4 Religion and Prison

Introduction

Republican ex-combatants attest that, during ‘the Troubles’, recruits to the IRA were warned that in all likelihood their militant activism would lead them to one of two places: the cemetery or jail. Loyalists understood this too, coming to see themselves as the cannon fodder doing the dying or the jail time for others who were whipping up the frenzy. Therefore, prison is one of the defining experiences of ex-combatants in Northern Ireland who managed to stay alive. Indeed, all except one of our interviewees had spent time in prison, some for just a few months, some for up to 20 years. In interview, most of our ex-combatants, unprompted, spoke readily about their experience of religion while incarcerated, indicating that prison was a significant period of contact with religious activities, ideas, and personnel. This chapter examines this important aspect of the narrative about the tension between armed struggle and peace, outlining interviewees’ recollections of the role of religion in prison life, and the impact of the prison experience on their encounter with God, even if only then – or later – to reject religion. Part of this story is the phenomenon of evangelical prison conversions among Loyalists, and this is given particular attention. Again we begin with Republicanism.

Republicans

While none of our Republican interviewees were ‘born-again Christians’, perhaps theologically in the Catholic tradition more properly called ‘Charismatic Catholics’, a number of them told us of Republicans they knew who had become born again in prison or after. Some of
these stories are on record. For example, in his biography, Loyalist convert David ‘Packie’ Hamilton recounts sharing a prayer of commitment with an IRA man (Hamilton, 2008: 153) and mentions that INLA hunger striker Liam McCloskey became a born-again Christian. McCloskey and Hamilton were introduced by Prison Fellowship, and they subsequently toured schools and Christian meetings telling their story (Hamilton, 2008: 125–6). The conversion account of an ex-IRA prisoner, Tom Kelly, is included in Adventures in Reconciliation, a book of testimonies by evangelical and charismatic Catholics. He heard God speak to him after pilgrimages to the Mount Melleray monastery in County Waterford, and also went on to collaborate with an ex-UVF convert on Christian and cross-community activities (Kelly, 1998). IRA member Mary Smith found faith through attending a Catholic Bible study (Jennings, 1984).

These accounts are very similar to Loyalist prisoners, where the phenomenon of religious conversion is more common. The prison experience for Republican prisoners mostly went in the reverse direction, a loss of faith. During our research, it was more usual to hear of people losing faith in prison – especially through the process of education and politicisation – rather than finding it. Martin recalled his mother remarking unhappily on this:

I was a prolific reader in prison, so I read everything and I would have been very much into left-wing, you know, political ideology. And as you know, the vast majority of left wing literature would be anti-Church and anti-religion. And it was one of the things that my Ma talked about, cos she used to joke about it after, she’d say, ‘son, I don’t know what they did to you in there, but sixteen years of being taught Catholicism and it was wiped out within four or five months, from when you went into jail. So they talk about the Jesuits brainwashing people, my God, they wouldn’t have a patch on your people!’

‘When we started educating ourselves when we went into jail,’ said Patrick, ‘we started losing religion, bits and pieces.’ Aiden, who had been active in the Official IRA, described losing his faith, in part through reading about Marxism and other religions. When asked if he might have retained his faith had he not gone through this education in prison, he said he would have lost it anyway, but being in prison probably advanced the process. ‘For me, God died in the H-blocks,’ commented Brid. ‘With a lot of us, our politics replaced our religion; it became our religion and all that goes with that.’ This was because politics, unlike the