottles-worth of inebriation

(John 2:1–11), and that was after they'd already emptied out the cellars of the Cabarfeidh!<sup>2</sup>

How do we know whether God is real? The *Manduka Upanishad*, a sacred Hindu sacred text said: “In the union with him is the supreme proof of his reality ... He is peace and love” (Mascaró 1965, 83). In this lecture, however, I will confine myself to the Christian traditions of the Hebrides. Jesus said: “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). And the Psalms (34:8): “O taste and see that the Lord is good.”

It takes faith to find the courage to taste and see. “Faith” is the trust to embark upon life’s spiritual journey. A simple Uig shepherd, Aonghas nam Beann, Angus of the Hills, once said that faith is like



An anchorite’s retreat? This near-intact *both* is one of several *bothain* (plural) on Eilean Fir Chrothair in Loch Roag. While surveying, the antiquarian Seumas (or James) Crawford (pictured) heard a tradition from Donald “An Clapper” MacAulay that the island hosted a *taigh beannachabh* or “blessing house”. Author’s photo, 1995.

a salmon running up a river. At every leap it has to trust there is a higher pool.<sup>3</sup>

Such faith is not to be confused with blind belief. It is an instinct written in our hearts – one that we can either shun, or inwardly ask to be tuned into. When Carl Jung, the great Swiss psychologist, was asked as an old man if he “believed” in God, he said he didn’t need to. *He knew!* Such is the knowledge of the salmon as it swims into the loch amongst the hills.

### The Trellis and the Vine

In part our spiritual lives are a very private affair. To pray one must “be still, and know that I am God” (Psalms: 46:10). Our islands have a long history of contemplative retreat in nature, and Seumas Crawford of Garrynahine – the stonemason and Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland – has carried out survey work on sites in Loch Roag. Here, for example, Little Bernera was once called *Kiallasaigh* – the Island of Cells or Temples (Maclver 1934, 31).<sup>4</sup> But even an anchorite in their hermitage stays spiritually connected to their community through prayer. God is love. That means having the connections of a social and even a political life, and that means sometimes having to agree on how to celebrate spiritually in collective manner. Here is where the need arises for organised religion.

The word “religion” comes from the Latin, *re-* meaning “again”, and *ligare*, “to tie” – as in a “ligament”. Religion deeply ties a community together, binding the spiritual to this world. If spirituality is the tree or vine and our individual lives its branches, then religion ought to be the supporting trellis. Good religion helps to lead the branches to the light. Bad religion leaves them languishing in shadows that produce a stunted spirituality, only capable of seeing a bonsai God. Sometimes when religion causes spiritual suffocation, freedom must be reclaimed by running wild along the ground. This is what many people mean today who describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious”.



Wholesome religion is growth with one another up the trellis. That's what a "church" should be, and not just a bricks-and-mortar building. A true church is the collective spirituality of a religious community. The word comes from a Proto-Indo-European root, *keue*, which means "to swell". As such, a church should be the clustered buds that swell and sweeten until they burst to yield wine. A "parish" relates to what is "parochial", coming from the Greek, *para* meaning "alongside", and *oikos*, "the household". A parish is therefore the neighbourhood community. Words like "economy" and "ecology" share this same housekeeping root, and the reason why there's so much Greek is that this is the original language of the New Testament.

What makes religion challenging, and often conflicted, is that the trellis may be Spirit-inspired, but made of wood and nails by apprentice human hands. It takes constant maintenance, repair, and sometimes a complete rebuild. There is a lovely line in a song by Pink Floyd, "Love is the shadow that ripens the wine," and often religion entails wrestling with one another in precisely those shadows.<sup>5</sup>

The Epistle of James (4.1) made a telling diagnosis of the human condition. "Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?" But Jesus taught that we can do better than staying stuck in this state. He called us not to any old life, but to promised "life abundant" (John 10:10).

Christians believe that Christ is the human face of God. Some believe uniquely so; others, universally so like there's many faces of the "Buddha nature". He is "the light of the world" (John 8:12). He came "to preach deliverance to the captives," to bring "on earth peace, good will toward men," and to realise "good tidings of great joy" (Luke 4:18; 2:14; 2:10). Properly speaking, an "evangelical" should mean a "bearer of good news". The root is from the Greek, *angellein* or "messenger", which gives us "angel", so give us more such evangelicals!

I believe that for all the faults of our island religion – and there are a few – we still retain a spiritual consciousness that has slipped in

many other places.<sup>6</sup> Our trellises may have suffered from the gales and need attention, but the vine itself is the true vine. The Outer Hebrides may seem geographically on the edge of things, but when the centre collapses, the periphery becomes central.

### Some Earmarkings

We grow from our soil, and earmarks matter on the island, so let me say where I am coming from. My mother (Jean, who is with my sister, Isobel, in the audience tonight) is from Birmingham and her people were from England and Wales. She became the sister of the children's ward at the Royal Infirmary in the Yorkshire coal mining town of Doncaster. There she met my father, Dr Ian Kenneth McIntosh who had gone south to seek work after graduating from Edinburgh.

From his side come the Lewis connections, long before our move to the North Lochs medical practice in 1960. His uncle, Mr James Purvis, was the surgeon and Superintendent at the Lewis Hospital from 1924 until about 1930.<sup>7</sup> Half of Dad's forebears were from the Scottish Borders and the other half were Gaelic-speaking Highlanders. According to family tradition, the Borders side were descended from "the other Ettrick Shepherd," the Rev Thomas Boston (1676–1732). Boston's writings provoked critical mentions in the letters and poetry of Robert Burns.<sup>8</sup> By the nineteenth century his work was translated into Gaelic and his teachings would be described by many as "hyper-Calvinism".<sup>9</sup>

Dad's great grandfather on the Ross-shire side was Murdo MacIennan whose croft was at Jamestown next door to the seat of Mackenzie power at Brahan Castle. He was the precentor of Gaelic psalms in the ornate old style at the parish church in Contin. His father had been one of *na daoine*, "the men" of the Highland church, and his forebears further back had been cleared from their ancestral lands in the Urray area of Strathconon. According to one of Murdo's obituaries, on the Sunday after the Disruption in May 1843 he carried the Bible out of the patronage-dominated Church of Scotland and into the cemetery, from where the

service was continued under the emergent auspices of the Free Church of Scotland (Communicated, 1899).<sup>10</sup>

This provides another distant link with Lewis, for Stornoway's Alexander Matheson tells me that his mother maintained that we are related through this Maclennan line. That is very helpful. Should I err in my views tonight, kindly refer complaints to Sandy in his lieutenantary capacity to be dealt with as a minor family matter.

### Religious Gene or *Genius Loci*?

A little while ago I was preparing for an interview in the BBC's Edinburgh studio. As the technicians waited for their equipment to warm up I was chatting about Lewis with the Sunday morning presenter, Cathy Macdonald from Earshader.

"You know," she said, "I think that the island has got a *religious gene*."

I don't think she meant it quite in the biological terms that Richard Dawkins might use when he comes to Stornoway to lecture from this platform next month, but there can be little doubt that in a cultural and environmental sense, the island does have a religious *genius loci* – a "spirit of place" that runs through the people.

Such an observation is not original. Just a century after the death of the patron saint of Iona in 597, St Adomnán, by that time the ninth abbot, wrote the *Life of St Columba*. From this we can see that the Hebrides, even then, were a magnet to spiritual seekers. People came from afar to live, as Adomnán's Latin puts it, *in oceano desertum* – in "desert" hermitages of the ocean, there to retreat and seek God in relative solitude (Adomnán 1995, 127; O'Loughlin 2007, 128).<sup>11</sup>

This Celtic church took root around monastic settlements scattered all along the west coast. We see their mark in place names like *annat*, *annait* or *annaid*, meaning a mother church or monastery. To stand before the eighth century Martin's Cross with all its swirling snakes and lions outside St Mary's Abbey on Iona is to stand before nearly two-thirds of Christian history.

There is a tradition that the Hebrides were called *Eileana Bride* – the Isles of Bridgit or Bhrighde (Carmichael 1900, xv; Donaldson 1922, 7). While there is no convincing scholarly evidence to link this to the name “Hebrides”, Harris certainly comprised the Parish of Kilbride – The Cell or Church of Bhrighde (Macaulay 1980, 113). This name continued to be used for legal title at least until 1832.<sup>12</sup> Such Gaelic place names carry us back to the days of early Christianity, if not to the “Druids” before. They also connect us to the days of the “undivided church” before the Great Schism of 1054 between the eastern (Byzantine or Orthodox) and the western (Roman Catholic) churches.

As such, the Creation-centred spirituality that shines from the Martin’s Cross down and through the nineteenth century oral traditions of the *Carmina Gadelica* may reflect more than “Druid” remnants; more, too, than the influence of nature-loving Irish Franciscans who re-evangelised the southern Hebrides after the Reformation (Campbell 1994). It may also carry an echo of the undivided church’s Creation-centred Orthodox liturgies from the east (Telepneff 2001).<sup>13</sup>

Neither should we forget that on Iona Adomnán played host to the shipwrecked Gaulish monk, Arculf, who described his pilgrim visits to such Eastern Orthodox (as we might call it today) territory as Syria, Egypt and Constantinople (Adomnán 1895). The Rev Dr George MacLeod (Lord MacLeod of Fuinary) who founded the modern-day Iona Community certainly believed that the Celtic church was substantially Orthodox. Not for his ecumenism and socialism alone did he fit his critics’ billing: “Half-way between Rome and Moscow!”<sup>14</sup>

Time has now shed a shroud of mystery around the earliest religious sites of the Hebrides. Shortly after the Great Schism the Normans swept into England and the Hungarian-born Margaret of Wessex or St Margaret began a process of Romanisation throughout the Scottish church. This brushed aside the old Gaelic liturgies and introduced the Latin formulations of European monastic orders.<sup>15</sup> And yet, where people always went to be still, the rocks remained.

## A Sacred Landscape

St Clement – whether of Rome, Alexandria or elsewhere – is the patron saint of the Macleods of Harris and Dunvegan (Macleod 1909, 148; Macaulay 1980, 114).<sup>16</sup> Three pre-Reformation temple sites in the Western Isles carry his name (Macleod 1997). To stand at the top of the *Tùr Mòr* – the Great Tower of St Clement’s of Rodel at the foot of Roineabhal – is a remarkable experience.<sup>17</sup> Here, “within living memory the corpse of the dead was borne thrice sunwise round the church” (Henderson in Macaulay 1980, 113). To gaze out across the Sound of Harris is to behold an *oceanò desertum* that would have thrilled and, very likely, have been familiar to Adomnán as Abbot of Iona.

Here lies a sacred landscape once redolent with meaning – one that has known the *drùidheachd* or “Druid” lore and still sustains the standing stones and cup marks of pre-history.<sup>18</sup> It also knew the Celtic monks at a time when the Irish Sea, flowing into the Sea of the Hebrides, rendered those waters less of a boundary, and more the information superhighway of an otherwise “Dark Age”. There also came the humble monasticism of the Culdees, the *Céli Dé* “Companions of God” until the Augustinians arrived after the reforms of Queen Margaret and her son, King David (MacAulay 1993, 4–8).

But it is the testimony of the rocks that remains ... Killegray, Ensay, Pabbay ... just so many of these tiny islands where ... stones can still be seen set purposively in the ground. Few if any do not host at least one temple, or holy well, *annat* place name, standing stone or cup-mark-incised rock, each bearing witness to some distant saint, portentous event or near-forgotten tradition of blessedness (Macleod 1997 & 2000; Haswell-Smith 2008). From Roineabhal itself one can see north-east on a clear day to the Shiants – *Na h-Eileanan Seunta* or the Enchanted or Sacred Isles – and far west to St Kilda. There, according to Kenneth MacAulay’s account from 1764, is a well called *Tobar nam Buadh*. Here the people would “address the Genius of the place with supplication and prayer” (Macleod 2000, 75–77) ... and I love seeing this evidence of the religious “gene” expressed so long ago.

So many Hebridean place names testify to such imbued sanctity. There is, for example, a promontory called *Am Beannachadh* or The Blessing Place a mile south of Gallan Head, and nearby, *Taigh a 'Bheannaich*, the House of Blessing. Here lie the remnants of a small chapel or temple, a spring-fed holy well, and a dozen or so cell-like structures that probably housed a monastic community (Macleod 1997, 27; Macleod 2000, 36; RCAHMS 2011).

Such *teampallan* or “temples” – I take it, as does Anglicised local custom, directly from the Gaelic to designate these mainly pre-Reformation chapel sites – have only recently been the subject of a relatively comprehensive archaeological survey (Barrowman, forthcoming). One can but speculate that they may have been repositories for icons, holy books, communion chalices, a burning candle or other devotional aids



Site and cemetery of *Teampall Mhicheil*, the “Temple” or Church of St Michael on Little Bernera (the prominent building is a late addition). By adding sand to the thin soil those newly passed away were laid to rest amongst their ancestors, forming a hill or community of the dead. Author’s photo, 1995.

to religious life, and that their role was to turn the heart not towards the outer object – for that would be idolatrous – but inwardly, towards the witness of the saints; and aided by that inspiration, through to God.

Early sources such as the Skye physician Martin Martin suggest that our temples were probably used in much the same way as can be seen to this day in the tiny antiquated chapels of rural France. These are often located on the edge of or just outside the village and in beautiful places, perhaps up in the cliffs or shouldering a cave where once the local saint lived out their hermetic life of presence, prayer and healing. Most remain in daily use for private prayer, and at designated times in the calendar become the focus of regional pilgrimages. Martin suggests that similar practices had been followed on Lewis until the clergy – Mr Daniel and Mr Morison – abolished them around the 1660s (Martin 1994, 106–108).

All that remains of most of these sites today are low walls (e.g. *Teampall nan Crò Naomh*, South Galson), a mound in a meadow (*Teampall Rònain*, Eoropie), foundation slabs exposed by coastal erosion (parts of *Teampall Pheadair*, Shader), foundations under or near more recent structures (*Teampall Bhrighde*, Scarista and *Teampall Mhicheil*, Little Bernera), a remnant cemetery (*An Teampall Rànais*, Lochs), a Papal indulgence and mere memory beneath sand dunes (*Teampall Mhoire*, Barvas) ... or holy wells that, where we are fortunate, remain intact and locally cared-for (*Tobar Bhrighde*, Melbost and *Tobar Mhoire*, Shader); where we are unfortunate, have been knocked in and destroyed by diggers (*Tobar Rònain*, Eoropie), and where we are lucky, have been lost but found again (*Tobar a' Gobha*, The Well of the Blacksmith, Leac a Li).<sup>19</sup> There may not be much left to see at most sites, but when I visited some of them on a pilgrimage through the island in 2009 I had the thought – *the less there is to see, the holier a place it be* – and that, at least, raised my spirits on a rainy day.

The preservation of ancient sacred sites and their relics is now being embraced by communities all over the Hebrides. Comments in the local press reflect a renewed sense of pride and ownership.<sup>20</sup> When I chanced

to attend a Free Church service on North Uist a year or two ago I asked the Rev Ewen Matheson what he made of local efforts to stabilise and restore parts of *Teampall na Trianaid*. "I just see it as a part of our long religious heritage," he said, shrugging his shoulders, but with a smile that seemed warmly receptive.

### **They Take Their Surname from the Rainbow**

Looking back, Martin Martin says that the temples "were held in greater veneration in those days than now" (Martin 1994, 106), but veneration had not died out. He describes Lewismen going to the Flannan Isles twenty miles directly west from *Am Beannachadh* to gather seabirds for food. On arrival, they would "uncover their heads, and make a turn sun-ways round, thanking God for their safety." Believing in these isles' "inherent sanctity", one fisherman confessed "that there was none ever yet landed in them but found himself more disposed to devotion there, than anywhere else" (p. 99). In addition to this, Macaulay cites a tradition that the Flannans were "the residence of ecclesiastics in the time of the Druids" (Macaulay 1980, 110).

More noteworthy still is Martin's account of North Rona. The Barvas minister, Daniel Morison, told him how nonplussed he was on his first parish visit when the inhabitants laid on a sun-wise blessing ritual, pronouncing: "God save you, pilgrim, you are heartily welcome here; for we have had repeated apparitions of your person amongst us (after the manner of the second sight), and we heartily congratulate your arrival in this our remote country" (Martin 1994, 101, his parentheses).

They gifted him five sheepskins of barley-meal, saying: "Pray be pleased to accept of this small present, which we humbly offer as an expression of our sincere love." These saintly people later died out from a famine that was believed to have been caused by rats from a passing ship. Martin maintained that they lived "a harmless life, being perfectly ignorant of the vices that abound in the world" and knowing nothing of money or gold. Most haunting of all: "They concern not themselves



about the rest of mankind, except the inhabitants in the north part of Lewis. *They take their surname from the colour of the sky, rainbow and clouds*” (pp. 100–102, my emphasis).

When I visited the Ness museum recently I saw the curved St Ronan’s Cross with three circular holes suggestive of the Trinity and its dim outline of a praying Christ, stripped of all his garments (RCAHMS 1997). Sadly it has had to leave North Rona for safety, but it is good to see it cherished within a living community.<sup>21</sup>

### Put Off Thy Shoes

The handing down of traditions did not end, however, in Martin’s time. A fine example is a powerful passage in *Crotal and White*, that songlike paean to a Hebridean crofting childhood written by the now-deceased BBC journalist, Finlay J. MacDonald of Scarista (MacDonald 1984). Here he describes a forbidden boyhood excursion to *Eilean na Caillich* – the Isle of the [Holy] Old Woman – on Loch Langabhat, South Harris, which in the oral tradition is linked to a nunnery at St Clement’s.

After shakily making his way along a sub-surface causeway the young Finlay reached the islet and found the outline of a cell with a doorway and a long lintel stone. At this point his dog started to howl dementedly with its hair stood on end. “I heard a voice,” he wrote, “or rather, felt a voice. It came from my ears but at the same time it came from within my head. It said, *Put off thy shoes from off thy feet for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.*”

Later his father questioned where he had been that day. The boy confessed, and the old man said: “Well, you had to – some day. I suppose the surest way of making you go was by telling you not to.”

As Finlay got older he learned that others too had also made their secret pilgrimages. Each tale had its own circumstances. But, “What was interesting – and why I wouldn’t go back – was that one sentence was common to all the stories. *Put off thy shoes from off thy feet for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.*”



*Tobar Bhrighde* – St Bridgit’s (or St Bride’s) Well – at Melbost Borve, with Dr Finlay Macleod of Shawbost, author of guidebooks on the island’s Norse mills, wells and chapels. Author’s photo, 2009.

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### **The Christian Significance of Holy Place**

For my present purposes it matters not if Finlay MacDonald’s experience might be explained away, for example, as dim memories of ceilidh house ghost stories in childhood. What matters is its testimony to the importance of spiritual experience in the cultural psyche. Offhand I can think of more than half-a-dozen Gaelic-speaking Presbyterian men and women on Lewis and Harris, aged between twelve and seventy, who regularly go to venerated spots to “commune” – if we must put it like that. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature refers to such places “sacred natural sites”. It believes they

are important for the conservation of both natural and human ecology (Verschuuren et al. 2010).<sup>22</sup>

I was struck by this description of the Gaelic psalms that the Rev Angus Smith, formerly of Cross Free Church, gave in an interview with Fiona MacDonald (MacDonald 1994, 69):<sup>23</sup>

You see, when you sing in ... Gaelic you use so many grace notes and everybody can be slightly different but it all merges together into a kind of shimmer. And, to me, it's like the sounds of the sea, or the sound of the wind, or all the sounds of nature merging into one.

I was similarly struck when the Rev Dr Iain D. Campbell of Back and now Point Free Church took up cycling. Delighted by such a vivid experience of his natural environment, he wrote in the *Stornoway Gazette*: “My theology tells me that the things that are seen declare the things that are unseen: that the details of the creation declare the grandeur of the Creator” (Campbell 2010c).

Fr Gerry Hughes, a Jesuit retreat leader, once told me that in his experience, long periods of silence more than anything else help to still the world and draw the soul to God. Traditional fishing and work on the land gave many opportunities for such withdrawal inwards during prolonged spells of bad weather or winter darkness. Perhaps spiritual retreat was built in to the crofting way of life.

In mystical Christianity, Jesus expands a static notion of “holy places” or “holy ground” (such as that on which Moses stood) with a sense of incarnation where geography itself becomes incorporated into the Body of Christ (Janzen 1992). In John’s gospel it is He, not Jacob’s well in its more limited sense, that becomes the source of life-giving water (4:7–15); it is He, not the Pool of Bethesda, that in the final analysis offers healing (5:2–9). It is He by whom “all things were made,” for “in him was life; and the life was the light of men” (1:3–4). This offers a profound redemption of nature (Isaiah 11:1–9). Sacred places are valuable as portals, as wake-up calls to consciousness, but basically the whole of the

Creation becomes holy on account of the fullness of incarnation (Job 35–38; Psalms 104; John 1:1–9, cf. Proverbs 8:22–36).<sup>24</sup>

This is not pantheism – the confusion of God with nature. It is *panentheism* – the position that God is present in nature – immanent as well as transcendent. This is a point that the Russian and Greek Orthodox traditions of the Eastern church have understood better than we in the west (Evdokimov 2001; Clement 1993), but in so saying, we should not overlook the panentheism of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: “God executeth His decrees in the works of Creation and Providence” (WSC 1647, question 8).<sup>25</sup>

We glimpse here the fullness of a Eucharistic spirituality; one where the bread and wine are consumed, to use the word employed in the Greek gospels, in *anamnesis* – “without amnesia” or in “un-forgetting” – of the divine underpinning of reality. Failure to grasp this denies the Earth its opportunity to cry “Glory!” (Isaiah 6:3). It leaves the Creation “groaning as in the pains of childbirth” (Romans 8:22, NIV). It is the driving cause behind today’s ecological crisis, but also, its apocalyptic meaning. Yet Christianity is a young religion, and its third millennium is only just beginning.

### Rising Early in the Morning

We can pray – which is to say, attune to God – in any place, but Christ knew the value of location. “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed” (Mark 1:35, NIV). If utility had been all that mattered, why would he have bothered to go outside? Why did he divide his time between the multitudes in the marketplace, and down by the lake, in the garden, up the mountain or out in the wilderness, keeping company with the angels and wild beasts (Mark 1:13)?

Many of *na daoine*, the devoutly prophetic island “men” of the villages, have done likewise. The Rev Norman Macfarlane wrote of Callum the Seer of Shawbost: “he rose long before dawn, that, like his

Lord, he might hold Communion with God” (Macfarlane 1924, 143). When Angus of the Hills was “cast into the deepest spiritual concern” at the start of the great revival in the early 1820s (pp. 19–20) ...

... he went back to his native hills and spent days and nights there in prayer. Many men in Uig did the same. The hillsides were sanctuaries where prayer and confession and praise rose as incense on the air. If ever there was a spot where the angels gathered as pendant spectators it was surely there. There is a Moorish legend that Heaven was built right over the deep blue sky of Andalusia, Lewismen felt as if heaven’s foundations were in the mountains of Uig.

Lewis and Harris is a patchwork quilt of such sanctuaries. I believe the island is itself a holy place, but what does that mean? Let me leave it with these lines from *Four Quartets*, perhaps the greatest mystical poem in the English language (Eliot 1959, 51).<sup>26</sup>

You are not here to verify,  
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
Or carry report. You are here to kneel  
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more  
Than an order of words.