



Paisley's religious legacy

The Slugger O'Toole blog presented this review -

Watching the two hours of the BBC's documentary on Dr. Paisley brought to mind my blog from six years ago of [Paisley and Prospero](#) where at the end of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Prospero turns to the audience and says "*Now my charms are all o'erthrown And what strength I have's mine own.*" At times it felt a bit like Mallie was interviewing a slightly more quick witted version of [Leonid Brezhnev](#) in his latter years.

I had intended doing a blog on the politics of the Paisley interviews but so much has already been said and so relatively little of it has much current political currency that I thought leaving that at least for the meantime might make sense.

Where there has been relatively less analysis is of Paisley's religious legacy. There has been much analysis of what he did in religious terms and also the tumultuous end of his moderatorship and subsequently the end of his individual congregational ministry at the Martyrs' Memorial. The apparent enforced end of that congregational ministry did seem quite distressing to all. However, two things were notable. Firstly standard Presbyterianism has always held to

a collective congregational leadership with the minister merely being a preaching elder and not above the other elders. Traditionally it was said that the Free Presbyterian Church did not function in such a fashion and gave the minister much greater power – indeed Presbyterian detractors to the Free Presbyterian Church often accused the Free Ps of being essentially primitive baptists or congregationalists. The ability of the Martyrs' Memorial's elders to persuade / force Paisley's retirement shows the fundamentally Presbyterian nature of the relationship. The rotating moderatorship of the whole denomination since Paisley's retirement also represents a clear classic Presbyterian form of church government.

The second notable issue is that often it is difficult to get aged, physically infirm and intellectually weakening ministers to retire. I know of one Coleraine Presbytery church which had the same minister for over 50 years in the nineteenth century and apparently had enormous difficulty getting the minister to retire despite his clearly (to everyone else) fading powers. The somewhat acrimonious nature of Paisley leaving the Martyrs is far from unique.

Of potentially greater interest is Paisley's religious influence where Maille's programmes shed no new light to those who know much of the story of Paisley's position.

Ian Paisley was the son of a Baptist minister and had a "conversion experience" at the age of six at a children's meeting run by his mother. That is a common sort of occurrence in fundamentalist / evangelical circles. Most parents' most fervent hope and prayer is that their children

come to such a position and evangelical Christianity is still frequently a position handed down the generations.

Paisley then following his father into the ministry is again relatively unsurprising as is his reputation as an effective evangelist though I know of a number of his contemporaries who would report that he was the best gospel preacher they had ever heard. That said the position of gospel preacher whether ordained or not who travels about Ulster and further afield preaching was and is a common one.

Where the Paisley story becomes much more interesting is when he first seems to have publicly collided with the mainstream Presbyterian Church in Ireland at Crossgar in 1951. Paisley had been due to preach at a gospel meeting but such was his reputation that a larger premises was needed. It seems the Kirk Session of the local Presbyterian Church granted use of its buildings for the meeting but was overruled by the presbytery. This is indeed an interesting position and dependent on who held the trusteeship of the buildings it is highly unclear whether the presbytery had any right to reverse the kirk session's decision. This decision can hardly have been made on the grounds of objection to Paisley's politics as he was not then a political figure. Rather this will have been due to Paisley's religious views.

The Presbyterian Church has for an extremely long time had a liberal and a more fundamentalist wing. In the eighteenth century there was a strong Arian influence (New Light) which persisted in various manifestations of Unitarianism. This was defeated during [Cooke's](#) time in the nineteenth century but the liberal and less evangelical part of the church has waxed and waned over the years. In the 1950s

and 60s this more liberal theological position was fairly prominent within Presbyterianism and also Methodism.

The reaction of many especially ordinary members in the pews against this liberalising trend is unlikely to have been solely in Crossgar but here the kirk session seem, with the backing of much of the church, to have taken a stand. The church split and in fairly short order the Free Presbyterian Church was founded with Paisley its moderator.

The Free Presbyterian Church has grown markedly from those small beginnings to now having approximately 12,000 members in Northern Ireland along with congregations in GB, the Rol and Australia along with missionaries in Africa, Spain and India.

Ian Paisley also made contact with American conservative evangelicals and received his doctorate from the Bob Jones University. This doctorate is often derided but it is fair to point out that in evangelical circles not only is he rated as a preacher but also as a theologian. His exposition on Paul's Epistle to the Romans is highly regarded in evangelical circles well beyond Northern Ireland or Free Presbyterianism. It is also worth noting that Presbyterian moderators all receive honorary doctorates and are always thereafter styled Dr. on equally shaky academic grounds.

The fact that now, some years after his leaving the moderatorship, the church remains intact and has not disintegrated is something of a legacy. In addition to many evangelicals his preaching which has resulted in many "getting saved" is the most important legacy. However, neither of these from a secular analysis of religion is an

enormous issue. The denomination is after all less than 1% of the population of Northern Ireland.

Another legacy which is rarely mentioned is, I would submit, much more important to a secular analysis of religious practice. As mentioned above the initial falling out in the creation of the Free Presbyterian Church was over a gospel mission. The idea that a presbytery would attempt to overrule a kirk session on such a matter now is much less likely: indeed in many areas inconceivable; the idea that it might want to is even more remote.

In response to that split the PCI seems to have become considerably more reluctant to impose its will on congregations and the centralised control of the denomination seems weaker than ever to the extent that Church House's views and decisions are of almost no relevance to the congregations or presbyteries. That such a decentralisation of control is a legacy of as controlling an individual as Paisley is truly ironic. It has, however, at least for the meantime tended to favour his conservative theological position.

The other response to the challenge of Paisley and the Free Presbyterian Church is that the mainstream church has moved towards a more theologically conservative position. There are still liberals and ecumenists within the PCI (the current moderator [recently attended a joint service with Roman Catholic prelates](#)). However, the rotating of the PCI moderatorship between theologically conservative and liberal ministers, though it has largely continued, has begun to look increasingly eccentric in view of the fact that the vast majority of the PCI congregations are theologically highly

conservative as are their ministers. In a number of recent cases where liberal ministers have retired their replacements have been conservative and evangelical. Clearly the liberals still exist eg Steve Stockman in Fitzroy. However, they are increasingly becoming marginalised. Indeed as Gladys Ganiel [noted recently](#) there are few to follow the likes of John Dunlop and Ken Newell. That the PCI has gradually yet fairly decidedly turned away from a liberal ecumenical and indeed political position towards a conservative even fundamentalist position which eschews politics is again I submit a legacy of Paisley.

Although comparing churches across parts of the UK is deeply complicated in a theological sense the contrast between the PCI (a largely conservative evangelical church) with that of the Church of Scotland or the United Reformed Church in England is marked. Clearly there are pockets of conservative evangelicalism within especially the CoS but again that is largely where there is a sustained challenge from conservative seceders such as in the Western Isles with their strong Free Church and Free Presbyterian Churches (unrelated to the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster).

As with the decentralisation, in part in reaction to as centralising a figure as Paisley; the fact that the depoliticisation of the PCI is in part a reaction to as politically involved an individual as Paisley, is deeply ironic. The move towards increasing theological conservatism less so. That tendency, however: the theological one is the most important religious legacy of Paisley. It is also seen, albeit to a lesser extent, in other branches of the Protestant churches. The Methodists split to form the two much smaller

Independent and Free Methodist denominations. Lacking a centralising figure such as Paisley and being offshoots from a smaller denomination they are not as large but again their existence has probably prevented the Methodists from becoming as theologically liberal as they are in England. The same is probably true of the CoI which again in Northern Ireland remains more conservative than the CoE (though conservative evangelical elements within the CoE are often underestimated).

Clearly one person alone, even a figure as charismatic and apparently dominant as Paisley, cannot be solely responsible for religious practice and most Christians would attribute most events in the church to the guidance and will of God. However, if one wants to look for the religious legacy of Paisley it is not the Martyrs Memorial nor even the Free Presbyterian Church but the largely evangelical, theologically relatively conservative, nature of the mainstream Protestant denominations in Northern Ireland. Although during his life time Cooke was a divisive figure in nineteenth century Presbyterianism he is now lauded as one of the greats of the PCI. Whether as an outsider Paisley will ever be accorded the same status by the PCI is dubious. His influence has, however, been nearly as profound.

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