By any standards this is a substantial book – containing well over 600 pages of information about eight very different American denominations, each of which is studied from several points of view. In itself, however, it represents only one third of a larger project entitled ‘Organizing Religious Work for the Twenty-First Century: Exploring Denominationalism’. Located within the Institute for Religion Research (HIRR) at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut, the project as a whole received major funding from the Lilly Endowment – a very significant source of finance for research into American religion. This volume is concerned with the national structures of denominations – its partners focused on (a) local congregations and (b) the regional judicatories (an intermediate layer of organization between local and national structures). The whole, therefore, represents a close analysis of the layered organization characteristic of American denominationalism.

Roozen and Nieman look at the national structures of denominations from three points of view – historical, sociological, theological. A crucial focus of their work can be found in the relationship between the Christian dimension of these communities and their organizational lives; hence the interdisciplinary nature (including practitioners as well as academics) of the eight teams brought together in this project. The denominations in question are (in alphabetical order): the Assemblies of God, the Association of Vineyard Churches, the Episcopal Church, the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, the National Baptist Convention, the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ and the United Methodist Church. In other words, the list includes both old and new denominations, large and small organizations, a range of ecclesial and theological identities, and denominations which are growing as well as shrinking. In short, about as many variables as it is reasonably possible to contain in one study have been taken into account.

The first thing to say about this book is that it contains a great deal of reliable and well-organized information – the fruits of a carefully planned piece of
research. A lot of very interesting detail is brought together in a volume which can be read in several ways – particular denominations, or groups of denominations, can be selected from the whole, different themes can be explored, and different clusters imagined without ever losing touch with the central thesis. Indeed I doubt very much that many people – including even the most ardent reviewer – will read the book from cover to cover. Readers will nonetheless emerge instructed by the various case studies they have chosen for perusal and will be able to see their relevance to the wider project.

What, then, are the underlying or core themes that link the diverse experiences of these religious communities? These can be summarized in a sentence or two. Essentially this book concerns the struggles about identity that lie beneath the multitude of presenting issues that come and go in the lives of American denominations. How, more precisely, do the national structures of American denominations contribute to the maintenance or otherwise of denominational identity as these organizations establish their priorities for the twenty-first century? Will they succeed in their task? Or will some of them succeed more than others and, if so, which ones? Is it possible, in other words, for the denomination – the form of organizational life favoured by the historically dominant groups of American religious life – to adapt to a new and very different economic and social context of the new century without losing its essential, indeed its defining, characteristics?

For the British reader, a second question follows from this. To what extent do these questions resonate for the churches of Europe as they in turn adapt to similar pressures? The answer is complex. In some senses the European churches are in exactly the same situation as their American counterparts: structures that emerged in a very different economic and social context cannot simply carry on regardless of the changes going on around them. Most European churches, however, have an entirely different ecclesiological existence. More precisely, the historic churches of Europe are, above all, embedded in territory – a feature displayed at every level of society (local, regional and national). This, moreover, is the feature which constitutes both their greatest strength and their greatest weakness. The unique place that such churches have in the history of the locality and their obligations to the entire population offer huge potential; conversely their rootedness in place can lead at times to paralysing immobilism – the more so in times of rapid change.

One such occurred at the time of the industrial revolution – a shock from which the historic churches of Europe never fully recovered. In some senses they have been trying to ‘catch up’ ever since, especially in urban areas. Here, the American denomination had a distinct advantage: unassociated with territory and with a much more limited pre-urban existence, denominations were able to move into the growing cities of the United States relatively easily. Hence, still, the comparative vitality of American religion as denominational activity, nation building and economic development spiralled up together, encouraged by an