

## back page interview

'Wait a minute — Jesus never taught just-war theory. He practised full-on non-violence'

**Alastair McIntosh**  
spiritual activist,  
co-author of  
*Spiritual Activism*

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

**That's when it gets important to reach down into our spiritual wells.** I have felt that need in my activism; and my *Spiritual Activism* co-author, Matt Carmichael, is of a younger generation of activists, and has also come to recognise it in his work on climate change.

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

**The religion we've all inherited has been necessarily time-conditioned;** so spiritual activism can mean working with religions to help them to become more fit for purpose for the times we are living in. That can be challenging. For example, it's a change that Christianity has had to take up through such issues such as women's ordination. We ask: "What is an activist? What does it mean to take a leadership role? Why is spirituality important?"

**Spirituality can start off relatively light,** such as the current interest in mindfulness; but that leads you on into a place that becomes God-centred. I think when the Psalms say, "Be still, and know that I am God," you have it in a nutshell. To become mindful in a Christian sense goes much deeper than just observing yourself; but through that opening of observing yourself, you are led to a position where, as Paul put it, "I live, yet not I, but Christ lives within me."

**The Lord's Prayer starts off with "hallowed be thy name,"** a profound God-centred mindfulness. Then the very next line is "Thy kingdom come." You see? And what is this kingdom but a realm of love made manifest, through justice, for those who suffer in the world: the widow, the poor, the alien. So what we're being shown here is that our contemplation of God is not just cosmic navel-gazing: it leads to action within the creation, as participants in that creation.

**What differentiates that from ordinary political action** is that we're given a spiritual compass and a source of energy. You see it in Jeremiah 2.13: "They have forsaken me the fountain of living water and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that hold no water." Spiritual activism is about connecting with the fountain of living water.

**Jesus has all these images of lamps and oil:** the lamp and oil of our lives burning low, the oil that keeps our light burning brightly. We're commissioned not to hold our light under a bushel, but to hold it out for the world.

**Our work is very interfaith,** and already it has been criticised as such. But, for us, such interfaith appreciation only confirms the need not to make our Christ too small. Liberation theology is the driving force in our work, whether inspired by the social activism of Basava, in the Hindu tradition; or the environmental activism of Julia "Butterfly" Hill, as a Christian; or the Islamic non-violence of groups we hear far 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 OK with mindfulness, but edgy about spirituality. The secular and religious alike find spirituality unsettling. But that's the trouble with the Holy Spirit: you can't control the blowing of its wind, the rushing of its thirst for love and justice; and that, sadly, makes a lot of people uncomfortable.

**I was employed by Edinburgh University,** teaching Human Ecology up until 1996. Now, I'm almost entirely self-employed — freelance, writing, speaking, and lecturing — though I have a part-time post with Edinburgh University Divinity School in an AHRC research programme on climate change and ancestral time.

**These days, I'm spending most mornings** finishing off a book about a pilgrimage I 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 violence and non-violence, partly through the lens of the senior-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'm tying this in with a fresh look at the meaning of the Cross, the urge I feel as a Quaker to move beyond blood-sacrifice theories of atonement, and to recognise 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. The military's moral position is Augustinian just-war theory. Challenging that, they'll have what they call 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 practised full-on non-violence."

**At senior levels in the British military,** you've got people who have seen war close up in Iraq and Afghanistan, very aware of what they see as the necessity for war, but also of its limitations. They know that they're morally challenged by that, and profoundly searching for better ways for bringing about international security. That's why they're willing to listen 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 nurse. I was born in Doncaster, and raised on



DOMINIQUE CARTON

the Isle of Lewis. I have two grown-up children from my first marriage, and today live with my wife, Véréne Nicolas, in Glasgow.

**The old people of the Hebrides who raised me** were the greatest influence in my life. They were Presbyterians of the strictest Westminster Confession, but with hearts and a wisdom that spoke its 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,

as one old island woman put it to me recently, how can I be lonely when I'm with God?

**In the late afternoon I'll maybe wander down to the GalGael Trust,** a boat-building project that we have in the Govan area of Glasgow, where I live now. I'm one of the people who pioneered modern land-reform. We got the island of Egg into community ownership; and, in the 1990s, I was approached by people in urban poverty in Glasgow who were saying "What about us?" So I became involved in

the project here. It's been a gift — though we're surrounded by people who are experiencing hunger.

**I became a Quaker in the 1980s** through the peace movement. It was the era of Greenham Common, when the nuclear threat was being ramped up. I listened to the elderly Quakers, and thought: "That expresses my feelings." But I'm a very interfaith and interdenominational Quaker. I'll often attend mainstream churches in the course of my work.

**If I could change just one thing?** The mainstream Churches' embrace of violence through just-war theory, and divine violence in their soteriology. Yet do I have sufficient truth of the heart to presume to change even that? Maybe God sees further than my quaking shows me.

**I'm happiest with my wife,** by the fire, after a productive day's writing.

**The squeal of my hearing aids,** indicating that the batteries are good — that's the sound that most reassures me.

**Don't get me started on what makes me angry.** . . . "Health and Safety" trumping grounded common sense.

**I pray most "Give us this day our daily bread."** And "Be still, and know that I am God."

**Who would I choose to be locked in a church with?** You mean, there'd be enough communion wine to share?

*Alastair McIntosh was talking to Terence Handley MacMath.*

*Spiritual Activism: Leadership as service is published by Green Books at £19.99 (CT Bookshop £18).*



## word from Wormingford

*Ronald Blythe's supplies are replenished by a helpful neighbour*

**in his uncle's Suffolk rectory, would chase air all the way to Samoa.**

Here is the prayer he said at the end of the day, and which I often say here: "Lord, behold our family here assembled. We thank thee for this place 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 delightful. . .

"Let peace abound in our small company. Purge out of every heart the lurking grudge. Give us grace and strength to forbear and to persevere. . .

Give us courage and gaiety and the quiet mind. Spare to us our friends, soften to us our enemies.

**MATCHLESS mornings; no bird-song, but the thinning oaks in a kind of aloof conversation. Not a soul about. My neighbour Vicky rings up to ask if I need "supplies".** I like this word for shopping. It makes me feel that I live in the Wild West.

It is market day, and the little Suffolk town has become one big shop. Morally, we should support a dozen small shops. But convenience reigns.

St Peter's, the parish church, also redundant, soars to high heaven, as it did when I was a boy. Now, I am the President of its redundancy. It is full of Christmas cards and tinsel, and the ghost of Mr Vinnecombe exercises its spectral wrath. He taught my brother the organ. A rap across the knuckles when he made a mistake. There was a green lead spire that touched the sky, only they took it down in case it fell, which I doubt it would have done. Both Thomas Gainsborough and John Constable drew this lovely spire. But the bells are still rung.

The other day, I ran my hand along the traceries of the north door. When did this last open? Surprisingly, there is a Christmas card of my uncle's tomb in a neighbouring churchyard. It is peeping out of a snowdrift. His life was shortened at the Western Front.

Like the young men who lay out in the snow at the TB hospital, he chased air — nothing more. No more singing carols in the choir. No more snowy surplises and tottering processional cross; just this gasping for breath. If you were well off, you might go to Davos, to gasp there.

But those crowded evenings! And the dressmaker twins, identical little ladies midway along the aisle. A card in their window said: "Hems taken up. Bridal-wear. Mourning." Robert Louis Stevenson, on holiday

"Bless us, if it may be, in all our innocent endeavours. If it may not, 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, we beseech of thee this help and mercy for Christ's sake."

I see him shuffling together the pen-written pages of *Kidnapped* (1886) to write this. On his life-giving South Sea Island they called him Tusalala — teller of tales.

I expect this is what they called Jesus. His magnificent Sermon on the Mount was one thing, his parables another. As children, 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 tend not to raise their voices as preachers do; so I always imagine that those who listened to Jesus were entrapped by pure narrative.

Printed by Mortons Printers and Publishers, Newspaper House, Morton Way, Horncastle, Lincolnshire LN9 6JR; registered as a newspaper at the Post Office

ISSN 0009-658X



9 770009 658151