

Reviews

Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition—A Social Case Study of the American Baptist Convention by Paul M. Harrison. (Princeton University Press and Oxford University Press. 248 pp. 40s.).

The purpose of this book by the assistant professor in the department of religion at Princeton University is not, as the main title might suggest, a theological examination of the nature and source of authority and power in the church but a sociological study of the exercise of *de facto* power in one special area, namely the churches of The American Baptist Convention. The author explicitly acknowledges his debt to modern American sociologists such as Talcott Parsons, Robert K. Merton and Marion J. Levy in his analysis and examination of the power structure of the A.B.C. (It will be convenient to use henceforth this abbreviation). Nevertheless, despite the strong sociological emphasis, it is clear that the author has been spurred on by certain theological judgments which he has made concerning the way in which Baptist polity works in practice. He believes, for example, that there is "profound discrepancy between the Baptist doctrine of the church and the polity of the A.B.C." (p. VII). Baptist emphasis on the freedom and sole competency of the individual (incidentally this is a phrase much beloved of American Baptists but not heard too much in Baptist circles elsewhere) and on the absolute autonomy of the local congregation has resulted in an impasse. In Baptist theory, church councils and denominational officials have no legal authority. In practice, he contends, the picture is far different.

He proceeds, with the aid of sociological techniques, to examine the actual, as distinct from the ideal and theoretical, working of Baptist polity. It should be said at once that the methods adopted are not as scientific as the jargon of sociology might suggest. When it comes to assessing the individual opinions of executives, secretaries, officials of one kind or another, ministers etc. there must be inevitably a highly subjective factor both in the person who gives the interview and in the author as he reviews and examines it. This must not be lost sight of amid the flourish of sociological terminology. His definition of certain key concepts is important for a proper understanding of the book as a whole. *Power* is the ability of a person or group of persons to determine the action of others without regard for their needs or desires (p. 4). It may be doubted whether even the greatest tyrant or dictator has been able to rule according to this strict definition. *Authority*, on

the other hand, indicates a right to exercise power i.e. presumably a legal right conferred upon the holder of power in some proper constitutional manner. "*Polity* is the sociological manifestation of doctrinal belief; it is the political expression of the content of the gospel as interpreted by the members of the religious group." (p. 5)

With these definitions in mind, let us turn to a brief exposition of the author's main thesis. Baptists have inherited from the 17th century a number of theological principles of which the most important are the emphasis upon personal faith and freedom and the autonomy of the local congregation. The author admits, however, that the earliest Baptist confessions are not primarily concerned with these two principles, and when they are, it is always in relation to the sovereignty of God (p. 19). The early Baptists sought to create a church-order which would deliver and safeguard them from the abuses of ecclesiastical power which had been responsible for so much of their suffering and persecution. In asserting freedom for God and the activity of the Holy Spirit, they found themselves obliged to establish some kind of workable church-order and they believed they had found this in the autonomy of the local congregation, though it is not expressed in this kind of language. In the 19th century what had originally been based on theological assumptions was subtly altered by the influence of political individualism. Mr. Harrison is surely justified in asserting that the comparatively recent emphasis on soul competency focuses attention on the possibilities of men rather than upon the power of God. (p. 22) In this sense, it is a departure from the spirit of the founding fathers. He is also right to point out the power of the early associations, their nature as associations of churches and not of individuals, and the willingness of some early Baptists to accept at times the principle of representative democracy in a manner alien to much later Baptist thinking. The strong 17th century emphasis on the unity of the church, despite its embodiment in local congregations, is something of which we need to be constantly reminded. (p. 30ff)

When this has been said, however, the fact remains that Baptists have from the beginning been very suspicious of delegating legal executive authority to groups other than the local churches, such as associations or national unions and conventions. Nevertheless, churches are social groups and as such are subject to sociological pressures. Practical necessity, financial needs, personal ambition, the inevitable exercise of power if anything is to be achieved, all these produce power structures and developments in polity even when the formal theological ideas of a religious body remain unchanged or change only very slowly. This in fact,

according to Prof. Harrison, is what has happened in the A.B.C. While Baptist theory has shrunk from openly admitting the need for more legally conferred authority which might limit the power of the local church, in practice convention officials have arrogated to themselves powers to which they have no legal right but which they require for the proper performance of their functions. Since this has been a haphazard and purely pragmatic process, there are no proper legal safeguards against the abuse of such authority. On the other hand, the local churches in which, according to the theory, sovereign power resides, are not in a position to make their influence felt as they should in the denominational councils or in the shaping of denominational policy. Furthermore, there are no openly accepted legal principles governing the exercise of power to which they can appeal in their defence.

The author appeals to a great mass of statistics, reports, personal interviews and his own observations to back up this thesis. This material cannot be presented in a review and the reader must assess it for himself. The A.B.C. itself, says Prof. Harrison, was born out of response to pragmatic and immediate needs, being an instrumental entity possessing no direct authority from God to exist in its own right. (p. 51) While lip-service is paid to the authority of the Bible, the answer given by Baptists as to who are the interpreters of that authority remains ambiguous. (p. 55) The national leaders of the Convention possess considerable power *de facto* when *de iure* they have no legal authority. (p. 62) Nevertheless, Baptists seem to be moving away from a radical individualism towards a modified ecclesiastical method of validating authority (p. 66) but this has as yet found no open expression in terms of theological principles which would justify the trend. Higher church councils are still regarded by most Baptists as no more than human creations. Among Baptists therefore, authority tends to be charismatic i.e. dependent upon personal qualities which enable a leader to gain a following for his ideals and support from the constituency in order to achieve them. The end result is a formal system of authority which reduces legal authority to a minimum, but which in practice encourages the growth of an uncontrolled informal system of power. (p. 92)

Baptist democracy, therefore, looks very different when attention is directed to actual practice rather than to theory. "For years Baptists have been looking at anarchy and seeing democracy." (p. 157) Some Baptists are guilty of wishful thinking, assuming that because Baptist theory says there should be no wider ecclesiastical power, there is, in fact, none in practice. (p. 163) This, of course, is not so. One basic and fundamental weakness is the

failure of Baptists clearly to acknowledge and accept the principle of indirect representation. Pure democracy is as impossible in Baptist churches as in the ancient city state and quite impracticable on the associational and national level. The author points out that if all the churches of the convention sent all the delegates to which they were entitled under the present system of "direct representation," then there would be 12,744 voting delegates at the annual meetings! Nor are these delegates chosen by the church members in a strictly democratic vote. Financial and other factors determine the choice in fact. He purports to prove by statistics that few ministers from small churches have the opportunity to work at the national level of the A.B.C. It is clear that Prof. Harrison is convinced that the solution does not lie in any attempt to re-establish pure democracy according to a New Testament pattern which does not exist. Nor can abuses of power within the present system (and one who is not an American Baptist will naturally be cautious about confirming or denying what these are) be laid at the door of denominational officials only.

If I understand Prof. Harrison aright, a solution to the problem of authority and power requires a rethinking and reapplication of fundamental theological principles and the willingness to establish proper legal and constitutional safeguards for the exercise of power. The basic principles are:—

(1) The absolute sovereignty of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ within the universal church. (p. 218) This requires in practice checks on the illegitimate exercise of power whether by groups of local churches or denominational officials.

(2) The priesthood of all believers involves, among other things, the right of the humblest believer to seek and find the mind of Christ within the local church, and then the freedom to proclaim what he finds. This freedom includes every individual, from fundamentalist to executive secretary. For this, however, to become a reality, there, must be proper safeguards for the minority to express their views, even when these are not acceptable or congenial to the majority or the leaders of the Convention. (p. 219)

(3) Baptists must recognize that all ecclesiastical authority is penultimate and limited and depends upon the loving mercies of God. Prof. Harrison is justified again in asserting that the founders of the Free churches never declared the local congregation to be an autonomous unity totally separated from the life of other churches. (p. 219) It is at this point where the need is most acutely felt for an historical and theological study to supplement this sociological approach. How far is true to say that the New

Testament gives us a picture of locally autonomous congregations? What is the theological significance of the New Testament use of ecclesia in other than the local sense? Does the New Testament give us an unchanging pattern of polity which is determinative for all future practice? The author roundly declares that congregational autonomy is neither descriptive of the theological intention of Free Churchmen nor of the real social relations of the churches and associational groups. (p. 220) Freedom and authority are not antithetical but complementary and if Baptists wish to combine them in a satisfactory way, they must be prepared either to develop their polity into a system in which the principle of indirect representation is accepted and in which power is delegated under proper safeguards or failing that (and Prof. Harrison does not seem very hopeful of this first development) Baptist polity must be strengthened at the associational level. If the local churches are to be able to resist undue pressure either from secular authorities or from ecclesiastical oligarchies, they must recognise the "temporal but pre-eminent authority of the association of churches, so long as they wish to derive the advantages of associational membership." (p. 220) Baptists have failed to recognise that all authority involves power but if the power is not to be naked power but true authority, it must be properly conferred and suitably controlled.

There can be no question that Professor Harrison has put his finger on some real problems and that his analysis of the power structure is in many ways illuminating. Whether the picture given of the American Baptist Convention is accurate is exceedingly difficult for an outsider to judge. Is it really a fact that executive power is being exercised in such a way as to infringe seriously the freedom of the local congregation? The abuses of power, if such there are in the A.B.C. are not, of course, peculiar to that convention. A sociological analysis of any other communion would reveal similar anomalies and distortions. Nor would this be a matter for surprise as long as churches, whatever their polity, are composed of justified sinners and not perfected saints. In pleading for a more frank recognition of the principle of indirect representation, some will think that Prof. Harrison is advocating a course which would undermine the historic Baptist emphasis in regard to the nature of the church. This, however, is precisely the matter for debate. Some feel strongly that the essential nature of the church for Baptists is that of a fellowship of believers expressed and safeguarded by believers' baptism. On the other hand, they would question whether the autonomy of the local congregation as often understood by Baptists is either a clear and unambiguous implication of what we know of New Testament practice or unconnected

with peculiar 17th century conditions which are not valid for all ages to come. The church as a fellowship of believers and the retention of believers' baptism could very well be combined with a polity which modified local autonomy in the interests of stronger associations or of more convention authority. These are difficult and controversial matters. At least Prof. Harrison deserves our thanks if he forces us to consider such questions which hitherto on the whole we have been loathe to face.

R. F. ALDWINCKLE

From Stepney to St. Giles', by R. E. Cooper (Carey Kingsgate Press, 148 pp., 10s. 6d.).

It is good to see R. E. Cooper turning his talents to authorship. The story of Regent's Park College 1810-1960 gives him a congenial theme, for who would not choose to pay tribute to his *alma mater*? He has shown himself a true son of Regent's in his concern for historical accuracy, with the result that we have not only the story of the growth of an educational institution but also a competent survey of a period which is of great significance for British Baptists.

The author is obviously impressed by a series of contrasts: between the period when members of Oxford University were required to subscribe to the Thirty Nine Articles and to take the Oath of Supremacy, and the achievement of 1957 when Regent's Park Oxford attained the status of a Private Hall; between the two houses near Whitechapel road, London, where began the "Baptist Academical Institution at Stepney" and the present splendid site in St. Giles' where Helwys Hall is "one of the most useful and modern in Oxford"; between the days when some of our Baptist forefathers were suspicious of learning in their ministers, and the present day when "the majority of Baptists are mistrustful of the minister who is mentally lazy."

Possibly Robert Cooper is over-sensitive of the Baptist suspicion of education. He writes "We have smiled patronizingly at the deacon's prayer during a pastoral vacancy: 'O Lord send us a pastor without an intellect': it is sad that such a prayer can be offered: it is sadder still that it is so often answered." There seems to be a little cynicism here, which I am not sure Robert Cooper meant. Looking across the world field I should say that Baptists are making notable efforts in the field of ministerial training. In some areas where I did not expect to find it I have found the writings of Wheeler and Theodore Robinson in great demand, to say nothing of the appreciation of Aubrey R. Johnson and the general acclaim of H. H. Rowley.

Regent's Park's contribution to scholarship, it need hardly be said, is outstanding. Its major contribution has been in the Old Testament field (though our debt is great to Theodore Robinson for his work also in the New), in history and Biblical theology. One could wish that the Baptist contribution could shine with equal lustre in New Testament studies, though here Principal Beasley-Murray is already establishing himself.

Robert Cooper has written his appreciation of Regent's Park around its Principals. There are estimates of Newman "to whom more than any other person his successors in London and Oxford owe the firm and broad foundations on which the work of the College was built;" of Joseph Angus, who saw the College moved to Regent's Park and its affiliation to London University; of George Pearce Gould, Henry Wheeler Robinson and Robert Child. He pays generous tributes, but his survey would have gained if it could have included a chapter on Gould (whom Robert Cooper finds hard to assess) by one of Gould's men, and I am not sure that Wheeler Robinson was really known except by an inner circle.

It was due to Wheeler Robinson more than any other that the Oxford venture was achieved. It was the fulfilment of J. H. Shakespeare's dream, though Shakespeare had Cambridge in mind. It was indeed fortunate for our denomination that Regent's Park College could begin in Oxford with such internationally recognised scholarship as Wheeler Robinson could give it; fortunate too, that so many Regent's men achieved distinction. Robert Cooper is entitled to pride as he surveys the contribution made by Regent's men in scholarship, in the home ministry, on the mission field and in administration. I enjoyed so much his appreciation that I began to wonder whether it was wise to venture on the chapter "The Regent's Park Contribution." Some readers of this book, I fancy, may see implications in that chapter which Robert Cooper did not mean to suggest. His view that the characteristic of Regent's Park men is "intellectual integrity first" leads him to the sentence "This is not to suggest the great preachers are not honest intellectually." It should not be necessary in a book of this tone and quality to have to write that sentence.

Baptists everywhere, and not merely Regent's Park men, are proud that we have a college in Oxford. What is needed now is the translation of that pride into effective support of Principal Henton Davies in the great and worthy task to which he has committed himself.

F. TOWNLEY LORD

Between the Testaments, by D. S. Russell. (S.C.M. Press, 1960, 176 pp., 12s. 6d.).

The University of Leeds is determined to illuminate the post-exilic-period of Old Testament studies. First there was Principal Sneith's helpful volume. *The Jews from Cyrus to Herod*, and now Principal Russell's volume *Between the Testaments*. This latter volume concentrates attention on the Inter-testamental period in the strict sense of those words, that is, on the centuries 200 B.C.—100 A.D.

He introduces us first to the struggle between Judaism and Hellenism. These are the two founts of our own culture and their first meeting is of perennial interest. There is an outline treatment of Judaism in this period, the people, the sects and the literature. The first part concludes with a brief study of the apocryphal literature.

Part Two is wholly given to the Apocalyptists, their work and some of their doctrines, the Messiah and the Resurrection. There is also a select bibliography, a chronological table and the usual indices.

The book must be warmly commended for it helps to fill a gap, and Dr. Rowley's commendation of the book is well bestowed.

G. HENTON-DAVIES