



A Review of "Denominationalism," By Russell E. Richey (ed.). Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977.

1978

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*Ecumenical Review* 30, 2 (April): 189.

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This is a collection of essays published during the past 40 years, edited with commentary. In spite of the variety of its contents, it is informed by a clear message. In antithesis to the judgment of Richard Niebuhr that "denominationalism represents the moral failure of Christianity", we have here a celebration of denominationalism as the distinctive and dynamic contribution of American Protestantism to the story of Christianity. The matter is treated from the point of view of the historian and the sociologist. Theological norms are not invoked, for "the denominational principle required *de facto* surrender of claims to be the Church ... continuous with the early Church". The denomination is not a sect, for it makes no exclusive claim to be the true Church. Nor is it conformed to any earlier model, for it is the essence of the denominational principle "that the true Church and its unity (are) not to be fully manifested in human institutions".

The theological roots of denominationalism are traced in the claim of the Calvinist dissenters of the 17th century that Christians must have the liberty to separate themselves from the communion of a church and to "dispose of themselves as a distinct church" while continuing to hold that the body from which they have separated is also the true Church. The book tells the story of how this principle, transferred to American soil, created the theory and practice of denominationalism. Those who had been uprooted from their homes had desperate need for the mutual support of a community. The congregation was thus the vital centre of life; but it was fragile. The plurality of confessions made state support impossible. What happened was that voluntary associations dedicated to the christianizing of America and (later) to overseas missions, powered and shaped by the revival movements, provided a new pattern which was so successful that the churches had to adopt it. In the period from the Revolution to the mid 19th century, the churches developed "programme agencies" for missionary work, education, literature and many other purposes. With this development, denominations received their characteristic form.

It follows that "the denomination is not primarily confessional, and it is certainly not territorial. Rather, it is purposive". (Mead p. 70 ff.) Very typical of the denominational principle

as here expounded is the following quotation: "A congregational church is a group of Christians associated together for a definite purpose, not because of peculiarities of belief." (p. 81).

Space does not permit a discussion of the individual essays. W. S. Hudson (1955) probes the 18th-century roots of denominationalism. Sidney Mead (1954) and Timothy Smith (1968) examine the special features of post-revolutionary America which gave shape and power to the denominational idea. Elwyn Smith (1962) and F. J. Hood (n. d.) give detailed accounts of the growth of the Presbyterian and Reformed denominations. Richey (1977) demonstrates that American Methodism has had all the authentic features of a denomination from the beginning. Timothy Smith and E. F. Frazier study the role of the ethnic factor in creating denominationalism with reference to European and African groups respectively. A chapter from Richard Niebuhr's book *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937) portrays denominationalism as the institutionalizing of the American faith in the Kingdom. Finally, a penetrating essay by Martin Marty asks whether "ethnicity" is not the "skeleton of religion in America" in a double sense – both as the strong frame and as the guilty secret.

The editor assumes that the brief period during which "the norms of ecumenism and the theology of neo-orthodoxy made pluralism and denominationalism suspect" is over, and that we can now celebrate with gusto the distinctively American contribution to the Christian story. I am not competent either as a historian or as a sociologist to criticize the book. I have found it fascinating and informative. I am, however, bound to ask the theological question which the book firmly ignores: Can the phenomena here described make any claim to be an authentic manifestation of what the New Testament means by the Church?

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