

SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM

LEADERSHIP AS SERVICE



ALASTAIR McINTOSH & MATT C

Sample
chapter

Praise for Spiritual Activism

“Nuclear disarmament, as this thoughtful book suggests, is more than a matter of dismantling the weapons. We must also dismantle our minds and hearts to change our current ideas of true security.”

Bruce Kent, Vice President of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament

“We’ve tried to heal what ails us and our world with smartness, money, technology, economic growth, policy, and politics--all necessary and all insufficient. Having tried everything else, it is now time to add spirit exercised with discipline, going to the heart of the matter where wholeness, healing, and Holy converge. Highly recommended.”

Professor David W. Orr of Oberlin College, author of *Down to the Wire*

“The perilous path we tread is littered with burnt out, sold out, freaked out activists. If we wish to engage effectively and for the long run in this world full of wounds, for our efforts for Earth and Justice to be truly sustainable, it behoves us to take great care of our psychological and spiritual wellbeing. This book provides us with an important tool for the journey.”

John Seed, Australian deep ecologist and founder of the Rainforest Information Centre

“There is so so much that we activists can learn from religious faiths: about how to mobilise people, earn their commitment, and speak to their sacred values. From the spiritual traditions we can learn how to sustain ourselves in the long struggle. So, to my fellow activists, even the most sceptical, I insist read this excellent book and learn some vital lessons from the most successful and longest lasting social movements in history.”

George Marshall, founder of the Climate Outreach Information Network

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THE AUTHORS

Alastair McIntosh has been described by BBC TV as “one of the world’s leading environmental campaigners.” A pioneer of modern land reform in Scotland, he helped bring the Isle of Eigg into community ownership. On the Isle of Harris he negotiated withdrawal of the world’s biggest cement company from a devastating “superquarry” plan. Alastair guest lectures at military staff colleges, most notably the UK Defence Academy. Over nearly two decades he has addressed 6,000 senior officers from eighty countries on nonviolence. His books include *Soil and Soul: People versus Corporate Power* (Aurum), *Hell and High Water: Climate Change, Hope and the Human Condition* (Birlinn) and *Rekindling Community* (Green Books). He is a fellow of the School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh and a visiting professor at the College of Social Sciences, University of Glasgow. A founding director of the GalGael Trust, which tackles urban poverty, he lives with his wife, Vèrène Nicolas, in the Govan area of Glasgow, Scotland. He has taught spiritual activism in Europe, North America, Australia, Indonesia, Moscow and Beirut.

Matt Carmichael has been campaigning on global justice issues in his home city of Leeds, England, since the mid 1990s; and in the past decade on climate change and fuel poverty. He led workshops on spiritual activism at two Camps for Climate Action, and as chair, guided the Leeds activist hub, Tidal, from its church-based origins to becoming a fortifying force in Leeds activism, open to all perspectives. He was a founding member and secretary of Schumacher North and created the Delta Course, an introduction to spirituality for people disillusioned with, or uninterested in, religion, but open to life. He has a degree in theology and is also an inner-city secondary school teacher, a homemaker, a writer, and as can be seen scattered throughout this book, sometimes a cartoonist.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Nonviolence and the Powers that Be

Pussy Riot and liberation theology

When rock band Pussy Riot performed their “punk prayer”, uninvited, in Moscow cathedral in 2012, it appeared at first sight to be an irreverent publicity bash. The state authorities prosecuted three of the young women for “hooliganism”. Their “prayer”, addressed to the Blessed Virgin Mary, was called *Mother of God, Chase Putin Away!* Only during the court case did the deeper basis of their action emerge.

It is risky from a Western standpoint to be certain how to assess Putin’s role in the Orthodox Church, and the allegation that Patriarch Kirill of Moscow - equivalent to the Archbishop of Canterbury - was once a KGB agent. What is widely acknowledged, is that during the communist era Russian religion survived both by resisting and collaborating with the state authorities.¹³⁴ This limitation on freedom held back its social evolution. In contrast, the Roman Catholic Church of the 20th century was able to put itself through a major reformation.

In the early 1960s, Pope John XXIII - “Good Pope John” - established the council known as Vatican II that, among other reforms, gave explicit sanction to a gospel of the poor. This legitimized the rise of “liberation theology”, especially from within Latin America where land rights, bloody dictatorships and American corporate imperialism were burning issues. Liberation theology advances integral (all-round) human development centred on “the preferential option for the poor” - the idea that God is



Mammon versus God – Financial sector billboard outside
Christ the Saviour cathedral, Moscow, 2000
Alastair McIntosh,

always on the side of those who suffer.¹³⁵ Not to be confused with the more recent “integral” grand theory of Ken Wilber,¹³⁶ it achieves this by reading the Bible in ways that liberate theology itself from suppression and co-option in the interests of the powerful.

Whether it was because of collaboration or out of brute necessity, the Orthodox Church in Russia slept through most of the 20th century. It lacked the opportunity, even had it so wanted, to update its theology from that of Tsarist feudalism to a progressive social gospel. The members of Pussy Riot saw themselves as taking an explicitly prophetic stand. The battle line lay between the charismatic authority of the young women and those they represented on the one hand, and the routinization of that charisma by the state, the state-embraced Church and wealthy oligarchs on the other. When Alastair was a guest of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Holy Trinity Sergiyev Monastery to lecture on land reform theology in 2000, he couldn’t resist snapping a picture of an advertising billboard outside the cathedral that captured this contrast of God versus Mammon with the words; “The Wall Street in Moscow.”¹³⁷

The closing defence statements and other writings of the three young women who went on trial for their punk prayer reveal a remarkable and unexpected theology of liberation. The performance was, as they saw it, a ritual of delegitimization; a removal of blessing; even an exorcism.¹³⁸

Prior to being handed down a sentence of two years, Masha Alyokhina said; “Speaking about Putin, we first of all mean not Vladimir Putin, but Putin as a system created by him.” In other words, she saw power in systemic terms that went beyond individual persons into the transpersonal backdrop. This was further emphasized by Nadia Tolokonnikova’s assertion; “People can sense the truth. Truth really does have some kind of ontological, existential superiority over lies and this is written in the Bible.” Complementing this, Katja Samutsevich said; “The fact that Christ the Saviour cathedral had become a significant symbol in the political strategy of our powers-that-be was already clear,” when Kirill Gundyayev (who the band understood to be Putin’s former KGB colleague) took over as head of the Russian Orthodox Church and used it “openly as a flashy setting for the politics of the security services.” Pussy Riot’s protest was not to reject the Church, but to reclaim it for the people and civic protest.

Naming, unmasking and engaging the Powers

In Chapter Two we saw that Walter Wink, an activist American theologian, understood spirituality to be the inner dynamic of outer realities – the *meta* or “beyond” that lies behind the *physical* to comprise the *metaphysical*.¹³⁹ He would have seized on Masha’s statement; “not Vladimir Putin, but Putin as a system created by him,” as epitomizing the biblical sense that sees the “Powers that Be” as transpersonal constellations of spiritual force.

Thus, when the New Testament, the Christian Bible, speaks of “Mammon” as the God of money, it doesn’t mean a golden image set up for idolatrous public worship. More powerfully, it means the innermost spirit of greed that seizes human hearts and sucks dry their treasures. Newspaper cartoonists understand this intuitively. They are in touch with the political unconscious, which is why they pick up nuances that the rest of us might miss. In Jungian terms, Masha’s “Putin” is not Vladimir; it is a complex of the collective unconscious – a feeling-toned libidinal field within the Russian people. It might be said that Vladimir is himself possessed by Putin’s

archetypal presence, and that configures a certain type of social behaviour and Russian society.

The Powers that Be, says Wink, “be” because they *are*. Those who see power only in its outward forces would dismiss this as magical thinking, but they fail to take account of consciousness and the unconscious; how inner forces, through a sense of meaning, purpose and lived-out story, constellate outer realities. This is why, if we respond to violence in kind by cutting off its Hydra head, others spring up and only violence wins. We’ve not dealt with the underlying psychodynamic, and the bulk of human history is the tale of such violent cycles. Marx saw these cycles as the material embodiment of Hegel’s dialectics: the privileged wrest control of resources from the proletariat, who in turn organize to get them back. Despite repeating the same mistakes again and again, the story loops round endlessly because, from *Tom and Jerry* to *Batman* to *Inglourious Basterds*, we are continually indoctrinated with what Wink calls the Myth of Redemptive Violence.

The Myth of Redemptive Violence enshrines the belief that “violence saves, that war brings peace, that might makes right.” It persists because it serves the interests of those in power and fuels the hopes of those who are not. Its character, says Wink, is religious, albeit idolatrously so, thus; “If a god is what you turn to when all else fails, violence certainly functions as a god... It demands from its devotees an absolute obedience-unto-death... This Myth of Redemptive Violence is... the dominant religion in our society today.” Our very blindness to the spiritual interiority of power leaves us susceptible to its pervasive influence.¹⁴⁰

To respond to violence in kind is tempting, even instinctual, but it brings with it many drawbacks. In many circumstances it is impractical simply because of the overwhelming might of the oppressor. A military coup can also take decades to organize, dumping ordinary citizens with the enervating psychology of submission for long periods. Most seriously, though, responding in kind deprives the oppressed of yet more of their dignity by demanding of them the same behaviour they so hate in their oppressors. In almost every case the result, should the oppressed succeed, is that the spiral of violence simply tightens as oppressed become oppressor. One domination system replaces another, just as George Orwell’s pigs morph into humans at the end of *Animal Farm*. Orwell was writing about Russian

Communism, but he came up with an archetypal image that describes the French Revolution, the English Revolution, the Chinese Revolution, American imperialism, Rwandan involvement in the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and any number of other historical and contemporary situations. As Wink surmises; “Violent revolution fails because it is not revolutionary enough. It changes the ruler but not the rules”.¹⁴¹

Violence serves what Walter Wink calls the Domination System, which is hierarchical, authoritarian, legalistic and usually patriarchal in nature. He suggests that power is intrinsically good because all power is God given. However, just as the law of entropy in physics says that all energy degrades, so spiritual power in human hands degrades. However, this corruption or “fall” is not a terminal catastrophe. The ultimate purpose of power is to serve God. For this, the Powers must be called back to their higher, God-given vocation (or calling). Thus our slight caution at the start of this chapter, about presuming to push Vladimir Putin too much into a corner. And so Wink’s triptych:

- The Powers are good
- The Powers are fallen
- The Powers must be redeemed.

This redemptive understanding can be applied to people (including ourselves), to institutions and even nations. In the Hebrew texts, the “angels of the nations” - the inner collective spirits of nationhood - wrestle with one another and even do battle. And yet, the story of Jacob wrestling all night with the angel at Peniel makes an interesting point.¹⁴² He gets hurt - struck in the hip and left limping - but is granted blessing. And what is the hip, we might ask, but that by which we stride out into the world? Psychologically, the ego. It challenges the ego to try to see the soul in the “enemy”.

Wink continues. It follows that:

- The Nations are good
- The Nations are fallen
- The Nations must be redeemed.

None of this should be misunderstood as suggesting we should appease evil. The partner of an abusive spouse - to bring it back down to the level of individuals - does not help to advance their potential for redemption by

grinning and bearing the beatings. Our part is not to be confused with the greater work of God, and even Jesus said that there come times when you have to shake the dust from off your feet and leave the household or the town behind you.¹⁴³ You can't force good, but neither give up on the potential for another's redemption. That's all. It's not for us, metaphorically speaking, to throw other people into an inescapable hell. By the same token, it's arguably not for us to kill and take away their opportunity, in this life, to find redemption. We all have a right to self-defence but, if the exercise of that right means killing, we also have a right to choose to renounce our right.

Joanna Macy's language is helpful here. She distinguishes between *power-over* and *power-with*. The Domination System's rules embody power-over – the leader's power over their subjects, the colonizer's power over the natives, the natives' power over immigrants, the power of the rich over the poor, or of men over women, and sometimes, the other way around. Perhaps power-over is part of the natural order, but if that is the case, so is power-with. Life systems evolve flexibility and intelligence, not by closing off from their environment and erecting defensive walls, but by opening to sensory information with sensitive, vulnerable protuberances like eyeballs, lips, tongues and fingertips. Neurons allow themselves to channel currents from their neighbours, and every part of an ecosystem is dependent on every other part. Here, power requires openness and readiness to change. It is not a power one can own, but which all are invited to participate in by life itself.¹⁴⁴

How can we as activists move with the rough and tumble of life, but in ways that hold out the light of the redemptive principle? Furthermore, how can we do that from a place of courage rather than cowardice? For as Gandhi with good reason maintained, it is better to fight than to refrain because we are afraid. Here we reach the heart of Wink's activist methodology; it involves wrestling power itself towards conscientisation. We should proceed, Wink suggested, by:

- Naming the Powers
- Unmasking the Powers
- Engaging the Powers.

In having the courage to say that the cathedral of Christ the Saviour was being used to sanitize a corrupted politics and the security forces, Pussy

Riot were *naming* the Powers that Be; naming Putin, naming the Patriarch, naming the KGB, naming their perceived abuses of power.

In stating that this went beyond the individual person to a system called Putin, the women were *unmasking* the Powers that Be, and by implication (more explicitly in their other writings), revealing how such a system caused oppression. The tool by which unmasking takes place is, as Nadia rightly identified, a transcendent sense of Truth.

In conducting their crazy dance, knowing that this would force a confrontation with the authorities, Pussy Riot *engaged* the Powers that Be. Having themselves put on trial also put the system on trial. They wrote in response to criticism from Patriarch Kirill:¹⁴⁵

A fervent and sincere prayer can never be a mockery, no matter in what form it occurs, therefore it cannot be said that we jeered at, or mocked, the shrine... You were endlessly wrong in saying in your sermon that we do not believe in the power of prayer. Without belief in the power of prayer and of words, we would never have offered our prayers so desperately and fervently, in anticipation of the severe persecution that could be dealt to us and our loved ones.

The lyrics of the punk prayer did not use accepted theological language. Appeals to gay pride and lines like; “Patriarch Gundyayev believes in Putin/Bitch, better believe in God instead”, shocked many Russians and limited the women’s public support.¹⁴⁶ But when the prophet Isaiah stripped off his sackcloth at the Lord’s request and walked naked and barefoot for three years “for a sign and wonder”, he probably didn’t manage to swing the Churchwomen’s Guild onside either. Pussy Riot played the holy fool. Explaining themselves in a letter to supporters of 24th July 2012 they said:¹⁴⁷

Perhaps our behaviour is perceived by many as defiant and obnoxious. This is not the case. We are in desperate circumstances, in which indifference is difficult to maintain... We emphasize that we advocate for non-violence and hold a grudge against no one; our laughter is, in a sense, laughter through the tears, and our sarcasm is a reaction to the lawlessness.

We have used Pussy Riot to illustrate Walter Wink’s schema because their case is high profile and it throws up the unexpected. So often in the work

of nonviolence the unexpected - the serendipitous - appears from nowhere and transforms realities. Tim DeChristopher was a wilderness guide in Utah working with at-risk youth when the Bush regime opened up wilderness areas adjacent to national parks for oil exploration. At first he took part in all the usual forms of activism, standing with placards, leafleting and writing letters. Then one day in 2008, he gate-crashed an auction and, with an empty wallet, successfully bid for 22,000 acres. By the time they'd sorted out the mess, Bush was out of office. The politics changed, there was no re-auction, and the wilderness was saved.

Before deciding to engage the Powers, the position seemed hopeless. DeChristopher's standpoint felt pretty powerless. Later he told his trial judge; "This is what hope looks like. In these times of a morally bankrupt government that has sold out its principles, this is what patriotism looks like. With countless lives on the line, this is what love looks like, and it will only grow."¹⁴⁸

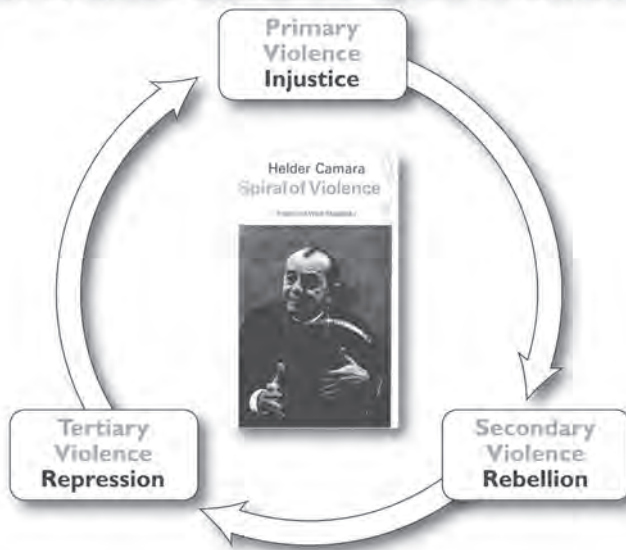
After serving a two-year sentence, he signed up for studies with Harvard Divinity School. His activism had taught him that conscience is the only peaceful power that can engage the Powers and avert atrocity. "That's part of why I'm going to divinity school," he said to the activist magazine *Yes!* in 2014. "I see this question of whether or not we have faith in our own moral authority as a spiritual issue."¹⁴⁹

Breaking the spiral of violence

Some hold that nonviolence is a misnomer because it's predicated on a negative. We don't see it like that. We see it as a direct challenge; a rebuke to violence. Nonviolence does not mean non-confrontation or pacifism in the weak sense of being passive. Rather, nonviolence is pacifism in Gandhi's sense of *ahimsa* - literally "nonstriking" or "without harm" - and *satyagraha* - "truth force", "soul force" or "God force". Thus he made statements like; "The badge of the violent is his weapon, spear, sword or rifle. God is the shield of the nonviolent."

Dom Hélder Câmara was the Brazilian archbishop who asked why when he fed the poor they called him a saint, but when he asked why the poor were hungry, they called him a communist. Living out liberation theology led him to write a powerful little book with a lovely spirit called *Spiral of*

Dom Hélder Câmara's 'Spiral of Violence'



Violence, Nonviolence and Liberation Theology

Alastair McIntosh

Violence.¹⁵⁰ This showed how the Level 1 or primary violence of social *injustice* leads to the Level 2 or secondary violence of *rebellion* by the oppressed. That stimulates the Level 3 or tertiary violence of *repression* by the powerful, which further impoverishes the nation and thereby feeds back into further primary violence. The upside is that the spiral of violence can be broken at any one of these points.

We love the interfaith way in which this Roman Catholic leader cited Gandhi, a Hindu, and drew on the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, whose 1967 book - *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* - had a foreword by the Trappist monk Thomas Merton. Such is interfaith *appreciation* and not just heady dialogue. It means coming to appreciate one another's faiths from the inside, as they see and treasure things, rather than just through the perceptual planes of our own cultural projections. Such is one of many ways in which the spiral of violence is broken, and a virtuous spiral set turning in its place. Then, in the words of Martin Luther King; "The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the Beloved Community, so that when the battle's over, a new relationship comes into being between the oppressed and the oppressor."¹⁵¹

Nonviolence in action

Until the mid-20th century when Gandhi put it squarely on the map, the techniques and, more especially, the spirit of nonviolence were poorly understood. Most people had heard of it only in the limited context of First and Second World War conscientious objectors. Now there are a great many examples of nonviolence being applied around the world. Often, though not always, the outcomes have been positive.¹⁵²

People often say; “Ah yes, but what about Hitler?” One response is that the idea of nonviolent civil defence was virtually undeveloped in Europe at that time. A more full answer is that it was work very much in progress, and there are a number of examples of nonviolence successfully challenging Nazi policies. These include the Norwegian teachers refusing to teach a Nazi curriculum and the story, until recently virtually untold, of the Danish systematic evacuation of Jews to neutral Sweden.¹⁵³ A breathtaking case study is the role of the Orthodox Church in Bulgaria, which prevented the transportation of most of that country’s Jews to concentration camps.¹⁵⁴ The Patriarch himself threatened to lie down on the tracks if they were loaded in to trains, and a memorial to this wonderful act of witness now stands in the Garden of the Bulgarian People in Jaffa, Tel Aviv.

Central to nonviolence is the delegitimization of illegitimate power through choosing suffering in preference to the perpetuation of violence. Even Hitler understood the need for social support to give the regime coherence. He wrote in *Mein Kampf*; “In the long run, government systems are not held together by the pressure of force, but rather by the belief in the quality and the truthfulness with which they represent and promote the interests of the people.”

Power that becomes disconnected from the people’s will is thereby vulnerable to moral challenge. It becomes a political false self, draining energy from the real self and distorting human relationships and perceptions of reality. Just as Deikman, when writing about cults, remarks that; “authoritarian organizations are not usually advocates of psychotherapy,”¹⁵⁵ so authoritarian states fear actions or analysis that will lead to their examination and self-examination. Such is the power of unmasking and this, very often, falls upon the cartoonists, poets, playwrights, journalists, essayists and theologians. Thus censorship. Thus, too, why the

campaign for land reform in Scotland has drawn heavily on exposing the psychopathologies of landed power, including the multiple poverties of wealth such as children being sent off to boarding schools that deprived them of family love.¹⁵⁶

Some theorists view nonviolence instrumentally. Gene Sharp's influential *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* outlines a plethora of techniques justified as "a pragmatic choice", because they work. However, it sidesteps spirituality, giving just five words in the case study of India's independence to Gandhi's "philosophy or frequent religious explanations".¹⁵⁷ This surprising omission leaves unanswered why, very often, it is religious people or organizations that spearhead nonviolent direct action and civil defence. Examples include Quaker mediation in the Biafran war, the leadership of Cardinal Jaime Sin in ousting Marcos in the Philippines, the Buddhist monks in Burma, Muslims and Coptic Christians in the Arab Spring, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and now his daughter Mpho teaching the "cycle of forgiveness" in South Africa, the Peace Women in Northern Ireland, and Presbyterian clergy being arrested *en masse* while protesting at the Faslane nuclear submarine base in Scotland.¹⁵⁸

We do not have space for detailed case studies here, and in any case, these are amply documented elsewhere.¹⁵⁹ However, when nonviolence comes up in conversation, what grips people most are personal situations into which they could imagine themselves being caught up. Here's one.

Back in the early 1980s, Alastair attended a week at Iona Abbey run by the Iona Community's then justice and peace worker, Helen Steven. It was the night of the weekly healing service. Not feeling comfortable with the hocus pocus that can surround "healing", he sat at the back of the ancient building near the exit. Just as the service was starting, two guys came in the door and sat down near him. One was a burly white Glaswegian. The other was a black American with an intellectual's demeanour. Half way through the first hymn the Glaswegian started singing erratically. When silence fell he started hurling obscenities, including some pretty spot-on abuse about hypocrisy within the institutional Church.

"Ye'r all a pile o' fuckin' hypocrites," he snarled, through the dim lighting. The service carried on, as people acted as if they had not noticed. "If Jesus fuckin' Christ could see you the now, he'd be ashamed of you."

The embarrassed friend remonstrated and managed during the second hymn to draw the unruly Scotsman outside. Meanwhile, Alastair had all of a sudden become interested in the fact that this was supposed to be a *healing* service! He followed the men outside into the Hebridean starlight, went up to the heckler, and said; “Look, if you’ve come for the healing, then come on right back in. There’s people in there who’d help you.”

It seemed a reasonable enough suggestion. After all, Jesus never seemed too put out by the Gadarene demoniac’s profanities. Why should the Iona Community - if it was any good - worry about a few f’ings and b’ings rattling around the Abbey?

“And who the *fuck* d’ye think *you* are?” said the man, spitting venom as he measured Alastair up. Then he threw his fists up and laid down a challenge to fight. “I’m going to fix you,” he said, “put you six feet beneath the peat,” and he took a swing, shadow boxing to within a shave of Alastair’s face to try to provoke an instinctual reaction.

“You can hit me if you want to, but I’m not going to hit you back.”

It might sound good in print, but truth be told, the knees had turned to jelly and shook so uncontrollably they knocked against each other. At this point, something very strange happened. Alastair was scared, well aware of being out of his depth, and suddenly it was as if a blissful force field swept down from the stars above. It was as if a great scooping hand cupped him into a space of transcendental calm and with it, the conviction that all was well no matter how the conflict might end.

By this time the church service was ending. Helen Steven slipped straight out to see what was the matter. She took over with a cheerful touch, defused the tension, and Alastair promptly made himself scarce.

The next day, Helen said she’d sat up late into the night making tea and toast as the man played exquisite Bach on the Abbey piano. Before leaving the island the next morning, he’d come back. He said he’d “never known such love” as that night - presumably the kindness she’d provided - and that he’d decided to join the Church.

“And do you know who he was?” Helen concluded. “It was RD Laing, the great but crazy psychotherapist.”

Some years later, his obituary in the *Guardian* reported; “There is disagreement over Laing’s religious beliefs, and a clergyman at his funeral claimed that he joined the Church in his last four years, which rather surprised his relatives.” John Clay’s biography, subtitled *A Divided Self*, holds that during this period he was dragged under by the demons of his alcoholism and, as a trained ex-army boxer, would sometimes walk into public venues and pick fights; not for nothing had Alastair’s knees knocked.

Not all brushes with nonviolence end so happily. While Alastair can tell of other positive encounters, there’s also one from his less artful days from which he emerged bloodied. A valuable talisman given to him by a Belfast shipyard worker is; “Never show fear; do show respect.” People, of course, get hurt and die in nonviolent confrontations, but not as much as in violent ones and with less of the smouldering aftermath from which violence can rekindle.

The main argument in activist circles against nonviolence is advanced by Derrick Jensen and Ward Churchill, who claim that nonviolence undermines the resolve and tactics that are necessary to dislodge violent political and corporate systems. Thus the title of Churchill’s book: *Pacifism as Pathology*. We would just ask whether, by feeding the spiral of violence, they begin to take on the likeness of that to which they are opposed?

Peace and Judeo-Christianity

The point of Ronnie Laing’s protest in Iona Abbey at a time when he was wrestling to find a spiritual breakthrough in his own life, was that mainstream religion for him had fallen short; the trellis lacked the strength to carry the vine. Nowhere is this more apparent in world religions - even in supposedly peaceful Buddhism - than in the contrast between holy war and nonviolent spirituality.

As we have seen, political power very often needs the charismatic halo of religious sanction to feel legitimized, but in so doing, it lowers the spiritual tone. Terror in the name of jihad or crusade is a case in point. A key role of prophetic voices is therefore to expose collusion between systems of domination and religious authorities.

To borrow from Walter Wink, we might say that the religions are good, the religions are fallen, therefore the religions must be redeemed. How? Partly by returning to source documents and partly by discerning the ongoing unfolding of the living Dharma or Spirit. We will address spiritual discernment in Chapter Nine, but for now let us see how, in both Judeo-Christianity and Islam (to take examples that are often in conflict), a nonviolent spirituality is at the heart for those with ears to hear and eyes to see.

There are many hundreds of passages in the Hebrew scriptures - the Old Testament - in which violence is mandated by God or carried out in the holy name. At face value, the Bible is almost beyond redemption, until one looks at the trajectory. It is an historical set of books that reflects an evolution, if not in God, then certainly in the human understanding of God. The trajectory moves from the tribal war God of Joshua carrying out genocide to take back the Holy Land from the Canaanites - people like the Philistines who would be today's Palestinians - to a God who, more and more, stands in solidarity with the victims of violence or misfortune, especially the alien, the widow, the orphan and the poor.

The rules of war laid down by Moses in Deuteronomy 20-21 are draconian. It's OK to take the vanquished as slaves, to take conquered women as "booty", and genocide has its place. That said, many commentators interpret Moses' "an eye for an eye..." as the beginnings of placing limits on retribution.¹⁶⁰ This trajectory develops until the later Jewish prophets anticipate a world beyond war. Both Isaiah and Micah therefore prophesy that:

In days to come... they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.¹⁶¹

Jesus followed in these footsteps with a mission that repudiated both Roman imperial power and the Jewish temple authorities' collusion.¹⁶² Jesus never taught "just war" theory; he taught nonviolence. This included nonviolent direct action such as turning over the tables of the money-changers who propped up the temple's exploitative economic system - fashioning a whip for use not against people (as is often misinterpreted), but to drive out "both the sheep and the cattle" - thereby rescuing them from sacrifice and rebutting the lucrative sacrificial system.¹⁶³ Christian

pacifists who break into military bases and hammer nuclear submarines and jet fighters tread this “ploughshares” path. These do not run away like terrorists would, but await arrest to take up further stands of witness in their trials.¹⁶⁴

Jesus told his followers to love their enemies, to pray for (or do good towards) those who mistreat them, and to turn the other cheek if struck. He said; “...until now the kingdom of Heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.” In other words, a new and nonviolent world order is to take ascendancy henceforth. When the brothers James and John - *Boanerges*, or the Sons of Thunder, as they were nicknamed - asked Jesus to draw down “fire from Heaven” to burn up their enemies, he refused. Instead of sending in squadrons of angelic drones by prayer remote control, he rebuked them, saying that they didn’t know themselves, and that he had not come to destroy people’s lives but to save them.¹⁶⁵

His dalliance with the sword was explicitly symbolic, serving only to fulfil prophecy, and he therefore told Peter; “Put your sword away. For all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword... No more of this!” He also healed the severed ear of Malchus, the high priest’s official, thereby symbolically restoring the enemy’s capacity to listen - the prerequisite for peace.¹⁶⁶ At his trial he told Pilate; “My kingdom does not belong to this world; if my kingdom belonged to this world, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over...” This is the context of his prayer, “Thy Kingdom come.” It was God’s realm of love and justice and not what people were used to: Caesar’s violent empire. Even the gendered feudal language of monarchy he questioned. When Pilate asked; “Are you a king, then?” Jesus replied; “King is your word.”¹⁶⁷

Later Christian theology, which is not present in the gospel stories, developed the idea that the cross was God’s punishment for human sin.¹⁶⁸ This projects human vengeance on to the divine heart. It obscures the meaning of the cross as God’s suffering with a learning, growing world; the cross as the supreme symbol of nonviolence, a dynamic symbol of transformation. Here is love that refuses to join violence, but absorbs it. Here is love belonging to a God of activism, in spite of all the world. Here is love to which resurrection from death is not an adjunct, coming after the event, but intrinsic: because it is outside of space and time, its greater part has never in the first place been “born”. Here, indeed, is the fire of love that

melts the violent spiral and starts to end its never-ending knock-on self-perpetuation. As the great Hindu-Christian theologian Raimon Panikkar said; “Peace is participation in the harmony of the rhythm of Being. Only forgiveness breaks the law of karma.”¹⁶⁹

Peace and Islam

Islam is closely related to Judaism and Christianity because all three trace their genealogies through the patriarch Abraham, thus the term, “Abrahamic faiths”. The stories and characters in their respective scriptures have important differences but also considerable overlap, thus Jesus and Mary are also revered in Islam, but in the sense of prophetic rather than divine or quasi-divine figures.

The central text in the Qur’an that relates to war is Surah 2:190:¹⁷⁰

Fight in the cause of God
Those who fight you,
But do not transgress the limits;
For God loveth not transgressors.

This is pure “just war” theory, however the *Hadiths* go further. These are authoritative oral traditions of the Prophet (pbuh). They include injunctions not to kill women and children, to treat POWs humanely, not to kill anyone by burning, and not to mutilate the dead. As Philip Stewart points out:¹⁷¹

If the Islamic rules were followed today, much of modern warfare would be impossible, and terrorism would be unthinkable. There would be no attacks on civilians, no retaliation against innocent parties, no taking hostage of non-combatants, no incendiary devices.

The problem with “Islamic” terrorism is therefore the same as the problem with “Christian” terrorism. It is a problem of militant (in the sense of military) religion. They let down the richness of their own fundamentals.¹⁷² Most striking and least widely known is the Qur’an’s explicit endorsement of *nonviolence* in Surah 5:31 (or 5:28 in some editions). In telling its version of the story where Abel is murdered by his brother,

Cain, the former says to the latter:

If thou dost stretch thy hand
 Against me, to slay me,
 It is not for me to stretch
 My hand against thee
 To slay thee: for I do fear
 God, the Cherisher of the Worlds.

To this and its surrounding verses, the leading scholar Abdullah Yusuf Ali publishing in Jeddah, gives the commentary; “Abel’s speech is full of meaning. To the threat of death held out by the other, he returns a calm reply, aimed at reforming the other.”¹⁷³ The Surah goes on to say (verse 35, or 32 in some editions) that if anyone kills unjustly, it is as if they had slayed a whole people. Even the root of the very name *Islam* links to *salam*, meaning peace, as in the Islamic greeting, *Assalamu alaikum*.

Pashtun resistance to the British Raj

The theory is all very well, but what about the practice? We in Britain and some other European countries are not taught our colonial history objectively. We therefore do not hear stories that might change our perceptions about those we conquered and colonised. Here is one such story about Islamic spiritual activism.

Throughout most of the 19th century and into the 20th, the Pashtun (or Pathan) peoples - the backbone of today’s Taliban - were caught in the “Great Game” buffer zone of the British and Russian empires. In 1893, Britain’s drawing up of the Durand Line, to delineate what is now modern Pakistan’s north-west frontier with Afghanistan, sliced through Pashtun territories. British efforts to suppress unwelcome political ideas that arose in resistance to such intrusion included collective punishments against whole communities and a gross neglect of social measures, including education.¹⁷⁴

Ghaffar “Badshah” Khan (1890-1988) was a devout Muslim landowner who used his influence to open schools (*madrassas*) that would raise popular political consciousness. When his father came under pressure from the British Chief Commissioner to rein in his son, the young Khan replied that; “educating the people and serving the nation is as sacred a

duty as prayer.” So began a series of prison sentences for the youth, some lasting years, during which time he discoursed with prisoners of other faiths and became inspired by the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. He concluded; “It is my inmost conviction that Islam is *amal, yakeen, muhabat* [service, faith and love] and without these the name *Muslim* is a sounding brass and tinkling cymbal.”¹⁷⁵

Badshah Khan’s subsequent work for Indian independence as “the Muslim Gandhi” led him to establish the *Khudai Khidmatgar* - the Servants of God. These were a pacifist Mujahedeen who chanted slogans such as *Allah-O-Akbar* (God is Great) and were derogatorily called “red shirts” by the British on account of their uniform. The membership oath included, “I shall always live up to the principle of nonviolence,” and, “All my services shall be dedicated to God; they shall not be for attaining rank or for show.”¹⁷⁶ Khan told them:¹⁷⁷

I am going to give you such a weapon that the police and the army will not be able to stand against it. It is the weapon of the Prophet, but you are not aware of it. That weapon is patience and righteousness. No power on earth can stand against it.

In close co-ordination with Gandhi, the *Khudai Khidmatgar* invoked a spiritual *jihad* of civil resistance including refusal to pay taxes, noncooperation with the Raj, boycotts and pickets, general strikes and the mass commemoration of iconic events. By 1938, Pashtun membership exceeded 100,000. Nonviolence had held fast even in the face of imprisonment, torture, and at the Kissa Khani Bazaar massacre in 1930. Here, the British killed more than 200 civilians who were protesting the arrest of leaders, including Khan, who had just been sentenced to three years for fomenting civil disobedience. Some of the *Khudai Khidmatgar* sustained as many as 21 bullets in the chest as they stepped forward, peacefully, to interpose their bodies between the troops and the crowd. Gandhi subsequently told Khan; “The Pathans are more brave and courageous than the Hindus. That is the reason why the Pathans were able to remain nonviolent.”¹⁷⁸

Notwithstanding the later tragedy of ethnic cleansing that resulted in the partition of India, Khan’s pacifism never faltered. In 1983 he told his biographer; “The present-day world can only survive the mass production of nuclear weapons through nonviolence. The world needs Gandhi’s message of love and peace more today than it ever did before.”¹⁷⁹

Redeeming leadership

When we see nonviolence managing to bridge such cultural gulfs as that between Islam and Hinduism, and with such revolutionary effect against a domination system as powerful as the Raj, we start to glimpse a power the world has hardly yet begun to comprehend. In explaining the immensity of *satyagraha* - “truth force” - Gandhi showed that spirituality is not an optional add on. It is foundational to reality itself, thus:¹⁸⁰

The world rests upon the bedrock of *Satya* or Truth. *Asatya* meaning untruth, also means non-existence: and *Satya* or Truth also means that which is. If untruth does not so much as exist, its victory is out of the question. And Truth, being that which is, can never be destroyed. This is the doctrine of *Satyagraha* in a nutshell.

There, too, we see the immensity of spiritual activism. The relatively small struggles in our lives are with the symptoms of oppression. The greater struggle is our individual and collective birthing of and in to reality itself. That is the redemptive light at the end of the tunnel.

The main practical difficulty with nonviolent direct action is the unavoidable spiritual depth it demands. To work in ways that might mean giving up one's life rather than taking life - and even harder, to try to live the whole of one's life in ways consistent with that principle - makes little sense to those for whom love is only a set of electrochemical processes in the brain. But if love is the sign of the myriad wider connections that link us all in the web of life; if individual consciousness is just the fingertip of the divine consciousness in which we all partake, then renouncing the option of killing one another starts to add up on a scale that raises our sights on what it means to be human to a level that is nothing less than cosmic.

Those who might grant the benefit of any doubt that consciousness and love extend beyond what we know of this life; those of us who feel even a hint that the greater part of our selves, far from being vulnerable to death, have never been fully born in the first place - we, surely, do not need to grasp so tightly to physical life as to deny the need of it to others. We, surely, might be the first to reject violence and try to live in a way consistent with the greater dream, in which all are members one of another.

Nonviolent direct action lives on its wits, using every ounce of creativity

to turn the domination system against itself to redeem itself. When Jesus advised carrying a Roman soldier's burden "the extra mile", he was probably playing on the fact that soldiers could be harshly disciplined for requiring Jewish subjects to carry their loads beyond the distance stated in the rules. By insisting on going further, soldiers would be placed in a quandary.

Matt experienced playing with such humour when he joined the political comedian Mark Thomas on a demonstration march around the perimeter of the American military base at Menwith Hill. The police sat menacingly in their vans filming the protesters as they arrived. Then Mark's lawyer advised everyone that they had a right to copies of all footage of themselves. Reasoning that the police were going to use the footage to identify them anyway, the group decided to volunteer their personal details to fill in forms demanding their films. They hoped that the administrative headache would put the police off filming. It turned out to be even easier than that. They didn't have copies of the form and therefore had to discontinue filming.

Even if we adopt a nonviolent standpoint, we will be left with many quandaries. These are par for the course - material for the praxis of action, reflection and more action; and for continuous conscientisation of both others and ourselves. Is it right or wrong to throw a tear gas canister *back* into a line of police? Is it okay to break a transnational corporation's window? Is damaging property nonviolent or does it harden the heart? Does lecturing a police officer about their role in the domination system achieve anything? None of these questions is resolved by the principle of nonviolence in the abstract. But that's the point. Attempting to live with love or "in the Light" is not a theoretical proposition. It is Truth expressed experimentally, often imperfectly, in a series of sacraments of the present moment. Such is *satyagraha*.

In our view, the idealist vision of a world without leaders and the hope for "leaderless" movements panders too much to those who think they can chew before they've cut their teeth. It can be childish, even narcissistic. Equally, though, the top-down forms of leadership to which we are often exposed are no longer acceptable. Indeed, we have wrestled in this text even with having to use the word "leader" because of some of its connotations, but alternatives such as "coordinator" or "facilitator" lack the sense

of drive and direction that is often necessary in activism, and terms like “eldership” or even “stewardship” need too much explaining to use as shorthand in the modern world. Such is the reality of working with fallen powers, but we’re left with the question; if “leadership” is the best available term to describe the flow of charisma through individuals and groups and out into the wider world, what would its “redeemed” form look like?

We suggest that it would look like people who are not attached to leading for its own sake, but who can step in and out of roles according to their skills and calling to the benefit of the community. It would look like people who are prepared to give their lives and sometimes risk their reputations in order that others might learn to participate and live fully, for as the African proverb has it; “If you want to walk fast, walk alone; if you want to walk far, walk with others.” It would look like people who will speak out uninvited to save the group from itself - practising tough love that might risk their own place in the group - yet doing so with the grace and the knowledge that discernment does not play by hard and fast rules. It would look like people who help one another to discern that which they already know within their hearts, and who can laugh at themselves with that twinkle-in-the-eye rascal quality of kindness and connection. It would look like people who can stand at a sink with the washing up and not just on a podium. Or who might ask not to stand at the sink or on the podium because they need to cut themselves some slack. It would look creative, feel natural and be wholesome.

We are minded of Native American groups where the young braves will argue out the issues and the elders mostly sit in silence, but now and again, throw in something that gathers folks back around the vision, or maybe reminds them of the boundaries. You know those moments, because everybody perks up alert and listens. We are also minded of the leader who will take the tiller, issue urgent orders, and steer the ship out of trouble. All these can have their place. What matters is the intention and its legitimization; power with rather than power over. Such is how the Powers can be redeemed; not by getting rid of power but by resting ego down into the deeper self, the jewel into the lotus, violence to nonviolence.

CASE STUDY

Muhammad (pbuh): Spiritual Revolution

Muhammad (peace be upon him) was the founder (or restorer) of Islam. At a time when media representations of Islam are ubiquitous, it is remarkable how little attention is afforded to the historical figure of the Prophet himself. A focus on extremism and corrupt or belligerent governments has distracted attention from the inspirational spark of spiritual fire that first ignited the new religion.

The violent society Muhammad was born into was dominated by the proud Quraysh tribe, who controlled religion and trade to their own advantage. By the end of his life, Muhammad had founded the city of Medina on radically egalitarian principles, and staged a classic nonviolent direct action to neutralize the Quraysh in Mecca.

After a series of transforming spiritual experiences, Muhammad started attracting followers, teaching that there was only one God in whose eyes all people are equal. Tribalism, with its inherited hierarchies, could no longer be the foundation for society. This was symbolized when he left his own tribe to take up residence with another - a deeply provocative and totally original act. It led him into direct conflict with the Quraysh, who planned to kill him. He escaped Mecca with his followers, but not before ensuring that all had paid their debts.

In Medina he guaranteed freedom of religion for Pagans, Jews, Christians and Muslims. He raised the status of women,¹⁸¹ freed slaves and encouraged public debate. He established the rule of law based on principle rather than privilege. He appointed Bilal, an African slave freed after brutal treatment in Mecca, as the first *mu'ezzin* and founded the first mosque as a place for community renewal and education, open to all.



**Muhammad crafted in
Arabic Script**

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His success threatened the Quraysh in Mecca even more, resulting in a series of military exchanges. Muhammad was no pacifist, and the consequences of the violent episodes he sanctioned echo down the ages. However, there is no doubt that in his context he raised the ethical bar where conflict was concerned by setting ambitiously strict rules. These included a requirement to accept any terms the enemy offered to bring a halt to violence, however disadvantageous. Throughout the decade when his community faced the constant threat of annihilation, he never lost his focus on reconciliation.

In 628 CE, a dream inspired him to exploit the Meccan religious traditions and bring hundreds of his followers, unarmed and defenceless, into Mecca on a pilgrimage. This placed the Quraysh in a quandary. If they let him in, they would be humiliated. If they didn't, they undermined their own cultural authority. They could not decide, and Muhammad staged a sit-in just outside the city. The Quraysh imposed apparently crushing conditions for a truce, which Muhammad accepted gracefully, risking his own allies' trust. These very conditions proved to be the undoing of the Quraysh who could not live up to the bargain themselves. Within two years Muhammad's army was able to enter Mecca unopposed. This proved his unassailability and he promptly returned to Medina, without humiliating any of the Meccan authorities further, showering some of his fiercest enemies with gifts.

In ten years he had irrevocably transformed the culture of Arabia. He had established peaceful relations between the groups who lived there, convincing most that his new Islamic ways were better, but insisting that those who continued to practise their traditional religions should be respected.¹⁸² The Holy Qur'an that was communicated through Muhammad is difficult for non-Muslims to follow without a good commentary, for example, that of Abdullah Yusuf Ali. As we have seen, the Qur'an, like the Hebrew Bible, conveys an assortment of positions on violence and nonviolence. Although little known in the West, some of the world's most inspiring examples of nonviolent witness have come from oppressed but devout Muslims. These range from Badshah Khan's self-abnegating Servants of God to stories, both reported and unreported, from the Arab Spring.

"With its clarion call that spirituality is central to activism, this is truly a book for our age, challenging the preconceptions of most activists, let alone those who still see spirituality solely as 'an inner journey'."

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Katrina Shields, author of the Australian empowerment guide *In the Tiger's Mouth*

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