back page interview

"Wait a minute - Jesus never taught just-war theory. He practiced full-on non-violence."

Alastair McIntosh
spiritual activist, co-author of Spiritual Activism

In activism for social, environmental, or political change, it’s easy to get dissected, and to sell out or burn out. When the oil in the laces of our lives — often the lamp of youth — runs low, do we find fresh resources?

That’s when it gets important to reach down into our spiritual wells and find a fire that need not burn in my activism; and my Spiritual Activism co-author, Matt Carnicahle, is of a younger generation, and has also come to recognize it in his work.

We look at the spiritual basis of activism, which is very relevant to the Church. We’re talking about poverty, housing, environmental protection, and we’re engaged in other faiths.

The religion we’ve all inherited has necessarily been time-conditioned; so spiritual activism can mean working with religions to help them become more fit for purpose for the times we are living in. They can be challenging, it’s very important.

The one thing we’re all working towards, above all, is that we are God’s children, and that’s what is important.

The Lord’s Prayer starts off with "blessed are the poor," a profound God-centered mindfulness. Then the very next line is "Thy kingdom come." You see! And what in this kingdom but a realm of love made manifest, through justice, for those who suffer in the world, the widow, the orphan, the stranger who is being shown here that our comprehension of God is not just cosmic phenomena, but also action within the creation, as participants in that creation.

What differentiates from ordinary political activism is that we do not act as a means to an end, but for the sake of the world. Spiritual activism is about connecting with the fountain of living water.

Jesus has all these images of lamps and oil in the Bible and all of our lives burning low, the oil keeps our light burning bright. We’ve commissioned to hold our light under a bushel, but is he out it for the world.

Our work is very interfaith, and already it has been criticized as much. But that means, such interfaith appreciation only confirms the need to take our Christ into too small. Liberalism theologize is the driving force in our work, whether inspired by the social activism of Martin Luther King, Jr., in the tradition of the environmental activism of Julia "Butterfly" Hill, as a Christian, or the Islamic non-violence of groups we fear too little about, like the Khudai Khidmatgar, "the Servants of God," during the Indian struggle for independence.

The feedback after the publication of Spiritual Activism is that editors are very reticent, but reticent about spirituality. The secular and religious alike find spirituality un-understandable. But there’s a problem with the Holy Spirit: you can’t control the blowing of its wind, the shaking of its trees for love and justice; and that, sadly, makes a lot of people uncomfortable.

I was employed by Edinburgh University, teaching Human Ecology, for 12 years, and I’m entirely self-employed — freelance, writing, speaking, and lecturing. I have a part-time post with the University of Divinity School in an AFRC research programme on science and theology.

These days, I’m spending most mornings reading of a book about a pilgrimage made through the sacred natural sites of my home islands, Lewis and Harris, in the Outer Hebrides.

As I walked the pilgrimage, I reflected on the violence, and non-violence, partly through the lens of the visitor-officer training courses on which I have guest-lectured for the past 18 years at the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, in Shrivenham. I am trying this in with a fresh look at the meaning of the cross, the urge I feel as a reality and not a theory, beyond Biblescific theories of atonement, and to reconnect with the non-violence of Christ’s witness on the cross.

I lecture at Shrivenham, usually twice a year, and I’ve also spoken at Irish, French, and Swiss military courses on non-violence.

"Jesus and His Servants" is Augustinian just-war theory, challenging that, they’ll call them the "realists" — the hawks on one wing, and balancing that, you have me saying: "Wait a minute! your Commander-in-Chief is also defender of the Christian faith, and Jesus never taught just-war theory. He taught and practiced full-on non-violence.”

At senior levels in the British military they’ve got people who see the war, American and Russian, very aware of what they are doing, and most of us are not just reacting to events, but also of their limitations. They know that they’re challenged by that, and profoundly searching for better ways for bringing about international security.

That’s why they’re selling to and listening to people like me who talk about alternatives to war. Although we disagree about a lot of things, we seem to command mutual respect.

My father was Scottish doctor, my mother an English name. I was born in Devon, and raised on the Isle of Lewis. I have two grown-up children from my first marriage, and today I live with wife, Véronique Nicolas, in Glasgow.

The old people of the Hebrides who raised me have had the greatest influence in my life. They were Presbyterian of the Stewart-MacDonald-Coles, but with hearts and a wisdom that spoke their own, higher creed.

I wouldn’t call it isolation. In a place like that, you’re deeply engaged in your environment and the human community. More than that.

in his uncle’s Stuwilli rectorcy, would chase all the way to Sanna. Here is the prayer he said at the end of the day, and which I often say after: "Lord, behold our family here assembled. We thank thee for this house in which we dwell, for the love that unites us; for the peace accorded us this day; for the hope with which we expect the morrow; for the health, the work, the food, and the bright skies that make our lives enjoyable."

"Let peace abound in our small company. Purge out of every heart a backbiting spirit and strength to forbear and to forgive. Give us courage and quietness and the grace of our friends, suffer to us our enemies."

COPRIGHT CAPTION

"Bless us, if it may be, in all our journeys, soever, and soever, give us the strength to encounter that which is to come, that we may be brave in peril, constant in tribulation, temperate in wrath, and in all changes of fortune, and down to the gates of death, loyal and loving one to another, as the clay to the potter, as the windmill to the wind, as children of their sire, as the hope of this help and mercy of Christ for our souls."

I see him shuffling together the pen-written pages of Koldwaff (1860) to write this. On his life giving South Sea Island they called him the "mountain" — rifle of tales.

I expect this is what they called Jesus. His magnificent Sermon on the Mount was one thing, his parables another. We were told that the latter were earthly stories with a heavenly meaning. They encapsulate his teachings, and his voice. We can hear him speaking. Storytellers send out to raise their voices as preachers and he can't always imagine that those who listened to Jesus were entrapped by pure narrative.


ISSN 0000-565X