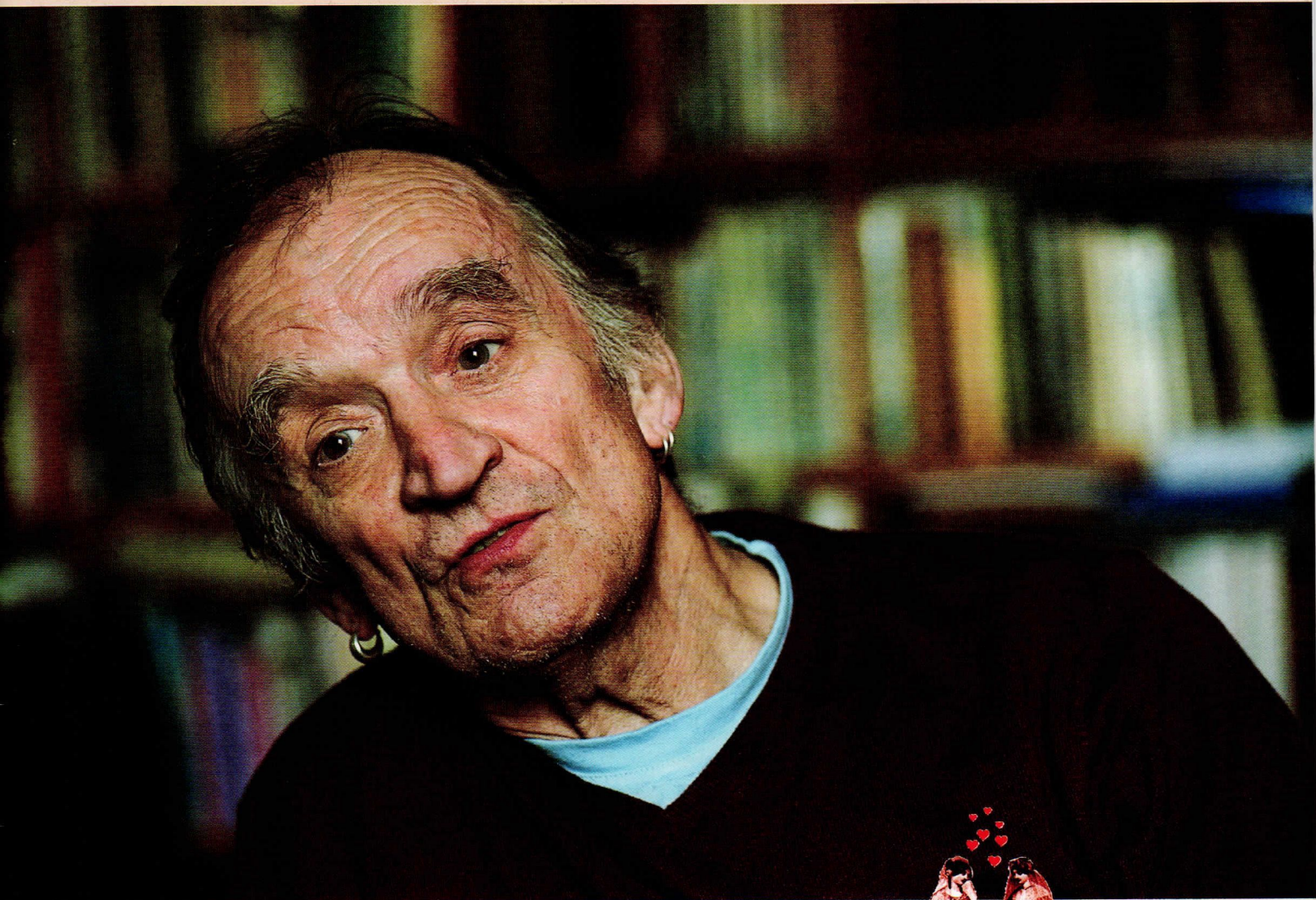


# ThirdWay

Christian comment on culture

‘Genuine, heartfelt passion – how can you possibly resist it?’

Simon Jones talks to the ‘godfather of folk music’, Martin Carthy



**Calvin** A fierce but wonderful faith  
**Scotland** Douglas Alexander MP  
**Marital rows** Same-old same sex  
**Reviews** RS Thomas and more



FEATURE



Brw 8/17

# Growing up with Calvin

How does fiercely conservative religion sometimes breed wonderfully spiritual people? **Alastair McIntosh** journeys back to his childhood home in the Outer Hebrides in the hope of finding out.

**T**he first time I felt the stirrings of a spiritual activist was in my mid-teens, when we were shepherded out of school lessons in Stornoway and over to a nearby church to hear a hellfire sermon.

I recall the angst of inner wrestling as one half of me, like a schoolboy Jeremiah with the fire burning in his bones, wanted to stand up in front of everyone and denounce this preacher's use of violence and oppression in the name of God. The other half, which won, knew that this would have brought eternal shame upon the family and quite possibly, a visit from the men in white coats.

I can't remember what the minister preached but probably it was just the unexpurgated version of the Westminster Confession of Faith<sup>1</sup> of 1646 which was, in turn, rooted in the Dutch bulb fields of the Synod of Dort in 1618-19. These days, its tenets are often cheerfully summarised – albeit to the chagrin of deeper thinking Calvinist intellectuals – under the acronym, TULIP<sup>2</sup>.

## FIVE PETALS

**T** is for the total depravity of human nature, by which, according to the Westminster Confession, all of us 'are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil.'

**U** is for unconditional election, meaning that God has chosen an 'Elect' whose differentiation from the Damned is not by good works, but by divine grace alone.

**L** is for limited atonement by which Christ's intercession is limited to the preordained Elect and

the Damned are, quite literally, the Godforsaken. As Patti Smith, America's Godmother of Punk put it, 'Jesus died for somebody's sins, but not mine.'<sup>3</sup>

**I** is for irresistible grace which means that if God's got your name in the book, set out 'before the foundation of the world was laid,' then God's going to get you.

**A**nd **P** is for perseverance of the saints, the ultimate insurance policy by which, once on the wagon of the saved, there's no falling off. Mind you, that's not an excuse for socialism! Says Westminster: 'Nor does their communion one with another, as saints, take away, or infringe the title or propriety which each man has in his goods and possessions.'

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**Such spiritual abuse was standard fare across much of Scotland in the mid-twentieth century and, from what I hear, England in its own ways was no better.**

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## SPIRITUAL ABUSE

Part of what so riled me that day in the sermon was that some of our teachers would threaten us with the leather tawse if we didn't learn these principles encoded in the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Such spiritual abuse was standard fare across much of Scotland in the mid-twentieth century and, from what I hear of prep school canings, England in its own ways was no better.

If we care about the future of Christianity, we

need to face up to what's been done by the violent theologies of violent men of violent times. Otherwise, we'll fail to understand the full spectrum of atheist rife. Worse, we'll risk staying remaining stuck within the very sadism that put Christ on the Cross in the first place and keeps him writhing there today.

The problem goes right back to Constantine's Rome but reaches its apotheosis in Calvin's 'penal substitution' theory of 'atonement'. Here God is 'armed for vengeance' but Christ 'endured the death which is inflicted on the wicked by an angry God.' The fate of the reprobate, however, is 'as if torn by an angry God, pierced through with deadly darts, terrified by his thunderbolts and crushed by the weight of his hand ... throughout eternity.'<sup>4</sup>

One could dismiss this binary worldview of 'double predestination' as being of little consequence to our modern lives, but Erich Fromm tied it in with what legitimised Nazi ideology<sup>5</sup>, the Dutch Reformed Church tied it in with apartheid<sup>6</sup>, and some historians argue that an implicit belief in 'manifest destiny' underlies recent US foreign policy<sup>7</sup>. Think of Donald Rumsfeld giving daily military intelligence briefings to Bush emblazoned with pictures of praying soldiers and Bible passages like, 'It is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men' (1 Peter 2:15)<sup>8</sup>.

## In a relentless world of 24/7 capitalism there's a subtle beauty to the peace and sense of shared spiritual retreat that still settles on most Hebridean villages for the Sabbath.

### THE PARADOX

And yet when I look back on my Hebridean childhood, some of the most wonderful people I've known were devout (Calvinist) Presbyterians.

People like the late Katie MacLennan of Seaforth Head who, when I asked her in 2011, 'Do you not get lonely, do you not get afraid, living all alone, the last person in the village by the light of your oil lamp?' responded, 'How can I be lonely, how can I be afraid, when I'm with God?'

If these people's focus was on Calvin, it would have mostly been on heart-warming passages like, 'Mankind is knit together with a holy knot ... we must not live for ourselves, but for our neighbours.'<sup>9</sup>

How can we reconcile the tensions between head and heart? Historically, a rich pre-Reformation folk spirituality was overlaid when Puritan evangelicalism was brought to the northern Outer Hebrides by 19th century landowners. But I wanted to press deeper in my understanding of the issues. Four years ago I made a pilgrimage through Lewis and Harris, hoping to make better sense of the paradoxes.

### SWINGS AND ROUNDABOUTS

Much ridicule has been levelled at the strict Hebridean Sabbath and while the children's swings are no longer chained up on a Saturday night, as I walked through Callanish and Breasclete I saw a village signpost at the style beside the swing park saying: 'Welcome. Open: Mon. – Sat.'

One can smile and shake one's head; or one can take a deeper look. In a relentless world of 24/7 capitalism there's a subtle beauty to the peace and sense of shared spiritual retreat that still settles on most Hebridean villages for the Sabbath. It punctuates the rhythm of the week and means that families come together because everything closes, and the vulnerable don't have to go to work.

Walking on the Saturday I'd duly attended the famous prehistoric Standing Stones. Come the Sunday morning I thought - 'Why not?' - and went to try the swings and roundabouts of the Free Church of Scotland service.

They're conservative evangelical, the island's main denomination, but my goodness - it blew my mind to hear the Rev Calum Macdonald deliver a sermon on Job 12; and one that didn't flinch from God's deep presence in Creation, drawing out Job's insights for ecology in our times.

A year ago I dropped by for another visit. As Calum poured out cups of tea he casually said something that blew my mind again, transcending as it seemed to do the usual divisions between evangelicals and liberals.

'The old people of the island often say,' he remarked, 'that there is only one quality in the human heart that the Devil cannot counterfeit.'

I raised a liberal eyebrow. 'The Devil?'

'Yes. I've heard it several times. The old people in this community would say that there's only one thing he cannot fake.'

It was the kind of conversation that can only happen in the seminary of a Hebridean croft.

'And what is that?'

'We call it in the Gaelic, the miann. M-i-a-n-n.'

'Mee-an,' I echoed back. And what might that mean?'

'You could translate it as ardent desire,' he said. 'Specifically, the ardent desire for God.'

'The one thing in the human heart that the Devil cannot counterfeit, is the ardent desire for God.'

Perhaps it's not what we say we believe that matters most; not the things that rattle disputatiously in the head.

Perhaps the thing that matters most - is the miann.

*Alastair McIntosh's Island Spirituality is available from The Islands Book Trust at £10. See <http://goo.gl/NJxSN> for details.*

### NOTES

1 Westminster Confession of Faith (1646-47), Church of Scotland version with anti-sectarian caveat, available online at <http://goo.gl/ZCWQR>.

2 Steele, Curtis & Quinn (2004), *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, and Documented*, P & R Publishing, Phillipsburg.

3 In her lyric, 'Gloria', <http://goo.gl/LrySN>.

4 John Calvin (1559), *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:16:1, 2:16:10 & 11:25:12, <http://goo.gl/u84WY>.

5 Erich Fromm (2001). *Fear of Freedom (or Escape from Freedom in the US)*, Routledge, London.

6 The Rustenburg Declaration (1990), South Africa, <http://goo.gl/O3WqN>.

7 Clifford Longley (2002). *Chosen People: the Big Idea that Shapes England and America*, Hodder & Stoughton, London.

8 Paul Thompson (2009, 20 May), 'Donald Rumsfeld's holy war: How President Bush's Iraq briefings came with quotes from the Bible,' *Daily Mail*, <http://goo.gl/yYksa>.

9 John Calvin (2012), *Commentary on Acts 13*, Bible Suite, <http://goo.gl/YKagr>.