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Reflections on COP26: What Does Theology Have to Offer the Conversation around the Climate Crisis?

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COP26 as a ritual space

Alastair McIntosh

To have COP26 coming to Glasgow was astonishing for those of us who live here. For me personally, the proximity was additionally provocative because the summit was hosted just a mile away from where I live and wrote my latest book, *Riders on the Storm: The Climate Crisis and the Survival of Being*.¹ In advance of the conference, I saw waste ground being manicured in our area. Letterboxes were washed. And as I began to draft this reflection, two massive Chinook military helicopters flew low right past my window. The last time I saw those was in 2005, during rehearsals for the G8 summit hosted in Scotland. You could say that they left a sense that ‘something’s in the air’.

But what was that something, and where might it land us?

A “demanding common task”

I can only see from my window on reality, and I am involved with several local groups within about a mile of where COP26 took place. The Centre for Human Ecology put on events that ranged from the science of climate change, to the theology, to celebration of the arts that give resilience. At the Quaker Meeting house, my wife and I offered training courses in “Meetings for Clearness” for climate activists, this being a Quaker discernment process to help find deeper calling and meaning in life.² Community Land Scotland mounted events that explored local people’s indigenous responses to land connection and protection in the face of climate change. And the GalGael Trust, just round the corner from the COP campus, served as a hub for indigenous peoples from around the world, melding their indigenous traditions with those served up by Scottish pipers, bards, singers and fire-makers.³

There was a Church of Scotland minister here in Govan in the 1930s, George MacLeod. His response to the Great

Depression was to spearhead the rebuilding of Iona Abbey and start the Iona Community. His vision was to open out a future for the Christian faith that was grounded in the life experience of poor and marginalised people. One of his best-known sayings is that “only a demanding common cause builds community.”⁴

As the first Green Party member of the House of Lords, he would most certainly have seen the relevance of this saying to climate change. Now, more than ever, our “demanding common task” is to reconnect with one another and to give the Earth space and time to heal. But that requires human depth – and so our response to climate change must be not just about politics, economics, and technology, but about our human being-ness. Our spirituality.

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After all, COP26 revolved around conventional political, economic, and technological responses to climate change, but it also demonstrated the inadequacy of these on their own. It leaves us in a position where the nations of the world have committed merely to “phase down” burning coal, and for the first time to naming “fossil fuels” as the global warming culprit. But really! Is that all? We must press deeper.

A spiritual calling

More than anything, we must consider what drives consumerism, understood as consumption in excess of what is needed for a dignified sufficiency of life. That depth of insight – and potential action – becomes a psychological and then a spiritual calling.

For many, to posit a spiritual ground of being is unreal. But what if the spiritual is valid? What if to see the world spiritually is the opening of the way that otherwise appears blocked? If a metaphysical reality – a reality beyond or behind ordinary reality – exists, we would be remiss to overlook the revelations it might hold in the face of such a great challenge. And if there is that ‘meta’ behind the ‘physical’, how might we begin to see it?



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Spirituality concerns the inner life – the roots of life, love and consciousness, which are interconnected. These roots make us “members of one another” at the deepest level, as branches on the vine of life.⁵

Many spiritual traditions concur that *truth* is central to this process. “The truth will set you free” says the Gospel.⁶ Gandhi spoke of *satyagraha* as “truth force”, and that, as the power to change the world non-violently. *Satya* in Sanskrit means

both truth and reality. Therefore, explained Gandhi, if we are not standing on “the bedrock of *satya*” we will be in *asatya* – without truth – and therefore unreality.⁷ The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* (an Upanishad dating back to the earliest parts of the first millennium BCE) speaks about the *dharma* – the laying out and opening of the way that leads to life – and states that *dharma* and *satya* are the same.⁸ And let it not escape our notice that when Hindu-Buddhist scholars try to translate *dharma* into English, the word they often choose is “righteousness”.

To me, the implications of this are very profound. We will all see truth from different angles, but constantly seeking it (and perhaps testing it with such processes as Quaker Meetings for Clearness or other discernment methodologies such as the Jesuits teach) can be a hugely powerful process. Perhaps the most striking landmark of COP26 is that nobody serious is now questioning climate change and that it is primarily human caused. That is the work of truth. And the power of truth, as Jesus saw, is that it walks hand in hand with the way and the life. Or as Gandhi saw, it is a “force” by which the world can change non-violently.

This points to an opening of the way for people and organisations of faith. It invites us to explore and teach about what is true and where we are in denial; about consumerism, and the idolatry of what it means to try and fill our inner emptiness in ways the market sells to us. It invites us to take a new look – with a new heart – at such practices as prayer, meditation, retreats and pilgrimages, and to relate these things to the many factors that drive climate change. It invites us to consider what is demanded, individually and collectively, from us.

COP26 as ritual space

This sounds like a tall order, and it is. But I’ve noticed that when large events are well held, within a simple framework, people *can* experience a widening of their worldview. Such events create a cyclical rhythm of departure, initiation and return, if I might borrow from the mythologist Joseph Campbell’s schema. In *departure*, we set out (perhaps unwittingly) on a journey of discovery. Through *initiation*, we hit the rapids of life, having to face near-crushing challenges – and, whether we succeed or fail, deepening in the heart. Finally, we *return* to where we started, but this time with new

qualities that help us free up the blocked flows of *life* into our community.

This process is more than just a “contact high” or social buzz. It comes from opening to the ground of being. I have seen it happening at festivals, at outings into nature for several days, at funerals and seasonal celebrations, and even at large conferences when there’s just that “something in the air” again.

I was not alone in feeling it happen at the COP: this was what the interaction on the fringes amongst indigenous peoples contributed, and many activists who came to Glasgow experienced this and commented on it.⁹

So too, more than a thousand civil society events took place around Glasgow during the COP that were logged at “Climate Fringe”, the events hub of the civil society coalition, Stop Climate Chaos Scotland. Such an aggregation helped to build a sense of ritual space, acting on consciousness with emergent properties that are greater than the individual component parts.

Some sense of this can be gleaned from countless visitor testimonies to the kindness they experienced in Glasgow, to new hope realised, and to changed perceptions of their fellow humankind. The plethora of fringe cultural and learning events saw many testifying to the power of story, love, regeneration and renewed energy. As Kat Jones of Climate Fringe concluded in her blogged appraisal: “I heard more than one person say that Glasgow will never be the same after this moment of collective effort. Glasgow Flourished.”¹⁰

And Coimbra Sirica, a reporter-activist who led a group of indigenous African and Amazonian journalists to examine Scottish land reform in relation to COP 26, reflected: “The story of the Clearances, heard when in Scotland last month, gave me

insight into the global history of the fencing off of commons that Indigenous and local communities still experience. Loved being witness to exchanges between Scottish woodland crofters and Indigenous leaders.”¹¹

Such openings of inner space, in ways that are anchored to the outer realities of life, are what ritual space can achieve at its best. Ritual unblocks avenues to higher consciousness, to deeper ways of seeing, being, and therefore, to more focussed and hopefully more effective ways of doing.

Most of those that I saw at events in Glasgow were in their 20s and 30s. I delighted to imagine how the experience might shape their still-emergent careers. For example, Sharon Inone was a member of the Solomon Islands delegation. Given my former links with Melanesian countries, she stayed at our home in Govan for the fortnight. She went home renewed in her determination to work for women’s equality. The COP, for all its other failings, had given her the chance to meet with people who endorsed the importance of her sense of calling within the wider picture that climate change sits. Who knows where that might lead in years ahead.

To deeper water in the pool of activism

Where might all this leave our future activism?

We should be wary of activist alarmism that exaggerates future scenarios in ways that go far beyond the forecasts of the consensus expert science. Claims like Jem Bendell of Deep Adaptation anticipating the “inevitable” social collapse of most countries because of climate change by 2028.¹² Of Roger Hallam of Extinction Rebellion (XR) and now, Insulate Britain, anticipating six to seven billion dead this century.¹³ Or Professor Guy MacPherson, a retired American ecologist’s insistence that

human beings will become extinct by 2026.¹⁴ These claims have been roundly discredited.¹⁵

Alarmism undermines activist integrity and contracts the possibilities of the future. Partly because of this, I think the mass obstructive protest that peaked between 2018 and 2019 is unlikely to repeat itself in the near future. But the remainder of the explanation lies in a wider questioning of what constitutes effective activism in the emerging world. As Micah White, the African American co-founder of Occupy Wall Street already observed in 2016:

Activism is at a crossroads. We can stick to the old paradigm, keep protesting in the same ways and hope for the best. Or we can acknowledge the crisis [and] embark on... a spiritual insurrection... a shift away from materialist theories of social change towards a spiritual understanding of revolution.¹⁶

White is less clear on what that “spiritual insurrection” might look like. But let me share how I’ve observed it. Many of us come into activism at the shouty, splashy, shallow end of the pool. Some of us even got thrown in! But, as our commitment and experience grows, and as the social movements around perhaps mature, we get the chance to deepen. To wade out further. To learn to swim. To dive, and even to discover how to breathe underwater.

As an Alice Walker poem puts it, our potential is “to gather blossoms under fire”.¹⁷ Our response to climate change needs this deeper grounding if we are to be in it for the long haul and neither burn out nor sell out.

A vision for the future

What, then, might yet be possible for the world? What might be a vision for the future post-COP26? Let me show why

‘human being-ness’ matters, starting with the prosaic and simplified observation that:

Greenhouse gas emissions = population x consumption

If either side of that equation falls, emissions come down. Some focus on population – and that, too often, with a focus on population in certain countries. However, not least given imbalances in global emissions between different countries, falling population rates won’t achieve anything meaningful unless consumption (or the carbon intensity of the production embodied in it) also falls.

Partly, our consumption can be reduced through new technology. Industry talks of “dematerialisation”, meaning making more from less; the shift from vinyl to CD to online music is an example. Decarbonising energy is the biggest challenge, and even here, it is hard to do the right thing. Germany chose to get rid of nuclear, but now its carbon footprint is nearly double that of neighbouring France, and the carbon intensity of its coal-generated electricity is nine times that of nuclear France.

Ultimately, however, neither falling populations nor a falling carbon intensity of material production will do anything unless consumerism (especially in the Global North) is curbed. What drives such excess? In *Riders on the Storm*, I have focussed on Four Cs. *Clearance*, of people from communities of place, leading to a loss of connection with both nature and with one another. A resultant *collapse*, of right relationships and inner wholeness. *Consumption* tending to consumerism, to fill the

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emptiness. And the antidote? *Community*, which is why this had such powerful traction with COP26's indigenous visitors to Scotland.

Historically and deep within the psyche, the world is ripped by rape and violence. Hope for the future rests in population moving into harmony with carrying capacity, in

dematerialising and decarbonising consumption. But there is no hope unless we tackle inner emptiness. At the deepest level, our problems are psychological – and those, opening to the spiritual. It is *being* that must survive, and thrive, in a renewal of that basic call to consciousness.



Climate change forces us to face up to our neglect of human being-ness.

For all their weaknesses, the politics, economics and technological options of COP26 are deeply important. But they must be underwritten by an emergent global spirituality. To me, this is the calling of our times to faith groups.

Climate change forces us to face up to our neglect of human being-ness. That is its *apotheosis*, its revelation. Like Jeremiah as the Babylonians beat down the city gates, let us not allow that revelation go to waste. And what did Jeremiah do? He went out and bought a field. He laid the ground once more, one day, for the desolate lands to be restored (Jeremiah 32). In the words of the prophets as written on subway walls, in tenement halls: “And a new day will dawn for those who stand long/ And the forests will echo with laughter/ Remember laughter?”¹⁸

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- 1 Alastair McIntosh, *Riders on the Storm: The Climate Crisis and the Survival of Being* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2020).
 - 2 Peter Woodrow, “Clearness for Individual Decision Making”, section II of Tova Green, Peter Woodrow, and Fran Peavey, *Insight and Action: How to Discover and Support a Life of Integrity and Commitment to Change* (Gabriola Island: New Society, 1994), pp. 53-88, 123-148. Recordings of COP 26 training workshops available at: <https://bit.ly/COP26-Clearness-English1>; <https://bit.ly/COP26-Clearness-Francais2>; and <https://bit.ly/COP26-Clearness-English3>.
 - 3 In the indigenous Gaelic language of Scotland and Ireland, gal means the stranger and the gael are the heartland people. The GalGael ethos is that there is a little of each – stranger and local – in most of us these days. The GalGael Trust was featured as a case study in Theos’ recent research on faith and social cohesion, commissioned by the Faith and Belief Forum and the British Academy. See Madeleine Pennington, *Cohesive Societies: Faith and Belief* (London: British Academy, 2020), pp. 59-60. Available at: <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/events/2020/07/17/cohesive-societies-faith-and-belief>.
 - 4 Kathy Galloway, *Living by the Rule: the Rule of the Iona Community* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2010), p. 123.
 - 5 Romans 12:5; John 15.
 - 6 John 8.32.
 - 7 Gandhi cited in Michael Nagler, *The Nonviolence Handbook* (Oakland: Berrett-Kochler, 2014), p. 10.
 - 8 Valerie Roebuck (trans.), *The Upanishads*, Penguin Classics, London, 2000, p. 22 (1.4.14).
 - 9 Calum Macleod, “COP26 and the Highlands: Land Rights at the heart of the fight for climate justice”, *West Highland Free Press*, 15 November 2021. <https://www.whfp.com/2021/11/15/cop-26-and-the-highlands-land-rights-at-the-heart-of-the-fight-for-climate-justice/>
 - 10 Kat Jones, “Let Glasgow Flourish: How the real COP was in the streets, the homes and the communities of Glasgow”, *Climate Fringe Blog*, 21 November 2021. <https://climatefringe.org/let-glasgow-flourish/>
 - 11 Coimbra Sirica, Twitter, 1 Dec 2021. https://twitter.com/Coimbra_/status/1466034300458086403
 - 12 Jem Bendell, “Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy – IFLAS Occasional Paper 2”, *University of Cumbria*, 27 July 2018 (revised 27 July 2020). PDF available at: <http://lifeworth.com/deepadaptation.pdf>.
 - 13 Roger Hallam in “Roger Hallam, Co Founder – Extinction Rebellion: HARDTalk programme”, BBC, August 2019. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0007p33>

- 14 Guy McPherson, "Extinction Foretold, Extinction Ignored", updated 11 July 2020. https://guymcpherson.com/extinction_foretold_extinction_ignored/
- 15 See for example, Thomas Nicholas, Galen Hall, and Colleen Schmidt, "The faulty science, doomism, and flawed conclusions of Deep Adaptation", *openDemocracy*, 14th July 2020. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/faulty-science-doomism-and-flawed-conclusions-deep-adaptation/>
- 16 Micah White, *The End of Protest: A New Playbook for Revolution* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2016), pp. 241-243.
- 17 Alice Walker, "While Love is Unfashionable", *Revolutionary Petunias* (London: The Women's Press, 1988), p. 68.
- 18 Led Zeppelin, "Stairway to Heaven" (London: Island, 8 November 1971).

a lay Canon of St Paul's Cathedral, where she co-founded the St Paul's Institute. Claire holds a doctorate in ecological consciousness and Julian of Norwich from King's College London, and is Visiting Fellow at Jesus College, Cambridge. She has authored numerous books, including *Sharing God's Planet* (CHP, 2005); *How many lightbulbs does it take to change a Christian?* (CHP, 2007), and *Don't stop at the lights: leading your church through a changing climate* (CHP, 2008).

Rachel Lampard has worked for many years to enable churches to engage with issues of social justice, particularly through the Methodist Church and the ecumenical Joint Public Issues Team, and served as Vice-President of the Methodist Conference in Britain between 2016 and 2017. She spent over a decade working for the Gambling Commission, seeking to regulate the industry to prevent gambling harm, and now chairs a youth work charity and an east London secondary school.

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Alastair McIntosh is a writer and climate activist, and the author of various books including *Soil and Soul: People Versus Corporate Power* (Aurum Press, 2001), *Poacher's Pilgrimage: An Island Journey* (Birlinn, 2016), and most recently, *Riders on the Storm: the Climate Crisis and the Survival of Being* (Birlinn, 2016). He was previously Director of the Centre for Human Ecology, and is Honorary Professor in the College of Social Sciences at the University of Glasgow.