

## REVIEWS

*Radical Religion in the English Revolution* edited by J. F. McGregor and B. Reay. Oxford University Press. 1984. Pp.ix, 219. £19.50.

This book has eight essays on the religious radicals of the English Revolution and makes an important contribution both in setting forward some new ideas and in bringing together some recent scholarship in the area.

Nevertheless, it is no intended slight to such as Christopher Hill, Brian Manning or any of the others if I concentrate upon the longest and, as it seems it was intended to be, the pivotal piece by J. F. McGregor - 'The Baptists: fount of all heresy'. He takes the Baptists as a group with their intention to reconstitute what they believed to be the one model provided by the New Testament for the church, their independent congregations and, perhaps especially, the profound implications of their rejection of infant baptism. These he sees as marking a truly radical departure from the more comfortable patterns of either the reformation or even of English puritanism in many of its forms. What he also recognises is both the Baptists' thoroughgoing rejection of hierarchical forms of authority with the Congregationalists and the Baptists' even more thoroughgoing rejection than the Congregationalists of any possible identification of church and society. So Dr McGregor does not worry, with the denominational historian, about such distinctions as those between Arminians and Calvinists - he recognises they are there but he asks his most basic question, fairly enough, of the Baptists as one loose-knit community.

Even so he sees it had two wings and recognises that the General Baptists were separated from what he calls 'the radical Calvinist coalition' and that the successes of the two main groups of Baptists were sometimes dependent upon the particular personal gifts of individual evangelists yet, on the whole, Dr McGregor is not primarily interested in internal distinctions between Baptist groupings. The problem to which he seems most concerned to address himself is to what degree and for what reasons radical believers, after a period among the Baptists, passed on to yet more radical groups. That this happened there can be no doubt and to this fact the other essays in this collection bear generous witness. He himself tends to stress that Baptists could become rigid both through trying to keep to their New Testament ideal and through limiting the free expression of the individual saint by means of the discipline of the congregation.

Dr McGregor's central point seems to have been that the Baptists encouraged a freedom and an open-ness (p.57) 'which could only flourish outside the movement'. Indeed, he suggests that the Baptists' primary weakness was (p.63) 'their inability to attract leaders of the quality necessary to resolve the ambiguities in their relationship both with the world and with their fellow radicals'. While this is almost certainly true I am not clear that it actually says very much; it could be argued in reverse that the leaders they had enabled them to move from sect to denomination without compromising what they believed to be their fundamental insights. With the exception of the Quakers the other sectaries dealt with in this book did not survive at all.

However, one thing is quite clear. Both this essay and this book must be taken into serious account by any working in the area of seventeenth century Baptist history which, it is suggested in the Preface, is 'one curiously neglected by historians'. Certainly, I found it caused me to think of some new questions for my own study of William Kiffin!

B. R. WHITE