

Irish Presbyterians and the 'Troubles'

Gladys Ganiel and Jamie Yohanis, *Considering Grace. Presbyterians and the Troubles*, Merrion Press, Newbridge, 2019, pp 264, ISBN 9781785372896. £15.99 pbk.

The origins of this book lie in a research project of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland which itself was derived from a statement issued by the General Assembly after its meeting in 2016. That might sound like an unpromising starting point for a book but *Considering Grace* is well worth engaging with, particularly for those who want to understand and participate in peacemaking in Ireland and for those, both inside and outside the denomination, who want to understand more about the theological make-up of Presbyterians particularly in relation to the legacy of the Troubles. One of the 'big three' denominations in Ireland, Presbyterianism has declined from 29% of the population of Northern Ireland in 1961 to just 19% in 2011, according to the census. That is still a significant section of the populace but throughout this period Presbyterianism has suffered in terms of the articulation and public expression of its message through the annual change of moderator. Churches with bishops have spokespeople who stay in position for long periods, are able to acquire more effective media skills and can express – and are expected to express - with authority, what their church thinks. Strangely this lack of what one person calls 'a settled voice' (p. 199) is mostly identified by non-Presbyterians in this book but undoubtedly this examination of Presbyterian thought, theology and response to the Troubles is all the more valuable for giving voice to such a significant yet frequently overlooked or misunderstood faith tradition.

The book is based on interviews with 120 people, most of them Presbyterians. These interviews are divided into nine separate chapters covering ministers; victims; security forces; those affected by loyalist paramilitarism (including ex-combatants); emergency responders and health care workers; quiet peacemakers; politicians; those who left Presbyterianism; and critical friends. The authors are experienced researchers and writers in this field and they present the often harrowing and moving accounts of personal experiences of the Troubles in a sensitive way, creating a narrative that allows the interviewees to speak for themselves. What is new about their approach is the asking of questions about people's theological understanding of what has happened as well as their feelings about peacemaking, reconciliation and the building of relationships across the divides. The participants reflect on how this has been done – or not done – by both congregations and the whole denomination.

But the experiences recounted in the different sections often remember a time when there was no counselling or support for anyone caught up in the brutality of the early years of the Troubles. Many struggle in different ways with notions of forgiveness, some speak of a belief in ultimate judgment, many worked to break down barriers and work for peace.

The PCI itself established a Peacemaking Programme from 2006-9 and had a system of 'peace agents' in local congregations whose job it was to lead peacemaking initiatives. But most 'quiet' peacemakers felt the denomination itself did not do enough (p. 156) although they, and some others, often mention the leadership given by some prominent Presbyterians, usually ministers and often ex-moderators, whose names recur throughout the book. It is interesting how names such as John Dunlop, Ken Newell and Norman Hamilton and others crop up as inspiring leaders. Some names evoke starkly different responses from the interviewees but no individual gets name checked more frequently than Ian Paisley. Indeed his personality and his Free Presbyterian Church are always in the background, often threatening to draw people away or restraining those who might have wanted to be more vocal in the direction of a conciliatory approach. So 'it was difficult for PCI to do much publicly, especially with Rev. Ian Paisley criticising its every move' (p. 134) or 'the church has had a tough time trying to compete with the Free Presbyterians. Paisley took no prisoners' (p.202). Views like these are repeated throughout the book.

It was perhaps the influence of Ian Paisley that led to many PCI ministers preaching what one ex-Presbyterian describes as 'a strange Troubles-related theology' (p. 217) which laid great stress on Christ's second coming. A number are critical of a preaching of the gospel that is 'too small'. As one Presbyterian peace activist asks: 'Who are the keepers of the story of the common good within Presbyterianism? All our stories are about private salvation' (p. 186).

The authors attempt to share the diversity of Presbyterian experiences of the Troubles, 'to extend an invitation to everyone on this island to *consider grace*' (p.242). They recognise that this is a challenging endeavour for everyone but the stories told reveal people who have done just that and whose expression of grace is something that can help to build a better future.

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