

review

Understanding Gregory Bateson: Mind, Beauty and the Sacred Earth,

by Noel G. Charlton, State University of New York Press, 2008, paperback, £11.00, ISBN 978-0-7914-7452-5 www.sunypress.edu

Reviewed by Alastair McIntosh

In the past it was common for the monastic life to comprise three elements – prayer, work and study. While the Iona Community is not exactly monastic, this reviewer at least always finds it pleasing to see these principles expressed in balance. In this respect, Noel Charlton is a Community Member who does not fail us. Many will already be familiar with Noel as a thoughtful and caring hand in those ventures behind which, over the years, he has placed his weight. The prayer and the work side of things have never been in question. The publication of this erudite volume, based on his PhD research, confirms his place as an Iona Community scholar.

Noel's focus is the English anthropologist and whole systems thinker, Gregory Bateson (1904–1980). Bateson was in many ways typical of the intellectual creativity and spiritual stuck-ness that came out of 20th-century English upper middle-class society. Like his father he became a scientist, but what distinguished him was his pushing at the boundaries so as to be 'verging on theologian in his final years.'

His father, William Bateson, was the first director of the John Innes Horticultural Institute and a trustee of the British Museum. A confirmed atheist, 'there was no question of religious belief' and yet, the Bible was regularly read after breakfast so that the children would 'not grow up to be empty-headed atheists.'

While at Charterhouse for boarding school in 1918, his eldest brother was killed in the war. The second brother survived but later

committed suicide – in part from the stress caused by father pushing what was now the eldest son to be a worthy scientific successor. Here we see the roots of Bateson's famous double-bind theory – much beloved of that celebrated maverick psychiatrist with Iona Community associations, R.D. Laing – that schizophrenia results from a child being forced into no-win situations. As Bateson said of his own childhood, 'There was no expectation that we would be any good – but there was a strong feeling that we ought to be.'

Instead of becoming a geneticist like his father, Gregory revolted and developed an interest in psychology and anthropology. His father had always skirted around the issue of 'Mind' and yet, kept 'one eye cocked upon it' and, as early as 1907, had said: 'We commonly think of animals and plants as matter, but they are really systems through which matter is continually passing.' Gregory's intellectual trajectory could be seen as an investigation into that system, one that led to the view that what gave it coherence was Mind.

He commenced his field work in Papua New Guinea in 1927 and there met his first wife, Margaret Mead, whose work on the courtship rituals of South Pacific islanders led her to become an early proponent of sexual liberation. Their daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson, would become a major interpreter of her father's extensive and wide-ranging work.

After active service in the Second World War, Gregory and Margaret went separate ways. His intellectual attention – now spurred on by nuclear proliferation and a growing awareness of ecological crisis – moved increasingly towards trying to understand how human beings interact with the environment as integrated 'whole' or 'holistic' systems. He was, as we might say today, a human ecologist.

The dominant scientific worldview at this time was reductionist. The 'whole' was to be explained only as the sum of the parts. Bateson turned that round. He explored what holds the parts together in the whole. He proposed that the parts interact with each other and with the whole via Mind in what he called 'an ecology of Mind'. By 1970 Bateson had become convinced, as Noel Charlton sums it up, 'that mankind and the rest of living nature was a single interrelated mental system and that the most embracing scale of this was related to the idea of divinity.'

As Bateson himself said in a 1970 lecture: 'The individual mind is immanent but not only in the body. It is immanent also in pathways and messages outside the body; and there is a larger Mind of which the individual mind is only a sub-system. This larger Mind is comparable to God and is perhaps what some people mean by 'God', but it is still immanent in the total interconnected system and planetary ecology ... a part – if you will – of God.'

All that said, Bateson thought of himself throughout nearly all of his life as a 'fourth-generation atheist'. But in wrestling with the challenges thrown up by scientific observation of the world, Bateson is pushed more and more towards some kind of a spiritual resolution. His Mind, with a capital M, becomes the proxy of a very Oxbridge intellectual's proxy for God, with a capital G.

Bateson became an inspirational figure for the post-sixties counter-culture. Indeed, his 'ecology of mind' is credited with being one of the inspirations for the internet. And towards the end of his life one gets the impression from Noel Charlton's account that, privately, he was, to use the vernacular, 'tripping'. He could see a world view that was alternative to the mainstream, but whether for personal or strategic reasons he just couldn't quite go the full way

and tell his eminently square intellectual reference group, 'ToTiDo.' Unlike Timothy Leary who coined the phrase in America or Aldous Huxley back home, he couldn't quite tell them to 'Turn on, Tune in, and Drop out' – of the mind-numbing, life-denying and metaphysically blind prison of secular materialism and, for that matter, of its counterpoint in conventional religious observance.

It is worth observing that Margaret Mead, over in America, was able to go further. Her insight into initiation rituals that had been crafted in the South Pacific led to her being invited, in 1967, by the Anglican Fr. Bonnell Spencer to be a consultant on his Subcommittee for the Revision of the *Book of Common Prayer*. Such was her enthusiasm and the Subcommittee's appreciation of her contributions that, during six years of service, she missed only one meeting. According to Jane Howard her biographer, 'Ritual, in Mead's view, was not to be relegated to the past. It was, instead, an exceedingly important part of life in all human culture, and people now needed what she called a "cosmic sense" – a sense of connection with the universal – as much as they needed to feel connected with their fellow human beings.' In particular, she pressed to retain the liturgical role of Satan. Howard tells us: 'She wanted no modern dodge for the question, in the *Book of Common Prayer*: "Do you renounce the devil and all his works?" As she cheekily explained to the Subcommittee members: "Bishops may not, but anthropologists do.'

Like Mead, Gregory Bateson was a product of his culture and the subculture of his social class. But his task was perhaps harder than her swinging-sixties American one. The constipated mores of English intellectual life during the mid-20th century – does not the expression 'British logical positivism' say it all? – seem at times to have forced him to function through a straitjacket. And yet, he too was perhaps serving a Subcommittee – in his case, of Mind. He too was an agent of cultural initiatory deepening, transforming a turgid base intellectual worldview into something that might more readily give life.

This rigorous biography and exegesis reveals how Gregory Bateson built a bridge from mind in its prosaic sense, to Mind as an interconnecting intelligence that gives coherence to material reality, and from there, onwards to whispered intimations of 'God'. Bateson emerges as something of a latter-day prophet speaking both to, and through, the condition of his people. As a scholarly work it is not a light read. But the elucidation is rewarding. Noel Charlton has cast spiritual light on one of the great transformative 'atheist' intellectuals of our times. ●

Alastair McIntosh represents the Quakers on the Iona Community Board. The author of *Soil and Soul*, his most recent books are *Hell and High Water: Climate Change, Hope and the Human Condition*, and *Rekindling Community: Connecting People, Environment and Spirituality*.

Now More Than Ever, Here More Than Anywhere: 50 Years of Scottish Songs for Nuclear Disarmament, edited by Penny Stone, www.banthebomb

This passionately and lovingly edited book 'celebrates fifty years of Scottish CND by telling the story of anti-nuclear campaigning through the songs that have been sung'. There is a goldmine of material here: from classic folk songs by Woody Guthrie, Hamish Henderson, Leon Rosselson and Dick Gaughan, to songs that have grown out of demos at Greenham Common and Faslane, to the Wild Goose Resource Group's 'Stand Firm'. It also includes contributions from Helen Steven, Penny Stone and Victoria Rudebark – and the powerful new song, 'Better Things', by Scottish singer-songwriter Karine Polwart. Not only is this an inspiring and very useful book; it is designed with a brave, free-wheeling spirit, which somehow sings of hope and possibility. Available through Scottish CND. (ed.)

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VOLUNTEERING WITH THE IONA
COMMUNITY: ISAAC'S STORY

Following a three-year stint on the Resident group on Iona a few years back, Nick Prance lived for some months in Guguletu, South Africa, a township where other Iona Community folk have spent time, walking alongside the community there. While he was in Guguletu, Nick wrote regular emails back to fellow Community Members; in one of his letters there was a reflection inspired by Isaac, a young lad at the JL Zwane Church. Last September, after a fair bit of negotiation, Isaac came to volunteer on Iona for 11 weeks. Nick recently received a newsletter from JL Zwane, and in it was the following reflection by Isaac. Nick says: 'I thought it was very interesting, and also contained some pretty good theology!'

Isaac's story

When I left for Iona on September 1st, 2008, I had no idea what to expect. I had never travelled overseas before or even stepped onboard an aeroplane. I arrived in Glasgow Airport. After an hour of being questioned at immigration services I made my way out into the city. I spent the night at the house of Rev. Norman Shanks, a member of the Iona Community. The next morning I boarded the train and was off to Oban. From Oban I took a ferry to the isle of Mull, there I boarded a bus to another ferry, which brought me to my final destination: the isle of Iona. I was greeted with a warm welcome and some excitement from Chris Redhead, who was responsible for staffing on the island. I worked in the MacLeod Centre. The MacLeod Centre hosted up to 40 guests a week. I had never cooked before and I had to learn everything by scratch. I was under the supervision of a resident worker by the name of Fran McIntyre. She was a great cook and an inspiring teacher. She made cooking look easy and I enjoyed working daily in the Mac kitchen.