

AMERICAN RELIGIOUS SURVEY

THE Cambridge University Press are putting out five books on American Life and Institutions, all written by Americans, but in order to interpret America to England. Everyone on this side should be anxious to understand America: misunderstanding at this stage of world history might precipitate one of the greatest of world tragedies. It is a little difficult to understand why there should be such need for interpretation, or why there should be any difficulty of understanding one another: but such difficulties exist, and can prove very intractable. It is all party nationalism and the pride and blindness it breeds. Some Catholics, especially, seem to delight in exaggerating the difference between us, forgetting the bond of our common religion, whatever one professes. It is therefore perhaps hopeful that the first of these five books to be published should be "Religion in America".¹ It has been entrusted to Dean Sperry of Harvard; and we cannot imagine it in better hands. First, the Dean has been a Rhodes Scholar and knows more of England than merely Oxford; he evidently likes us, and knows just how to approach us. He is modest, if anything, too modest; he has wide religious sympathies, which he is determined not even his own religious position shall circumscribe. Although the book has to deal with statistical facts and classify a varied and even confused situation, statistics are mostly postponed to an appendix, and the description of the numerous denominations is done not only without weariness, but in a way that should interest anyone with any concern for religion, especially if they are interested in reunion. The analysis is penetrating, his judgments spiritual, and a touch of kindly humour makes this a book which many will read through at a sitting.

Dean Sperry is apologetic about the number of sects in America, and the weirdness of some of them; but they are only an exaggeration of conditions this side. Were we not once credited with as many sects as there are days to the year? There are only 240 in the United States. Our own can be produced to about four or five families; and so can theirs. What has increased their number in America is the multiplication due to the national divisions of both Orthodox and Lutherans, and the duplication entailed by negro segregation: a sore point, but one which we need not rub in, with our own Indian and South African problems to match theirs. As

¹ Religion in America. By Willard L. Sperry. pp. 318. (Cambridge University Press).

Dr. Sperry points out, we are each inclined to lift our eyebrows at the other's problems and close our eyes to our own. The two great denominational differences between the States and Britain are that they now have no established Churches, while their Catholic numbers are about ten times ours. Twenty-three millions makes the Catholic Church in America now the largest of all the religious bodies: though that is surpassed by the twenty-five millions the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ can muster. Catholic growth is largely due to the influx of immigrants from European Catholic countries, and their greater birth rate, but also to the considerable number of converts. What has probably contributed to this growth is the fact that there has been little real persecution on either side; Church and State are separated, and so here is a free field and no favour, in which conditions the Catholic Church is not only winning easily, but it likely soon to dominate the situation. At this Americans are getting afraid, and Dean Sperry, while refusing to give way to any of the lower prejudices, does confess that he appreciates the fears others feel. It is feared that Catholicism, if and when it wins, will want Church and State to be united, and will no longer prove tolerant; though he gratefully admits that the first State to make religious toleration part of its constitution was Maryland, a Catholic foundation. He would obviously see with regret the disappearance of the strong individualist element in religion which Protestantism has fostered, and America, in particular, has emphasised as part of its independent and democratic spirit. He suspects that Catholicism is tempted to favour Totalitarianism. If the Dean fails a little, for all his determination to understand, where Catholicism is concerned, it remains to be wondered if any Catholic could have written such a sympathetic, friendly and understanding book. For Dr. Sperry is able to understand the real urge behind the proliferous sectarianism of his countrymen: it has an economic basis—the multitude of sects reveal that the ordinary, and the less educated people, feel themselves lost, crowded out and uncatered for in the larger dominations.

Any Catholic, American or English, will find here the people described he has to win. Why can the Baptists gain so many of the negroes, and Catholics make so little headway with them? Your reviewer is sure that we need to give these voluble, excited, and happy people more chance to express themselves; while appreciating all that is desired by the strong liturgical movement in the States, the negroes might well be allowed to sing their own spirituals during the Mass, yes, even clap their hands at the elevation (better than presenting arms or firing guns, anyhow) and shout

Alleluia, at least when the priest says it, often so swiftly and without its natural expression. There is even another question to be considered. How are we going to convert people, if it may be proposed without offence, like Willard E. Sperry himself? He is a liberal Protestant, and for all his sympathy and appreciation of us, may seem far off. But some of the very problems unresolved by liberals, which he sees clearly enough, are solved in Thomistic theology. He criticises us a little for being so uncritical of the State (and that is not peculiar to America) and yet fears that our allegiance to the Pope means a divided loyalty which would threaten the American Constitution! It is just because the Church is not put first that America, and the rest of us, are where we are, with our nationalism, our industrialism and our imperialism. For while he gently upbraids our imperialism, has there not been something called "dollar imperialism"? But he recognises well enough that there is danger of worse than misunderstanding if American business and British imperialism get at cross purposes. When he fears we lean towards totalitarianism he is probably confusing accidental political circumstances and the claim of religion to be totalitarian—the only thing that should be—and the demand of the Church to be supreme—the one supremacy that must be if all others are to be free and the State is not to be deified. It should be easy to guarantee that the Church will never ask for "Establishment" in America; it only asks for room and recognition; its supremacy is entirely spiritual (all else were aberrations we have learned to know from their failure); and the influence the Church would exercise on politics would be like any other body legitimate, and "indirect". Dean Sperry really shows how much America needs the Catholic Church, in a way how much he needs it himself. Somebody over the other side should profit by this splendid, sympathetic, sincere survey to set about a new campaign to win America; it obviously can be done, and now is the time. And when we on this side can have a similar survey, and a suitably matched strategy, there need be no more fears about America and ourselves, or indeed for the rest of the world.

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