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VOLUNTARY RELIGION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY*

One basic idea of uncoerced, voluntarily-supported, participatory, and autonomously-organized religious associations lies behind different language usages: in Britain we speak of the Free Churches, which in continental Europe are designated gathered churches, and in North America the believers' church. Although most completely seen in such churches, of voluntarism was also found within the life of the Church of England in the religious societies of the late seven-teenth century, the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (1699) and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (1701). These, in Gordon Rupp's words, provided the 'soil in which the evangelical revival was rooted'. Max Weber speaks of America as 'Association land par excellence', but Winthrop Hudson

* W. H. Brackney, *Christian Voluntarism in Britain and North America: A Bibliography and Critical Assessment*, Greenwood Press, 1995, 306pp, £75.

asserts that this voluntarism was the great heritage of American Christianity. [p.3]

Many would argue that the pattern of believing found in the New Testament is that of voluntary religion but that after Constantine the dominant shape became that of state-determined institutions, even though throughout the medieval period religious enthusiasm in its different forms made its voluntary protests against the control of both hierarchy and state. But in the radical reformation and amongst the more extreme puritans in England the voluntary covenant became the foundation of the church itself. After the English Revolution voluntary decision-making in religion found philosophical justification in the writings in defence of toleration from the pen of John Locke, particularly influential in North America. At the same time practical patterns of working were developed which reflected the structures of contemporary joint-stock trading companies. Association was also the mechanism whereby separately organized local congregations developed mutual commitment.

All this was greatly extended in the generation following the establishment of foreign missions: 'Baptists, taking the voluntary society as their *sine qua non*, started nothing less than twenty societies in the thirty years following the establishment of an overseas organization.' [p.27] Education, itinerant preaching, colonial mission, the care of orphans, and destitute ministers were all supported in this way and the first national union of Particular Baptists was achieved. At the same time Baptists were just as active in the great pan-evangelical endeavours of the period, especially the Tract Society, the Bible Society and the Sunday School Union.

This tradition of voluntary endeavour was an easy export to North America, especially in its post-establishment years, though the roots of cultural exchange go deeper. So it is a trans-atlantic phenomenon that Dr Brackney examines with abundant evidence of cross-fertilization of ideas between the two Christian communities, sometimes focused in particular individuals such as William Staughton, 'the structural architect of Baptist national voluntarism' [p.203], who fed his experience of Bristol College and the Baptist Missionary Society into the North American scene. During the first half of the nineteenth century, 'Baptists in the northern and western states had organized a network of inter-connected national societies for home missions, education, and publication, Sunday Schools, bible distribution, and historical work.' [p.33] Maybe that was to be expected; less predictable was the way in which more hierarchical denominations took voluntarism into their system in the USA, whilst anti-missionary Baptists such as David Parker opposed societal initiatives as challenging the authority and autonomy of the local church. From this religious base developed the great American nation-wide reformist societies: the American Temperance Society, the American Peace Society and the American Antislavery Society, all growing so large that they developed auxiliaries overseas.

The pattern was simple: most societies espoused a single function, for the pursuit of which they depended on many small subscriptions; subscribers controlled the work of the society through an elected committee of their own number who established the policy that the paid employees carried out. Beyond immediate

functions, however, religious voluntarism also provided the churches with a vehicle for renewal, for co-operation, for those wishing to offer a critique of society, for the empowerment of particular groups, and for the expansion of services.

Each of these emphases can be clearly illustrated. The founding of the BMS 'became a catalyst for renewal not only of Baptists in England, but of Christians on both sides of the Atlantic.' [p.44] The society model also enabled people of different confessional backgrounds to work together in organizations like the Evangelical Alliance or the International Missionary Council. The best example of how voluntarism provided a vehicle for those wishing to critique society could well be found in the various societies dedicated to fighting slavery. Dr Brackney shows how the existence of the society model provided a practical means for the establishment of the black denominations and offered an important avenue for the empowerment of Christian women, both topics receiving special attention in the following bibliography. When the churches discovered the needs of different groups of destitute people, the society was there once more as the means whereby compassion could be organized to meet that need.

Dr Brackney's work is described as 'A Bibliography and a Critical Assessment': following the exposition of the four chapters of introduction just under 1000 books, articles, and theses are listed and briefly commented upon, whilst in a third section five appendices list under different heads the various voluntary societies discussed.

The bibliography is helpfully divided and most of the comments are apposite, though more identification of authors would have been helpful: for example, not every reader will immediately identify Joseph Angus, Nathanael Haycroft, J. H. Hinton or Charles Stovel as Baptists. Similarly, British readers will need to be warned that the title Brethren refers to the Church of the Brethren, an historic peace church which has its origins in Lutheran pietists of the early eighteenth century coming to the conviction that baptism should be confined to believers.

Any compiler would have established a different list of bibliographical references, so one finds strange omissions and unexpected inclusions. British Baptists, however, are specially favoured with almost fifty items listed [Nos 262-309; see also 589-625 in the American, and 829-47 in the Canadian sections]; by comparison the treatment of the Congregationalists is much briefer (12 items) and the Unitarians with only two items briefest of all. Writing for an audience on either side of the Atlantic creates problems of how much detail to include: thus Miyakawa [Item 559] is said to test the Turner thesis but neither the nature of that thesis nor reference to its title etc. are given. The publishers have also been over-economical in indicating when volumes are edited rather than authored. [e.g. Items 568, 575, 814]

One of the principal uses of this volume is its comparative dimension on developments in Britain and in North America. For this the critical bibliography is most valuable, and could suggest more helpful cross-fertilization between British and North American historiography. The price will restrict the availability to a limited number of British libraries - sadly, since it is an important tool for research.