



Reviews

Cathy Higgins, *Churches in Exile: Alternative Models of Church for Ireland in the 21st Century* (Blackrock, Co. Dublin: Columba Press, 2013), pp. 199. £12.50

In *Churches in Exile: Alternative Models of Church for Ireland in the 21st Century*, Cathy Higgins explores the continuing decline of the role of the church in Ireland, and the essential ways that the church can reclaim its historical legacies in order to flourish in the twenty-first century. Higgins begins by offering a concise and easily accessible history of Ireland in her first chapter. Instead of a linear historical account, she chooses key themes that she believes were instrumental in shaping the church in Ireland and describes the historical events surrounding them. These themes focus on the prevalence of what Higgins describes as a ‘sectarian theology’ in the Irish context and include ideas such as redemptive violence and exclusive truth claims. The historical account of the church in Ireland, along with insights into Irish theological understanding prove to be a powerful combination for offering the reader a backdrop to the modern church crisis in this context. In Chapter 2, Higgins continues with this history by discussing the place of the Irish church in the Christendom model of religion and politics. Throughout this chapter, Higgins’ opinion on the situation of the church in Ireland begins to shine through. The Christendom model of church is not working. Therefore, what is a contextual and creative way of thinking about the church in Ireland in the twenty-first century that will assure its longevity?

Higgins goes about answering this question in the chapters that follow. The consequent two sections offer insights into the biblical texts as a means of not only explaining the history of the church, but also inspiring new ways of thinking about church that reflect a return to a pre-Christendom model. Higgins discusses the theme of exile in the Hebrew texts, and the ways that this theme relates to political and social phenomena in Northern Ireland such as ‘contested stories’ and

the desire to avoid cultural contamination. She also offers examples of egalitarian, community-centred models of New Testament churches as reflected in Paul's letters and Matthew's gospel. Higgins' strength in these chapters is continually connecting insights from the biblical texts to the context of the church in Ireland. These are not vague connections, and neither are they heavy-handed. The reader is able to see where the author is leading, and likewise is able to understand why she is highlighting certain points as opposed to others.

Chapters 5 to 8 are where the historical and biblical elements begin to take a practical shape. Higgins offers insights into the Celtic background of the church in Ireland, specifically that of the rich monastic tradition. She does well to explain that during the time of Constantine, Ireland was cultivating a church that looked nothing like the Roman version. This difference is one that makes the Irish church unique, and according to Higgins, offers exciting possibilities for a church that might seek to reclaim this historical way of doing church in the twenty-first century.

What would a church like this look like? According to Higgins it would be a place of equality for all members, especially those who have typically been marginalised by the church. This includes women and other disenfranchised groups. It would also be a church where the emphasis is on peace. Higgins offers examples of these 'peace churches' via the Mennonite and Quaker traditions. She is also quick to highlight the importance of the emerging church phenomenon, and the importance of embracing this alternative method of doing Christianity in the twenty-first century. Higgins is open about her appreciation of the emerging movements within the established UK churches such as 'Fresh Expressions' and 'The Church Without Walls', Anglican/Methodist and Church of Scotland respectively.

Higgins' work in the Ethical and Shared Remembering Project as well as the Irish School of Ecumenics comes through in *Churches in Exile*, by way of the focus on the church in Ireland in the twenty-first century in a contextual way. This combination of working at a grassroots level, as well as an academic one, has afforded Higgins the opportunity of creating both an academically sound piece of writing as well as resource material that could be used as a guide for an emerging church trend in Ireland. The desire to keep the work in

both these realms is a difficult one, and it does occasionally move from what could be viewed by academics as over-simplified views of history to areas that may seem far too theoretical for church workers, but overall Higgins shows a true gift in her ability to offer a resource that will interest a wide variety of audiences. Above all, Higgins is obviously passionate about the church succeeding in the Irish context and the way that both history and cultural understanding can aid in this process. This passion is reflected throughout *Churches in Exile*, and by the conclusion you are aware that Higgins has offered alternative ways of living Christianity that could not only bring it out of exile, but also allow the church to be a serious means of social change in Ireland.

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Peter Goodwin Heltzel, *Resurrection City: A Theology of Improvisation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), pp. 219. £16.99

In the introduction to this very valuable book, Peter Goodwin Heltzel references the fairly common knowledge that Martin Luther King Jr. carried a worn copy of Howard Thurman's influential *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949) 'in his briefcase throughout his civil rights journey' (xiii). It could easily be supposed that, in like manner, Heltzel must have a recording of John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* with him at all times. It is not incidental, therefore, that *Resurrection City* concludes with a rehearsal of Coltrane's signature work as a premier example of a mystical-prophetic theology that is unafraid to explore the full domain of the politics of love.

Jazz, and particularly its commitment to improvisatory experimentation, is, after all, the mode in which Heltzel is working. Part four ("Psalm") of Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* is indicative of Heltzel's broader intent in that it is nothing less than 'a jazz riff on jazz itself', anticipating the end of the entire piece by reserving improvisatory artistry, on a new theme, for the conclusion. 'In a similar way', says