

braced, had a cramping effect and sealed up too many windows into the world. Perhaps Vatican II has opened a few of these, as Pope John hoped. At any rate I think both Acton and Simpson would have welcomed the

declaration on Religious Liberty (freedom of conscience), which perhaps gets less publicity than other conciliar decrees because it was so long overdue.

MERIEL TREVOR

THE SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF RELIGION, by Betty R. Scharf. *Hutchinson University Library*, London, 1970, 190 pp. £1.65 (hardback); 70p.

In the last few years the massive American literature on the general discussion of approaches to religion has been added to by a number of British books. The fact that the latter have very little empirical work available in this country on which to base their discussions sometimes makes one's reactions to the widow's mite rather ungracious. The student and the professional sociologist of religion have to read the lot; the general reader is going to want to know what will give him best value for his money and effort. Fortunately, in spite of an overlap which is repetitive rather than refining in relation to certain themes (church, sect and denomination typologies, for instance), these books do basically try to do different things. Bryan Wilson and David Martin have each taken the available evidence on British religion and come to fundamentally different conclusions about the degree of secularization which can be determined; the latter writer, indeed, in a subsequent collection of essays, attacks the usefulness of the concept altogether. Roland Robertson's recent *The Sociological Interpretation of Religion* is a brilliant, uneven exposition of a particular type of sociological approach which will stimulate those who accept it (or at least find it meaningful) and leave others cold.

Mrs Scharf's book is a more pedestrian one, but no less worthwhile for that. Her aim is to provide a general summary of theories and approaches to religion, and as such her book will be very useful to those students of sociological theory who complain that they can't put the right names under the right schools of thought.

Sociologists have often used the analysis of religious beliefs and phenomena to illustrate how certain key concepts and themes can be used: social cohesion and solidarity, for instance, social control, or the relationship between ideas and social structures. This illustrative aim is another of the goals which

Mrs Scharf has set herself. She also attempts to extend the discussion considerably beyond the area of North American and Western European literature.

All these goals are important, and her book will probably help many to see sociological themes more clearly. However, the book is a much more ambitious one than it seems at first sight. Moreover the density of style, presentation (there are no sub-headings in the chapters) and the width of scope leave one gasping for air at times. The concern for synthesizing theories, for which students will bless her, does lead to stretching some parallels too far, as in the chapter on functionalist theories of religion. Like the classical sociologists from whom she draws her fundamental approach (in taking religion as one area which can be used to demonstrate basic themes), she uses analyses from the work of anthropologists on primitive and peasant societies as well as that of sociologists on industrialized societies. In general this strengthens very considerably the basic structure of the book, but at times it can deteriorate into a collection of bitty items. For instance, the author includes in her eclectic discussion of the roles of religious specialists the religions of Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Catholic and Protestant Christianity in half-a-dozen pages.

It would be a pity, however, for anyone with a serious interest in sociological approaches to religion to be put off by the author's immediate plunge into central issues. There is much valuable synthesizing in this inexpensive volume. It does tell you more about sociological thought than about religion, but that is precisely what the author intended it should do. And a good deal more thought and effort has gone into this book's construction than into some of the pretentious writing on the sociology of religion that has appeared recently on both sides of the Atlantic.

JOAN BROTHERS