

tions. Still, I am sure he is right that philosophers have not on the whole attended sufficiently to the whole complex of feelings and attitudes which is characteristic of atheism, and that great literature is the place where one might expect to find it

most tellingly expressed. The exciting, intelligent and sensitive book which he himself has produced is a fair illustration of the point.

HUGO MEYNELL

A HISTORY OF THE CHURCHES IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA by Robert T. Handy. The Clarendon Press, Oxford. 1976.

American society is the home of a curious, fascinating and often exasperating blend of the idealistic and the pragmatic. Ideology, as distinct from idealism, is unofficially but forcefully proscribed by idealist and pragmatist alike. Getting things done in a context of moral satisfaction is a great American need and in some versions of the story, a great American accomplishment. Organized or at least identifiable religion has played a considerable role in the development of this American self-definition.

The art of telling the story of religion's role in American society has undergone a considerable evolution. Beginning with a "providential" view of history in such works as Jonathan Edwards' *History of the Work of Redemption* and Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*, it moved in the nineteenth century to a more denominational focus, when Establishment was seen to be out of the question. Robert Baird's *Religion in America* (1843) reflected this shift, though the author concentrated on the evangelical bodies which he thought would create a (voluntarily) Christian America. With the revival of interest in religion in the mid-twentieth century the focus shifted to "politics". Here the emphasis fell on the relationship of religion (now more broadly defined) to public affairs. Sydney Ahlstrom's *A Religious History of the American People* (1972) was the most representative and comprehensive work to emerge from this period.

It may be that a stage in any evolutionary process can only be identified when it is essentially completed and a new stage is already in progress. Ahlstrom felt that the events of the late 1960's signalled the end of the "Puritan epoch" in America and as a consequence, "The idea of America as a Chosen Nation and a beacon to the world was expiring." Getting things done in a context of moral satisfaction was perhaps a thing of the past. There was too much

dissatisfaction with what was getting done (the Vietnam war, urban decay, etc.) and too much psychological distance from the source and even the language of historical, moral and religious ideals.

Recently Martin E. Marty (in *A Nation of Behavers*) has suggested that a retreat from the hope that religion can exert a comprehensive influence on American life is producing a more limited but more concentrated emphasis on individual religious traditions by the people who belong to them. It is also calling forth a new paradigm for the explication of American religious history. The former he calls "re-tribalization",—"a great clustering into separateness that will, it is thought improve, assure, or extend each group's power or place, or keep it safe or safer from the power, threat, or hostility of others." The "others" here are those who would try to obliterate the uniqueness of, for example, black, Indian or Roman Catholic religious experience in the interest of shoring up a questionable as well as generalised national morality. The latter, the new historiographical paradigm, Marty calls "a species of social history", an effort to determine what individual religious groups have really believed by concentrating not on their doctrinal controversies so much as their religious experience and social behaviour. This paradigm-in-formation enlists the services of quantitative methods of research, psycho-history (Erikson style) and local history.

Whether this alleged new stage in American religious history will yield substantive results remains to be seen. Can it, as its proponents seem to imply it can, substantially modify American moralism? Will it result in a new and more critical relationship between religious traditions (especially Christianity) and political realities? Will it provide new models for justice, alternative to the "justice" of the capitalist's freedom?

Despite the emergence of new historiographical methods and religious styles, the need to reinforce America's moral identity has never really abated and in time of crisis it is likely to become more rather than less acute. Witness the recent discussion of American "civil religion", a more sober but no less determined effort to affirm an inherently religious dimension in American self-understanding.

"Retribalization" may indeed trivialise itself by overemphasising communal unity, by returning to doctrinal absolutism, or by trying to construct a non-political future. (One feels that this last is presently happening in many Spirit-oriented groups.) If the gathering of resources is to issue in a new realisation of the power of the Gospel it will have to involve a critical re-appropriation of the complex history of Christian tradition. It will have to come to terms with religious experience as an alienating factor as well as a force of conscience. And it will have to see and understand that interaction with cultural forces is a phenomenon from which no religious body escapes.

Robert Handy's volume should be a valuable resource for this task. It offers a wealth of information on denominational life organized in the "decline of Christendom" framework exemplified by Ahlstrom and others. The stories are skilfully and sensitively (though prosaically) told, especially those which tended to be obliterated

or patronised in the past. Roman Catholic history, for example, is treated with a genuine respect both for its commitments and its agonies.

This is not a "people's" history, the work of a social behaviourist. There is much discussion of church order, doctrinal controversy, the numerical growth and decline of churches and of the relationships between churches and society. This is all to the good, however, as a new stage comes into being. History is neither "bunk" nor "just history" (in the sense either of numbers or experiences). The shaping and re-shaping of church policy structure and doctrine remains a significant indicator of what a church will do in response to life in and around it. Handy's history shows that nearly always, American churches have accepted the role of building up, more or less critically, the moral idealism and national identity of their country and are loathe to give up that role lest crises be provoked both in the church and in society.

The chapters dealing with Canada provide an interesting contrast to the main body of the work which deals with the United States. While the Canadians have in many ways caught up in terms of spiritual distress, they are still fighting an older version of the battle as to who shall be the spiritual and cultural conscience of the nation.

ALDEN V. BROWN

THE SOCIOLOGY OF SECULARISATION, A CRITIQUE OF A CONCEPT, by Peter E. Glasner. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, pp. 137 + viii £4.75

Are we ever going to have a satisfactory approach to, and explanation of secularisation? Most people are convinced that modern society is in some way secular. Extensive disagreement arises over the exact location of the secular and the reasons for its emergence. Such issues are the perennial problems of sociologists of religion. Books on the subject are legion, yet none has been acknowledged as a definitive answer—none raised to the status of a classic. Permeating a great deal of infighting, there is the weakness that the sociology of religion in general, and secularisation in particular, lacks an adequate theory. Thus, anyone who attempts to enter the arena—one might say jungle—

must realise its great complexity and be prepared to approach it with humility, if not awe. Many great minds have got lost in the undergrowth.

The conclusion of Peter Glasner's book suggests that the answer is now before us. As the title suggests, his approach is strictly theoretical and his data secondary. He presents no new material or the findings of empirical research. Indeed, he scorns such research which is used as a basis of theory and gives rise to what he calls systematic empiricism. Much of his book is negative. He attempts to cut to shreds with sometimes obscure, and at others well rehearsed reasons, nearly every previous writer on the subject, Parsons, Berger,