

Roots, Belonging and Place

Ian Lawton interviews **Alastair McIntosh**

Alastair is an independent scholar, activist, writer, speaker and broadcaster from the Isle of Lewis; a Fellow of the Centre for Human Ecology (CHE), a director of the GalGael Trust and Visiting Professor of Human Ecology at the University of Strathclyde. He participated in the NNJPN Conference (see p.4, his question to the panel is on p.7)

Ian: *Soil and Soul* is very much a book about roots, belonging and place. How did you come to be so conscious of those things?

Alastair: My sense is that place is a very human combination of environment and culture as well as being our location in reality as shared with the non-human world. I came to my awareness of it by having been raised on the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, but while I was growing up there I wasn't really aware of sense of place. It wasn't until I went out to Papua New Guinea with Voluntary Service Overseas and experienced their profoundly strong sense of place that I reflected back on my own place; that woke me up to realities that had previously been dormant.

That is one of the paradoxes of place and sense of belonging, isn't it? That you don't know that you've got it until you're out of it.

Yes, and often you don't know that you've got it until you start losing it. I was involved in development work where people were being constantly subject to logging, mining, the theft of their offshore fisheries and so on ... in other words they were very rapidly, in many parts, losing physical aspects of place and with it their general sense of place. That was what really woke me up to the importance of the matter. When I came back to Scotland after my second time in Papua New Guinea in the mid-1980s I started to get involved with land reform here. I also campaigned on preventing a multinational corporation from turning one of our mountains in the Outer Hebrides into a super-quarry that would have violated a national scenic area.

Can you say a little bit more about that, how that panned out, that particular protest?

Well, the super-quarry protest was one where the biggest mountain in the south of Harris was going to be turned into what would then have been the biggest road stone quarry in the world, to ship the stone down to the south of England and possibly

even as far away as America. It was being fought in all the conventional ways, on environmental grounds, on cultural grounds, on economic grounds and so on. The dimension that I added was to bring in a Native American warrior chief from the Mi'kmaq people and also a Calvinist professor of theology, Donald Macleod from the Free Church College, and between us we made theological testimony as to the importance of place as being God-given. We highlighted the importance of relating to a place in a manner that respects it as the location from which we receive the gifts of providence. Now, whereas these arguments had no legal traction in the government public enquiry they did get people thinking very much more deeply about the issue locally and, in those ways I think, contributed towards the super-quarry being stopped.

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If I were to think about Christian attitudes to place I would perhaps first of all think about how in Celtic Christianity, in the poetry and in the blessings and prayers, there seems to be a very strong sense of nature and place and the particular geography that those people found themselves in ... would you say that's true for a start?

Well yes, obviously I come from a Celtic part of the world so I was very much drawing on that but I think it's also very important not to draw just on what we would generally think of as Celtic Christianity, but also to ground that in its wider cultural and biblical context, and those are contexts that have widely been overlooked in modern western theology until fairly recently. In other words it is important to do what we would now call eco-theology. My own



Photo by Murdo McLeod

perspective is both Christian and interfaith – I am a Quaker of universalist disposition and for me it was no problem whatsoever working with chief Stone Eagle, at that time the warrior chief of the Mi'kmaq in Canada, who had a non-Christian traditional Native American spiritual perspective. I think in many spiritual traditions of the world you can find this concern for environment as being something that is given from a divine source, and you can sometimes reach people at a different level of their being when you tap into that. It awakens something in them that goes beyond the materialistic utilitarian sense of using the environment into a recognition of the environment as having importance for its own majesty, in its own right.

To get a Calvinist professor engaged with that protest might at first seem quite surprising.

Very surprising. But when you actually look at Calvinism there are surprises within it, one of which is that I discovered a passage in Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in which he talks about 'the beautiful theatre of the Creation' and understands the world in which we live, the Creation, as being the context in which the majesty of God is revealed. Therefore there were points of connection that made it possible for Professor Macleod to come onto the platform at the public inquiry and to question whether it is right to disfigure the Creation in this way.

It seems to me that there isn't a huge enthusiasm for environmental issues generally in Christianity, at least not in the Christian circles I've moved in. How has that come to be?

In my experience, an awful lot of conventional Christians are up their own

backsides in terms of the question of whether or not they are personally saved. They have this worldview that is very strong in British Protestant traditions – or at least traditionally it was, I think it's changing now – that the world is divided into the elect or the damned. That of course is fundamental Calvinism. Now although most theologians would no longer embrace that view it's still lingering on in the religious psyche. So you often have this, in my view, unhealthy obsession with personal salvation and not as much emphasis as there could be on community, on the learning to live together in love, and of connection to the roots of providence in the natural environment.

There is also sometimes a millenarian attitude ... well if the planet's stuffed then this is perhaps the end times, or something like that ...

We're seeing that with some Christian groups already. I'm hearing of some clergy having been preaching in their sermons up in the north of Scotland and the Islands, to the effect that climate change is God's judgement on human kind. This is all part of the apocalypse coming on. To which my response is to couch that in its own terms and to say, well we must deepen our understanding of the word 'apocalypse'. The word 'apocalypse' does not just mean disaster. It also means revelation. So the spiritual challenge of environmental destruction is to ask, 'What does it reveal about the human condition?' And that's why I called my later book *Hell and High Water*, with the subtitle *Climate Change, Hope and the Human Condition*, because I think that climate change teaches something about where the human species is at at this stage in our biological and cultural evolution and that the spiritual task of our times is to listen to that and learn those lessons.

Do you think that what you've been doing in your writing, in *Soil and Soul* particularly, is something like a theology of place?

Yes. I see it very much as a book of liberation theology. Liberation theology of place in relation to land reform and also what underpins land reform. As you know in Scotland we now have land reform since 2003,* and significantly 2% of the land in Scotland is now held in community trusts, thanks to that legislation, and what underpins that imperative of land reform is people getting back into touch with place. Only if people have a sense of grounding in place do they have a solid basis on which to build a sense of identity, which will carry with it a sense of values that are necessary to apply the sense of responsibility that will feed back into reinforcing the cohesion of a sense of place. I call this the cycle of belonging. Our sense of belonging is deepened by ever working on our sense of

grounding in place, our sense of place, our sense of values, our sense of responsibility and so on round in a continuous circle. If we reinforce that cycle of belonging then our ability to belong on this earth will be deepened; that's to say, belonging as human beings in relation to one another, to the environment and, I would suggest, to God. Whereas if we start breaking that up, if we start fragmenting our ability to connect at the levels of place, identity, values or responsibility, then we disable ourselves from connecting to life in its abundance.

Who else is contributing to this theology of place, this development in theology?

If we reinforce the cycle of belonging, then our ability to belong on this earth will be deepened; that is to say belonging as human beings in relation to one another, to the environment and to God.

A lot of what I'm saying is coming out of the cultural context in which I'm working. I've just published a major paper with my Dutch colleague Rutger Henneman in the *Journal for the Study of Nature, Religion and Culture*, which comes out of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Florida. It's called 'The Theology of Scottish Land Reform' – you'll find a link to it on my website. What we're doing there is, we interviewed 15 key Scottish land reformers about their theology. We found that this kind of theology is something that is deeply ingrained in Scottish culture. Of course, I was coming at this in terms of an inspiration from Latin American liberation theology, which has much to say about relationship to the land, and I was applying it in the Scottish context, but to my surprise I discovered it was already here. It was already here because the theology of land is such a strong theme in the Old Testament.

What is your understanding of the theology of place contained in the Bible? What is it saying to us?

I think it is central in the Hebrew Bible. Place was the context in which people were granted the full providence of God. In the New Testament this is integrated into the Body of Christ. The Orthodox Church understands the mysticism of this much better than the western churches do. It is one of the places in which a deeper theology needs to be integrated to unblock the flow of the Spirit. And that also needs to happen on an interfaith basis. For example, there is much that Christianity can learn from religions like Hinduism, Taoism and even so-called 'animism'.

If you survey the calamitous events in the Holy Land over the centuries what does that say to you about God, people, place and Scripture?

I think that God is present where there is conflict, not because God causes the conflict, but rather, as a presence amidst the suffering. But of course, being immersed in hubris human beings typically project their own ego aspirations onto God, and so God gets a bad press but, if I might speak anthropomorphically, God is pretty good at putting up with that!

What were some of the Christian responses to *Soil and Soul* and to your work generally?

Well, Professor Timothy Gorringer, now at Exeter University, describes it as having been one of the most important recent British pieces of liberation theology. The Christian response generally was either to ignore it completely or to be enthusiastic. Interestingly, nobody has damned it because to damn it of course you have to engage with it. So I suspect quite a few Christian theologians would have shaken their head and considered me to be sadly deluded. Because my concern is not with personal salvation, my concern is with how we collectively learn to live, with one another, in community on this earth and the salvation that is inherent within that. I think that's what Jesus is teaching. Jesus wasn't interested in the Pharisees with all their obsessions as to whether they were following the right rules and regulations, Jesus was interested in what was in people's hearts and how that affected their inter-relationships.

I've heard you talk about the difference between communities of interest and communities of place. Can you say something about that?

Yes. A community of place is a kind of meta-community context because place geographically holds a wide range of activities. Those activities will be connected together as communities of interest. For instance, a chamber of commerce is a community of interest concerned with business; you can have community among thieves, honour among thieves etc ... it doesn't necessarily require any deep spiritual grounding. But in my view, a community of place – that is a geographically-bounded community – is a context of holding all things that happen in that place. I think that this is constellated, is held together, by what is sometimes called 'spirit of place'. That there is a sense in which a place has got its own values, its own energy, its own way in which it shapes people. You see this very clearly, for example, when you contrast mountain people with people who live on the plains. Plato in *The Laws* makes that contrast and

sees a wide difference between such people. The geography of a place, when people are connected to it, has a big effect on shaping them. To my mind, grounded community of place is very important in shaping who we are, although I would have to concede that we live in a world where high levels of mobility mean that more and more people are not grounded in the place. They can so easily move away from it and so quickly do move away from it, which is quite a problem of our times.

What is the solution to that un-groundedness?

I think the solution is to re-ground ourselves or, if that's not possible because the nature of our lives means we travel a lot, we need to learn how to take sense of place with us as a portable ability to relate. I discovered that in Papua New Guinea when I discovered a very strong sense of place. And now I can go anywhere ... you may have noticed when I visited you down in Brighton, I was immediately looking for ways of connecting with a sense of place in that place.

I like that idea of a portable sense of place.

It's a matter of respecting the ground on which we happen to be treading. Of treating all places with a sense of veneration and of asking what has this place got to offer me and what do I bring to offer to this place; then I think the magic happens.

In Christianity there is a long history of people being called by God to relocate to other places of need or opportunity. Is that perhaps what you are doing, having moved to Glasgow, with the work you are doing in Govan?

Well yes, I grew up in an island community where I was always out in boats or out in the hills, growing things and catching things, gathering things, and for the past five and half years I've been living in a deprived city area in Govan in Glasgow. My work here is very much about trying to rekindle a sense of place with people who have often been deprived of it because of poverty. I think it's something we can learn to do. We learn to do it by connecting with the elemental nature of place – with fire, air, earth and water. I mean literally things like getting out in boats, making fires and cooking our food together – that kind of elemental connection – and also through engaging our creativity. The project I'm involved with in Glasgow, the GalGael Trust, uses creativity to help people make things of beauty. They'll come into our workshop, our staff will give them a hammer and chisel and a piece of wood and get them learning how to carve. We'll get them to help with building a boat, then they go out in the boats. So in these ways people can learn to connect and get an idea of what it means to be a community of place.

It's harder to connect in a city environment with that elemental nature that you might easily do in the highlands or islands ...

It is, but we're doing it here. The River Clyde flows just half a mile from my house. Once it would have been seen by many of these young people as a dirty old river into which bodies are dumped with concrete round their feet. That would be a common local impression, yet when they get out onto that river in the boats they've built themselves, and they see the swans or maybe see a salmon jumping ... as somebody said, 'GalGael has given me back my river.'

Have you ever been on a pilgrimage?

I went on one last year. I wanted to reconnect with the island where I grew up – the island of Lewis and Harris – and so I took a fortnight out and went up to the south of Harris and walked all the way up to the most northerly point of Lewis through some of the most remote mountain areas. In the middle of it I went for four nights without seeing anybody. But also I went through the villages; it took me twelve days in all. I took it very slowly and meditatively and specifically I was visiting ancient chapel sites, pre-Reformation church sites, known as temples on the island. I was also visiting holy wells and the ancient shieling sites, the stone huts built for practising transhumance – that is, taking animals out in the summer to the distant grazings.

What would pilgrimage have meant in days gone by to people in Scotland?

I think they meant the same as they mean now – a context in which you take yourself out of the hustle and bustle of everyday life and you enter into a greater inner stillness and a place of reflection. It's about letting your life be punctuated by visiting places that are considered holy, perhaps in T S Eliot's sense, where he talks in *Four Quartets* of kneeling at places 'where prayer has been valid'.

It seems that these days more and more people are interested in making pilgrimage to those sites. Would you say that's a fair observation and what do you think is going on there?

I think there's a huge resurgence of interest in pilgrimage at the moment. I've seen it with a lot of my fellow environmental activist friends who are feeling stuck about what to do given the obstacles that are in the way of trying to save the environment and they are feeling moved to a deeper spiritual activism in how they tackle these issues. One of the ways they're expressing that is by going on pilgrimages and it's interesting how often these climate change

marches are precisely that. They are marches that may last several days going to a protest site and they have many of the qualities of pilgrimage – perhaps in the full sense of Chaucer and his *Canterbury Tales* – all different things, from people having a riotous good time and getting drunk along the way, and getting goodness knows what else, to people seeking silence, reflection and spiritual sharing. Pilgrimage can be many different things to different people and I think we're seeing a resurgence of that because it is necessary to sustain ourselves when our energies start to run dry and we risk burn-out. That's the point at which we need to replenish the oil in the lamp of our lives, and to do so from a source not by bombing our way into somebody else's oilfield, but in a way in which I would say is nothing less than God-given. I think that this is the meaning of providence, of deep grace-given providence.

Thank you Alastair. That seems like a fine sentence to end on. ■

*In 2003, moved along by high-profile campaigns, some of which Alastair was deeply involved with, the Land Reform Scotland Act came into force, making it easier for communities to gain the ownership of the land on which they live and work. It gives communities a right of pre-emptive purchase over land when it goes on sale if they have registered a prior community interest.

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