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Religion in America (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

by John M. Zinkand

The Anabaptist Story—by William R. Estep. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1975. 250 pages. Revised Edition. \$3.95 (paper). Reviewed by Arnold L. Koekkoek, Associate Professor of History.

Estep is Professor of Church History at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. Writing with obvious interest in his subject, he seeks to show the origins of Anabaptism, its relation to the larger movement of the Reformation, its beliefs, and the relevance of Anabaptist ideas for the twentieth century. The work Estep has produced is, on the whole, what he intended it to be, namely, a "satisfactory introduction" to the Anabaptist movement, at least to part of it.

This is not a difficult book to read, though it is scholarly and shows extensive research into sixteenth century sources as well as modern and older secondary works. Prof. Estep writes with commendable style, and he generally keeps his student reader well in mind. Only in Chapter IX does he become prolix, too detailed and overly repetitious. Chapter XI, "Across the Seas and Through the Years," suffers, on the contrary, by its brevity, as it tries in the scope of a mere thirty pages to trace Anabaptism beyond the confines of the European continent and the sixteenth century all the way to the present. Invariably, some groups are not mentioned, while others get little more than passing reference. Really the title is a misnomer, for more than twenty-five of the thirty pages are used to discuss the relationship of Anabaptism to English Separatists and Baptists of the 17th century. Nevertheless, the book as a whole stands quite respectably as the "preliminary word" which its author intended it to be.

In company with most American church historians who acknowledge lineal descent from the Anabaptists—especially the Mennonites—Estep sharply limits Anabaptism, mainly to the Swiss Brethren, the South German group, the Dutch Anabaptists such as Simons, and offshoots from these three. Less desirable groups and individuals he thus seeks to exclude. By definition and specific mention, Thomas Müntzer and those about him are excluded as "inspirationists" rather than true Anabaptists. And while perforce acknowledging the infamous Münster episode to be the work of Anabaptists, Estep dismisses those responsible as fanatics not in the mainstream.

Indeed, the whole Münster affair is brushed aside with slight mention, not discussed or described on grounds that full accounts are available in many other places. Münster, says the author, is not "recognizable Anabaptism" (p. 16). However, the way Estep divides the Radical Reformation into different classes, including one which he defines as Anabaptists, is not at all as generally accepted as he intimates. His own use of the terms "normative" and "biblical" Anabaptists (pp. 140, 199 and *passim*) clearly indicates the difficulty of a simple definition of the name and the movement. This is why I noted earlier that this book is a satisfactory introduction to at least part of the Anabaptist movement; Estep has been more exclusive, perhaps, than he ought to have been.

It is only natural that this writer should treat his subject and those who figure in the story with great sympathy and general approval. One has a right to expect, however, that sympathy should not run away and hide from sound judgment. But there are a few instances where this happens. I do not think that one could get most historians to agree with such statements as "Probably, the most revolutionary act of the Reformation was the institution of believer's baptism," (p. 150) or "No other theologian of the sixteenth century so thoroughly divorced Reformation theology from Roman Catholic mariolatry [as Menno Simons]" (p. 139). And one who read only this book might well get the impression that the only pious people and the only martyrs for their faith in the sixteenth century were the Anabaptists. Of course the author neither says nor believes this, but that impression is certainly left with the reader at times. (See, for example, pp. 22, 49, or 73).

These, and other smaller items notwithstanding, this is a useful and worthwhile book for a first step into an often overlooked area of Reformation history.

Religion In America—by George C. Bedell, Leo Sandon, Jr., and Charles T. Wellborn. Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc., New York, N.Y. 538 pages, \$11.95. Reviewed by Nick Van Til, Professor of Philosophy.

As the title suggests this book covers more than an account of the history of organized and/or institutionalized religion in America. In fact, the first chapter is devoted to "Civil

Religion." One might argue that "civil religion" is institutionalized in some sense of the term but not in the sense that it has an organizational structure and office holders. Be that as it may, "civil religion" is the subject of intensive study at present by a variety of scholars. It is also of interest to many thoughtful citizens as they ponder the question as to what went wrong with the "American Faith" as the United States suffered defeat in Vietnam?

We face pertinent questions such as; What constitutes a civil religion? What factors bring about changes in that religion? What changes are needed now as we enter the post-Vietnam era? This is an era which is now a kind of extension of what Robert Bellah called the "Third Period of Trial" in American civil religion. Robert Bellah, Sidney Mead and Will Herberg, familiar names to those who have looked into the subject of civil religion, each have their own approach. Within the compass of this review it is impossible to assess their divergent views, but one will find all three stimulating and thought provoking.

Subsequent chapters in this work are devoted to "Religious Liberty and the Free Church", "Revivalism", "Indigenous American Religious Movements", "Liberalism and Conservatism", "Missions: Humanitarianism, and the Social Gospel", "Black and White in the American Religious Pattern", "Ecumenism and Interfaith Cooperation" and "American Religion in Ferment."

One of the commendable features of this book is the inclusion of pertinent documents at the end of each chapter's discussion. For example, the chapter on "Revival" is followed by excerpts from Moody, Finney and Billy Graham. The chapter on "Liberalism and Conservatism" includes in its documents A.A. Hodge on "The Inspiration of the Bible" followed by Harry Emerson Fosdick's "Shall Fundamentalism Win?"

The last chapter, "American Religion in Ferment" treats several of the changes which have characterized religious expression in America in the past fifteen years. There is a discussion of the Divine Light Mission of Satguru Maharaj Ji. As an illustration of American religion in ferment and process, it may be noted that the Maharaj Ji has been deposed as an unworthy wearer of the leadership mantle bestowed upon him by his father, the founder of the cult. The Maharaj Ji, it turned out, prefers the life of a big spender and high liver in preference to that of a model guru. This change took place since the printing of this book. Perhaps "fermentation" will have produced additional changes by the time this review is in print.

Martin Marty suggests that the changing pattern of ferment gives new options as to religious choice in America. It is no longer Protestant, Catholic or Jew. One can choose to be a Buddhist, Hindu or may associate with organized atheism. Not only that, but as a result of Black Studies, the Black American may have the choice of reverting to the African religion of his great grandfather in the African bush.

Because this book gives "religion" a broad meaning, one could possibly fault the authors for not including a chapter on "Secular Humanism." It is not organized but humanism surely plays a major role in culture formation in our country and should be present and accounted for.

The wide range of topics, the included documents, a comprehensive index, plus readable print and a quality binding make this book a worthwhile addition to a general or specialized library, private or public.

Religion and Modern Literature: Essays in Theory and Criticism, edited by G.B. Tennyson and Edward E. Ericson, Jr. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids Michigan, 1975. 424 pages, \$5.95 (paper). Reviewed by Hugh Cook, Assistant Professor of English.

Pointing to the increase of interest in the study of religion in general and therefore the proliferation of courses which explore specifically the relation of religion to literature, the editors of this anthology have designed it to serve as course and reference material for students and teachers.

Since most questions involving the relationship of religion to literature resolve themselves into the theoretical and the practical, say the editors, they have divided the book into three sections to facilitate the movement from the general to the particular, a division which serves the book well.

The first section contains essays which deal with the theoretical relationship between religion and literature--how a writer's beliefs shape his art, and how the reader reacts to literature motivated by beliefs contrary to his own. Essays by T.S. Eliot, J. Hillis Miller, Flannery O'Connor and David Daiches are particularly incisive in exploring this topic.

The second section of the book presents essays on the religio-philosophic background of modern literature, focussing on those issues that have perennially come to the surface in modern writing.