Review article

THEOLOGY

Theology
2017, Vol. 120(5) 370–372

DOI: 10.1177/0040571X17710204
journals.sagepub.com/home/tjx

SAGE

No fairy story

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Alastair McIntosh, ***Poacher's Pilgrimage: An Island Journey*** (Edinburgh: Birlinn 2016); 352 pp.: 9781780273617, £20.00 (hbk)

In 2001 Alastair McIntosh published *Soil and Soul*, an account of the fight to save the Hebridean island of Harris from being turned into a super-quarry, and of the community buy-out of another Hebridean island, Eigg, which has become a contemporary classic of liberative theology. He has published books since – on spiritual activism and on climate change – but this book is the true follow-up to *Soil and Soul*. Readers should not be misled by the title into thinking that this is a book of rural belles-lettres. McIntosh uses a 12-day walk across the length of Harris and Lewis, where he grew up, as the basis for an extended reflection on three things: violence, the theology that is complicit with it and the way to deal with it; the ecology of the imagination; and the spirituality of place. All three are interconnected, and all bear on a world torn apart by rage. McIntosh is addressing this very problem in his ruminations.

To begin with violence. The British army, and, it turns out, other armies as well (including the US?), includes lectures and discussions on the ethics of war in its officer training. As part of this, a pacifist is asked to come and speak and debate with men who are, after all, being trained to kill. For some years, McIntosh has been the pacifist representative at the UK Staff Training College, and invitations to other European centres have followed. The book details some of these encounters, and very bruising they are too. Some respondents think him mad; some rub the difficulties of the situations they have found themselves in in his face. The temptation would be for the pacifist to answer with holy indignation. McIntosh refuses. To the persistent question, 'Have you killed?', he responds, 'I, too have killed. Every time I have driven a car or taken a flight, powered by oil which has been fought over.' His respect for the men with whom he disagrees so profoundly, his compassion and his sense of solidarity with them are all a model for debating this issue. But he does not stop there, but is interested in the theological justification of war, the so-called 'just war' tradition and the loss of the early tradition of pacifism in Christianity. 'When Christ disarmed Peter, he disarmed every soldier' said Tertullian. That is now regarded, at least in Britain, as a damnable heresy. Why was this tradition lost? Of course, there are pragmatic reasons: Augustine lost

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patience with the Donatists. He turned to the governor, and his troops, to sort them out. But, in the view of many contemporary theologians, there is a deeper reason, the roots of which we can find in the Hebrew Bible. In Deuteronomy, and in the history which the Deuteronomists edited, there is a profound conviction that God visits sin with punishment. You have two options, the Deuteronomists say: either obey Torah, establish a contrast society and live in peace or God will scatter you among the nations (Deut. 28.64). On one level, this is obviously true. If we 'sin' – that is, live contrary to the ways of truth, peace and justice – we come to grief. Bismarck scoffed in the Reichstag that you could not run a state by the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount: 60 years later every German city lay in ruins and 6 million Jews and 2 million gypsies had been gassed. German culture has to live with that for ever. But on another level the problem is that it is framed as *retribution*: if you sin, God will smite you. A limited response to that appears perhaps 150 years later in the book we call Leviticus: God has ordained means of atonement, but only for sins not committed with a high hand. On one, very powerful, reading of the Messianic Writings (aka the New Testament) Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for all sin. The problem with this view is that it underwrites the logic of retribution, which is a logic of violence. Wrongdoing requires death to purge it! Of course, this is God acting within Godself: a supreme act of love and mercy, say the advocates. But unfortunately it underwrites the view that wrongdoing has to be followed by retribution, and this might be by guns, rockets, missiles, even nuclear weapons. This logic is embraced equally by jihadists and by British prime ministers, daughters of the manse, who regard it as their solemn and Christian duty to be prepared to press a button which would slaughter hundreds of thousands of people. McIntosh is wrestling with this theology and urging a different theology, rooted in his own Quakerism, which appeals to the 'atomic power of love'. There is an analogy here to his encounter with the military. McIntosh was brought up Presbyterian – a fierce religion of double predestination and of relish for the pains of hell for the wicked. He has renounced that version of Christianity, but he loves the people. One of the most moving stories in the book is of his attendance at a 'Wee Free' service, of the splendid sermon on Job 9 and the equally splendid meal which followed.

But now to the ecology of the imagination. If you are a child in Europe (I don't know about North America), you receive, until about the age of seven, a rich diet of 'fairy stories'. By your teenage years this has become a dismissive phrase for nonsensical claims that, for example, wealth filters down to all or that a rising tide will lift all boats. McIntosh engages with the 'fairy' tradition of the Celtic fringe. He distinguishes between 'imagination' and the 'imaginal', which is the 'suprasensible grounding of the soul' where prayer becomes 'the supreme act of the creative imagination'. The language of fairies, of which he has many amusing and moving stories to tell, is the language of that awareness, which Gregory Bateson was after, that 'there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy'. It suggests, McIntyre argues, that positivism falls woefully short and that neuroscience does not begin to approximate a full account of reality, but that we exist as part of a much larger whole, which includes 'nature' of course, but

also other levels of spiritual reality (Johannes Lindblom's well-known book on Israelite prophecy argued the same thing). So? Where does that fit in to the question of violence? It fits in because it is a way of understanding the struggle with 'principalities and powers', which, as the author of Ephesians saw, goes beyond purely social, economic or political realities. So, McIntosh argues, if we are to engage effectively with violence, we have to take seriously, and lay ourselves open to, the imaginal realm. This both is and is not a 'fairy story'. It is not in the sense that the struggle with violence is deadly serious and needs the profoundest spiritual resources to respond to it, as Gandhi, one of McIntosh's inspirations, saw.

One of the causes of spiritual desolation, as the early sociologists like Durkheim and Tönnies so clearly saw, is the loss of our rootedness in place. Both focused on the huge industrial city as the most potent working out of that loss, though in the Highlands rich landlords often cleared the land and sent whole communities into exile in order to run sheep or expand their hunting grounds. In the community in which McIntosh was brought up the sense of the past was still palpable. The book relishes this sense, but not purely as nostalgia but because he believes, as one respondent put it to him, that we have reached a time in history when the old wells have to be reopened. All those who look to 'indigenous religions' have the same sense. What the book challenges us to do is to find the locus of the holy inscribed in the places in which we live; to cherish catholicity, of course, which is to say the recognition that, as Luke puts it, God has never left Godself without evidence, and that this evidence encounters us in the flesh of the world. In North America, Wendell Berry is a prime witness to both task and possibility. But here too, in the book, we find another witness to McIntosh's catholicity of spirit. He explores this dimension in part through a series of encounters with the island's most notorious atheist, whose company he enjoys quite as much as that of the devout but hell loving Presbyterians, and the cheerful guardians of local fairy traditions. His atheism springs, he surmises, from the fact that a theology of fear discredits any god of love. And what goes in the place of that? The knowledge that forgiveness breaks the law of karma (which is the law of retribution) and that the motto of Lewis's main port, Stornoway, 'God's providence is our inheritance', 'runs like liquid sapphire through our veins'. As with *Soil and Soul*, a poetically imagined, politically engaged, narrative theology which illuminatingly tackles some of the deepest problems of our world.

Author Biography

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