

Reviews

RELIGION AND THE AMERICAN PEOPLE, by John L. Thomas, S.J.; The Newman Press, Maryland, \$4.50.

This is an interesting book and an important one. Its importance rests in the fact that it gives what is probably the best-sampled survey of religious belief and practice that has been reported in the literature. Many of the existing surveys have been criticized for their haphazard sampling techniques, yet it has been impossible to say just how much this has biased their findings. The sample of just on three thousand people interviewed in this survey were representative of the total USA population for age, occupation class, educational level, and place of residence (the obvious urban-rural distinction, size of town and part of the country being taken into account.) In view of the excellence of the sampling procedure the survey merits close attention since, particularly in such matters as age trends and socio-economic background, wild generalizations have been commonly accepted as factual evidence.

The single most striking fact that emerges from the book is that 94 per cent of the American population apparently expresses a 'religious preference' and that only 1 per cent definitely believes that there is no God. Among the preferences 68 per cent prefer one of the Protestant denominations, 23 per cent, Roman Catholic, 3 per cent Judaism or 'other' (a beautiful vista this opens!) and 6 per cent have no preference. More strikingly, 75 per cent of the population regard themselves as 'active church members'. If it did no more than establish this, then the book would have interest. It further appears that only 6 per cent of the American population received no religious instruction in childhood; this puts I think beyond question that, whatever the quality of the instruction, America is an actively Christian country at least in intention.

The interviews with the respondents were lengthy and fairly detailed as far as the social and inter-denomination attitudes went; there are a number of directly theological questions and questions relating to religious practice which while going to no real depth do at least estimate nominal assent to traditional beliefs. On the whole the results of the questions about denominational adherence and interdenominational attitudes are probably more reliable than the others since they are verbally much less complex. This is not mere carping on my part; one cannot for example help being struck by the fact that apparently while only 92 per cent of Catholics were sure God exists, 98 per cent believed in the Trinity—such minor evidence suggests that the more theological questions merely scratched the surface of the respondent's beliefs!

There are in this book so many interesting bits of information that it is invidious to pick out much for comment. In particular the complex view of each other held by the major religious groups needs to be read in full (ch. 7),

though one suspects that it may already be of historical interest since the survey was carried out eleven years ago. The general picture that emerges is that the majority group feels more threatened by the minority groups than vice versa, which is a somewhat unexpected result. In particular the Roman Catholics appear as pushing; in view of the apparent predominance of the lower socio-economic class in this group the finding may reflect inter-class as well as inter-denominational tensions.

The widespread belief in the divinity of Christ may perhaps come as a surprise to the English reader used to the 'Woolwich' school of thought. 75 per cent of the American population evidently still say that Christ is God; one must I think conclude with Fr Thomas that scepticism is somewhat the prerogative of the educated and vocal since only 65 per cent of college graduates hold this view while roughly 80 per cent of the rest of the population adhere to it.

Taken over all, education seems more critical to religious belief and practice than age. Churchgoers represent 53-57 per cent of all age groups over 18 years, with no evidence of trend with age except in the matter of prayer which is rather more frequent in the 65 and over age group than any other. In spite of their somewhat greater scepticism about the existence of God and the divinity of Christ, college graduates are rather more apt to be churchgoers (60 per cent) than people with only grade school education (52 per cent); they are likewise more given to Bible reading, grace before meals and frequent prayer. Here there is evidence of trend in a way that there is not with age.

So much for the information. The book is clear and well-presented on the whole, though attempts to produce some variation in the mass of figures given are more confusing than helpful (sometimes these are given as percentages, sometimes as proportions) and the reader does develop slight mental indigestion, as the book goes on, from the sheer quantity of the data given in the text. The manner in which the results are presented is eminently objective, fair and free of interpretation. Figure 2 on page 128 should however be treated with reserve. It seems either to contain mistakes or at least not to make clear where the data came from: the figures for 'Sunday school' are confusing and do not apparently correspond with those in the text. Perhaps rather more deceiving is that the 62 per cent of Catholics that in table 1 go to church every week become, in a splendid piece of wish-fulfilment, 92 per cent in figure 2.

However, no survey of this kind can be carried out in a theological vacuum. The selection of the questions and the interpretation of the results both leave room for bias, and I feel a certain uneasiness about both. The questions appear admirable on the general social issues and on the information-gathering side, allowing for the inevitable false reporting which all such surveys invite; the theological questions are less satisfactory. A question like this for example:

16.b. Which do you think you *should* be more serious about—trying to live comfortably; or preparing for a life after death?

suggests a theology in which such an opposition is critical. Personally I find it a foolish question, based on a false assumption, and consequently cannot share

Fr Thomas' distress about the 1 in 4 of the respondents who opted for comfort. A rather different objection could be raised to question

18.a. Some religions hold that divorced people who re-marry are living in sin. Do you agree or disagree with this stand?

Only 51 per cent of the Catholics thought people who remarried after divorce were living in sin. The author finds it 'difficult to account for the response' and adds 'a charitable interpretation might be that some Catholics mistakenly believed that their Church's condemnation of re-marriage after divorce applied only to Roman Catholics . . . this interpretation seems somewhat far fetched'. Why? What about the Pauline privilege? The question does not specify that the divorced persons are Christians.

The interpretation put on some of the data is likewise open to question; again it is mainly the theology that raises doubts in one's mind. The author rests his interpretation on an opposition of current attitudes and a 'traditional' view. I am no historian and he may well be right about this change, which could be described as secularization, but his argument worries me:

Obviously the human situation is no longer defined in the framework of traditional beliefs, for major emphasis is placed not on man's need to be reconciled to God but on human relations. The Churches are to teach people 'how to live better every day with all other people'. In other words, religion is regarded as an instrument of society rather than an institution transcending all that is secular because it serves as the means of relating man to God (pp. 228-9).

I don't know about traditionalism but

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love . . . This I command you, that you love one another. (Jn 15.10).

One cannot escape the conclusion that St John would emerge as one who bypasses the traditional quite as much as the people of contemporary America.

The evidence reported in this book suggests that the Americans are a believing people, yet the author says that there is a widespread view that religion has become secularised or at any rate insignificant in its impact on society. This is familiar enough. He attributes this failure of impact to the absence of religious literacy and maturity, and in particular to the failure of the Churches to produce 'a religious élite capable of making the doctrines of the traditional faiths relevant to our complex, rapidly changing social order or to the new insights into human nature furnished by modern science'. An interpretation that merits serious reflection, as does his suggestion that 'if it is to endure, a religious system must remain creative'. Such creativity will always depend on a specially concerned minority; 'in the long run, the progress and development of a religious system will be closely related to the quality of this minority'.

This book makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of the religious situation in America today, and so will enable the creative minority to measure the size of its task. While no survey, however good, can ensure

theological literacy, such research can make for a deeper understanding of the needs of the faithful. I believe that we need more research that is as professionally competent as this, and research in depth which would stand up as well to critical scrutiny. To have added so complete, competent and readable a contribution to the sociology of religion is no small achievement, and one for which we should be grateful; all we need now is the 'creative minority' who can make use of it.

MONICA LAWLOR

THE MEANING OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE, edited by Enda McDonagh;
Gill, 18s.

In the summer of 1962 nine speakers, a bishop, seven seminary professors and a doctor, came together at Maynooth to discuss Christian marriage and the fruit of their work is this symposium. Professor Enda McDonagh, who edits this book, points out in the introduction that the present day decline in sexual morality has created a crisis in marriage and the family life. The practice of contraception, pre-marital and extra-marital intercourse and divorce are clearly evil but modern man has more to offer the Church in regard to marriage than such problems and the Church has a great deal more to offer modern man on marriage than condemnations, however necessary, of evils. The biological, psychological and sociological advances are not dealt with in detail; the scriptural and theological issues receive what is undoubtedly the most detailed and up to date treatment in the English language.

Again and again the various authors point out the strictly juridical treatment of marriage in the theology manuals and the virtual absence of any detailed inquiry into its sacramentality. This is not surprising, as Professor Donal Flanagan pointed out, when it is realised that for St Thomas at the end of the thirteenth century it was still under discussion whether matrimony gave grace, a matter not finally settled for another couple of centuries. Since then, as moral theologians became increasingly isolated from the great theological, psychological and other scientific movements of the ages, particularly those of our own day, marriage has been treated by the moralist in purely legal fashion. Professor McDonagh and Professor Häring removed these fetters by two brilliant papers in which Christian marriage was examined in turn as a source of life and as a community of love. From both there emerges a clear picture of marriage as a union of two people complementing each other in their bodies, minds and hearts in love, drawing their ultimate source of inspiration from the divine model of love in the Trinity. There is too a very valuable revaluation of the narrowly defined primary and secondary ends of marriage, a source of much contemporary misunderstanding. The majority of the papers are thoroughly scriptural in their background with a whole paper devoted to this topic, *Marriage in Scripture*, by Professor W. Harrington.

His Grace Bishop Beck, who opened the meeting with some of the disturbing contemporary facts about divorce, contraception and abortion, had this to say