

BAHNR 4: 74-5

Sectarian Religion in Contemporary Britain

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Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2000

vi+314pp. ISBN0853649170 £14.99

This is a very useful survey of nine religious groups active in Britain, including Exclusive Brethren, which can be defined in sociological terms as 'sects'. It is the author's case that the current cultural environment of post-modernity is particularly conducive to the maintenance and growth of sectarian religion because sects are often perceived to offer individuals qualities such as certainty, morality, identity and community which are felt to be in short supply in society at large, including mainstream religion. Having discussed some of the common characteristics of sects, (such as dominant leadership, exclusive salvation, loose organisation, separation and a literal interpretation of scripture), sectarian groups are then divided into sociological categories before a detailed examination is undertaken of specific sects. These range from large groups like the Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses to the much smaller Jesus Fellowship and International Church of Christ; also covered are Christadelphians, Christian Science, Spiritualism and Rastafarianism.

The Exclusive Brethren are categorised, as an 'introversionist' sect, and the twenty-six pages devoted to them (pp.91-116) sketch Brethren origins and the subsequent development of that section of the Darby stream subsequently led by F.E. Raven, James Taylor (senior and then junior), James Symington and John Hales. Although necessarily selective, reference might usefully have been made to the cultural mood of the Romantic movement, in addition to social and political factors, in reviewing the emergence of the Brethren movement. The omission of a mention of Edward Irving is surprising in view of a comment on early Brethren's rejection of tongues, which is attributed to the upper class background of the leaders. The extensive influence of J.N. Darby (David Watson was apparently still quoting him in the 1970s) is validly highlighted. Addressing concisely, but without over-simplification, the complex and

controversial teachings of both Darby's opponent B.W. Newton and Darby's successors Raven and Taylor senior, is a distinct challenge, and to substantiate the claim that Raven's Christology was Apollinarian or that Taylor's unconventional views implied that Jesus was less than God, would require more scope than was available in this study. The value of the Brethren section is that it provides a fair-minded account of extreme Exclusive Brethrenism today. The rise of James Taylor junior and his subsequent downfall by reason of drink, money-making and his sexual appetite is handled without sensationalism. The material on current doctrines and strictures inevitably relies heavily on the personal accounts of those who have left the group in recent years resulting in a style that tends to be anecdotal rather than analytical.

The book represents a valuable source of information on the various sects examined, especially in the comparison provided in each case of the sect's teaching with that of orthodox Christianity. Students of the Brethren movement will also appreciate the author's consideration of the extreme Exclusives, a field to which scant regard has been paid by historians since early in the last century. It is a shame that the opening line of the Brethren chapter should contain an unfortunate error in the reference to Admiral Lord Nelson as J.N. Darby's 'grandfather', rather than 'godfather'—though even that goes beyond the evidence!

Roger Shuff