

**THE BRITISH: THEIR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES 1800—1986** by Terry Thomas (ed.) *Routledge*. Pp. vii + 247. 1988. £27.50 (hardback), £9.95 (paperback).

Pick up *The British* from the coffee table and you will be faced with the picture of a jolly C. of E. clergyman shaking hands with an equally jolly elderly lady just leaving or just going into church. Wondering what this might have to do with the British, your eye will travel to the subtitle in microscopic print—*Their Religious Beliefs and Practices 1800—1986*. On the first page inside there are only two words *The British*. Perhaps the picture is intended to be a symbol of contemporary religious life in Britain. If so, it belies the contents of the book because the Church of England, like all the traditional churches, eroded by secularization, is a sad institution. But the picture also falsifies the portrayed situation in so far as considerable prominence is given to the emergence of eastern religions in Britain, largely through the immigration of Indians and Pakistanis: it is commonly said there are now more Muslims here than Methodists.

The contributors to the volume are historians, sociologists and theologians, but they write with one object: to show the 'state of the art of the study of religion in Britain over the period' (p.15). By and large the contributors adopt a phenomenological approach in documenting the situation as a whole and without reference to theory and controversy. One writer who does not adopt this position is the sociologist Kenneth Thompson. All the articles are clearly written, free from jargon, and are easily digested.

The book is divided into two main parts—religion before 1900 and from roughly that date to the present. A smaller final section deals with more general issues.

Sheridan Gilley tackles with much facility the enormous canvas of official religion during the nineteenth century. His enthusiasm for its ups and downs and its vitality compared with today, makes him wonder whether the heart and centre of British society will hold together for long after the decay of traditional religion. Iwan Ellis is concerned more with theology than institutions, and especially with the hammering the discipline took in the nineteenth century in facing the challenge of science and particularly evolution. In the end, after initial opposition, theologians of most denominations accepted many of the findings of science.

An interesting chapter early on in the book written by the editor shows the development and repercussions of the introduction of academic study of eastern religions into the universities of Oxford and Manchester (not Cambridge!) in the nineteenth century.

For the twentieth century, the traditional churches are again awarded one chapter, this time written by Antony Dyson, and eastern religions two. For the latter there is a factual and useful survey of the emergence of Hindu and Muslim groups in Britain; and the second, by Kim Knott, deals with sects which combine eastern and western religions.

Common or folk religion has now become very much the stock in trade of the historian and sociologist of religion. And with good reason. Beliefs and practices which people embrace in an *ad hoc* way and which are supplementary to or contrary to those of the churches have become

acknowledged as being of great importance for living. David Hempton describes some of them and shows the methodological difficulties in studying them. But what is not raised is the functional difference between folk and traditional religion, as if they are simple alternatives.

Nor is that question asked in the most controversial contribution. This comes at the end, when Kenneth Thompson attempts to deal with the general question: How religious are the British? He rejects a rational, but inevitably pessimistic, approach which focuses on the secularized state of religious institutions. Instead, adopting an uncritical and simplistic interpretation of Durkheim, he holds that the British are surprisingly religious. But then so is every society if one uses such criteria. For him people are transposing their potential interest in the churches into a variety of individual beliefs and practices which are religious in form or function. He relies on attitude surveys, which purport to show that the vast majority of people believe in God and hold to a form of liberal Christian morality. He is hard put to it to demonstrate a corresponding ritual or action component. He waters down Durkheim's concept of community and believes that it exists through religious beliefs associated with watching the T.V., no matter how faint and diverse they are. Indeed, the essay should have demanded on the cover not a picture of jolly Anglicans outside their churches but of a family at home in front of the jolly telly. And of course Thompson's position is strengthened by the recent survey *Godwatching*. But why get embroiled with Durkheim? According to this phenomenological picture, the future of religion depends on the box.

Obviously a book of this kind cannot deal with everything but it is remarkable that no space was given to the upsurge of twice-born Christians, to the charismatic movement, to negro churches, and sects not influenced by eastern religions.

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**SHARING THE DARKNESS: THE SPIRITUALITY OF CARING** by Sheila Cassidy, *Darton, Longman & Todd. 1988. Pp. xviii + 164. £.5.95.*

The strength of this work lies in its conversational, anecdotal approach, which makes for readability and gives the author's intrepid personality ample scope. Unfortunately the over-ambitious and misleading sub-title implies something much more portentous. Sheila Cassidy has profound and sometimes provocative things to say about caring for others, about prayer and about community. Much of the book is reflection on hospice work.

The author is aware of the powerful witness given by some dying people, whom she portrays as 'glowing like candles in the dark', and as sometimes voicing the most devastating truths. She is wisely impatient of the phrase 'dying with dignity' which has become commonplace in this field. She is refreshingly relaxed on the question of an interventionist God, declaring herself 'quite content to remain in a state of unknowing'. She speaks of the task of being constantly sensitive to those in need as 'always listening to the music', and recalls a moment in solitary confinement in Chile when she became aware that 'in my powerlessness and captivity there remained to me one freedom: I could abandon myself into the hands of God.' So much for what is simply admirable here.