Spener and the Theology of Pietism

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INTRODUCTION

RECENT biblical and theological thought in America has taken one of two main lines of development, (1) the Form-Critical movement with its emphasis upon the Sitz-im-leben, or (2) the theological a priorists, whether Fundamentalist or Neo-Orthodox. In the pursuit of historical truth by the form-critics or the pursuit of doctrine by the theological a priorists, religion has almost disappeared. Recently we have witnessed the New Life Movement in Methodism under the leadership of Albert Edward Day, directing the Church (Ecumenical not Methodist) to a personal religion.

From time to time the Christian Church has been purified by a return to this personal relationship between man and God. It is the purpose of this article to show the purifying effect of this rebirth of religion by an historical study of one of the many returns to the religion of the heart as illustrated in Spener and the theology of Pietism. If this is to be the Christian century, we need a biblicism, a theology, and a personal religion of the heart.

PART I. THE ZEITGEIST

In the seventeenth century, the emphasis upon intellectual assent in the theological sphere had a two-fold development in religious practice. First, the belief in an unlimited right of investigation and personal judgment terminated in the party strife of England. Secondly, the stress upon conviction produced the extreme dogmatism in seventeenth-century German Lutheranism, and the institutionalism of the Jesuits. It should be recognized that the Gallican Church of this period had its difficulty. The ultra-clerical party under Mary de' Medici and Anne of Austria was opposed by a group of men who believed that Catholicism should be under the watchful eye of the State. Of the latter, Guillaume du Vair (1556–1621) may be mentioned, likewise Bishop of Lisieux, Lord Keeper and to some extent, Descartes, who continued the work of du Vair. It remained for the Protestants of Holland to initiate the movements which impeded the development of these two unproductive tendencies, namely, (1) division of the Church, and (2) theological dogmatism, as illustrated by the neo-scholasticism of the Lutherans and the neo-institutionalism of the Jesuits. The movement known as Latitudinarianism in England, and the whole question of the English Settlement was an attempt to counteract the excessive use and abuse of the right of personal judgment, the raison d'être of Protestantism. The movement known as Pietism in Catholic and non-Catholic bodies was a movement to counteract the right-wing development of the age of reason which produced the excessive dogmatism of the Lutheran Church and the institutionalism of the Jesuits.

As a reaction to the emphasis upon belief and conviction, the dominant characteristic of the age, a movement arose which stressed the individual soul. In the Roman Catholic Church, this movement took the form of Jansenism under the leadership of Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638), and Pascal, but opposed by the Jesuits, and Quietism under the leadership of the Spaniard, Molinos, the French Madame Guyon and Fénélon (1651–1715) with Bossuet as the opposition. It is to the discredit of the Roman Catholic Church that these personal movements of religion met with official rejection. In Protestantism a similar revival of personal religion occurred as may be seen in the rise of Calvinistic Pietism in Holland, German Pietism, Moravianism, the
Friends in England, and later the Methodists. All of these movements in their early beginnings are a ‘back to the heart’ emphasis (since personal religious experience is stressed) in opposition to the impersonal institutionalism and theological dogmatism of the status quo.

PART II. THE RISE OF PIETISM

Holland was the European center for religious and political freedom during the Age of Louis XIV, called by some historians the Age of the Dutch. The three Anglo-Dutch Wars and the invasion of Holland by Louis XIV (1672) established the supremacy of the Dutch Empire. Holland during this period was the refugee center for the Continent. The University of Leyden, founded in 1574, was the academic home of Justus Lipsius, Joseph Scaliger, Claudius Salmasius and Gerhard Johann Vossius, all famous men of letters. At Amsterdam, Descartes and Spinoza flourished for a time and set the course for modern philosophy. Despite the freedom in Holland, the greatest of the Dutch writers, Hugo Grotius, was forced to compose his great work in exile. In the field of religion the feud between the Precisians and Remonstrants, Calvinistic extremes, was over the problem of Church and State in connection with the question, Should the State enforce religious uniformity? Arminius opposed the Precisians on this question by affirming that the Church has no right to dictate to the State, until condemned by the Synod of Dort in 1618. In politics the dispute was over the question of a centralized government versus the sovereignty of the provinces. In the midst of all this disputation, a reform movement, known as Pietism, arose which influenced subsequent religious history.

Pietism arose among the disputing Calvinists in Holland and was carried to the German states by young ministers who studied in Holland. Gisbert Voet, one of the delegates at the Synod of Dort, and a Calvinistic precisianist, was an influential pietist. He was professor of theology at Utrecht from 1634-1676, and a leader of uncommon learning. Being a man of strong character, he sought to enforce puritanic rules, strove for greater religious piety, and became known as the “patron of conventicles.” Along with the mystic Wilhelm Teelinck, Voet opposed religious formalism and indifference and sought a personal religious faith. Johann Cocceius (Koch), one of the early higher critics, had as his first principle in religious reform an improved method of biblical interpretation. A quarrel arose between the followers of Voet and Cocceius over the philosophy of Descartes which need not concern us here. The mystical side of Spinoza found favor with the Pietists. Spinoza’s amor intellectualis and the laetitia spiritualis of the pietists have much in common. Jodocus van Lodenstein, a pupil of both Voet and Cocceius, has been called the first Pietist, for with him Pietism became a distinct religious movement opposed to formalism and religious indifference. Jean de Labadie, first a Roman priest and at the end of his life, a minister in the Reformed Church, had a pietist strain all his life. It is to be remembered that William Penn met Labadie and found a few points of agreement between himself and this French pietist. “Of Calvinistic Pietism generally it must be said that in its appeals to the imagination, the emotions, and the will, rather than to reason, in its chiliastic dreams, and in its comparative neglect of the practical aspects of religion, it failed to produce results in proportion to its efforts; much force was dissipated in negative criticism of the existing conditions in the Church and the world, which lessened its reforming influence, while from lack of cohesion among its members it failed to secure its own continuity.”

PART III. SPENER: THE PROMOTER OF PIETISM

Lutheranism of this period had a stronger unity than the Calvinists in Holland, and consequently Pietism remained within the church. Pietists did not argue and thus they stayed within their communion despite the hostility aroused by their procedure. The Pietism which was developed was largely contempla-
tive similar to Jacob Boehme’s mysticism and St. Bernard’s asceticism. Johann Arndt, the ascetic mystic, in his *Four Books on the True Christianity* (1605), exerted a profound influence upon Spener. Arndt directed the attention of Lutherans backwards to the devotional practice of the Middle Ages. The most important man in the Pietism of this period is Philip Jacob Spener.

**Spener and the Theology of Pietism**

Philip Jacob Spener, the paladin of Pietism, was born in Upper Alsace on January 13, 1635. After studying philosophy, philology and history at Strassburg from 1651 to 1653, he received his master’s degree for an attack upon the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. Following a few years as private tutor and lecturer, Spener was appointed preacher at Strassburg (1663). In 1666, he became the first pastor in the Lutheran Church at Frankfort-on-Main. Around 1670, Spener instituted religious meetings in his home for instruction and prayer (*collegia pietatis*), which may be the prototype for the Oxford Group of today. This conventicle subsequently developed into the movement called Pietism. While at Frankfort his two chief works were published, *Earnest Desires for a Reform of the True Evangelical Church* (Pia desideria, 1675), and *Allgemeine Gottesgelehrtheit*, 1680. A work entitled, *The Interior and Spiritual Peace*, was published six years later (1686). The chaplaincy to the court at Dresden was offered to Spener and accepted by him in 1685. In 1691, he went to Berlin as the rector of St. Nicholas’ Church upon the invitation of the Brandenburg Court. In 1692, *The Duties of the Evangelical Life* was published. The famous University of Halle was founded by the Elector Frederick III under Spener’s influence in 1694. Throughout his life, Spener was opposed by the orthodox Lutheran theologians. In 1695, the Wittenberg theological faculty drew up a list of two hundred and sixty-four charges of error derived from Spener’s writings. Before his death on February 5, 1705, Spener published his last important work, *Theologische Bedenken*, 4 vols., 1700–1702.

The immediate cause of the religious meetings in Spener’s home in 1670, the societies of piety (*collegia pietatis*) was the religious indifference and dogmatism of the *status quo*. Real spirituality was absent and Spener undertook the task of restoring spirituality to the life of his congregation. Spener’s preaching was practical and stressed life rather than contemporary doctrine. The meetings in his home supported his preaching, for a devotional study of the Bible, prayer, and religious edification were sought after in these conventicles.

“The primary object of the Pietists, therefore, was to infuse a fresh spirit of religious fervour, and to bring into use forms of faith and worship better calculated to satisfy the craving for *Innereichkeit* (depth of soul) in devotion and the desire to face the profounder questions which gather round religion.” Pietism is not a complete return to the original Lutheran position, but is a return to the religion of inner experience which occurs from time to time in the history of the Christian Church.

The publication of Spener’s *Pia Desideria* in 1675 with its attack on the contemporary Lutheran Church and a reform platform, was the official launching of a new religious movement. In true debate style, Spener in Part I of this work calls attention to the evils of present-day Lutheranism. The neo-scholasticism of the church hindered personal religious development. Religious indifference was all too common. Part II is the remedy for the evil conditions, a Pietist platform. All Christians should study the Bible. The universal priesthood of believers had the task of mutual instruction and inspiration. Christianity in its practical aspect possessed mutual love and service between fellow-Christians and likewise in dealing with unbelievers and heretics. Piety as well as learning was a prerequisite for the ministry. Teachers in schools of theology should have piety and should instruct their students in the practical side of religion as well as the theoretical. Spener closes his recommendations for a better ministry with
the insistence that preaching should be simple and practical.

This work created quite a turmoil, especially in regard to the devotional meetings in Spener’s home, which were copied by some and opposed by others. Spener expected the attitude of piety to diffuse throughout the Church by originating in these smaller groups and spreading through the whole ecclesiastical body. In his Das geistliche Priesterum, 1677, (The Spiritual Priesthood), the devotional meetings are defended. Spener’s insistence that conversion and regeneration are necessary before theological study brought an attack by Georg Konrad Dilfeld in his Theologia Horbio-Speneriana in 1679, which was disposed of by Spener in his Allegemeine Gottesgelehrtheit aller gläubigen Christen und rechtschaffenen Theologen (1680, General Divinity of all Believing Christians and Thorough Theology).

Pietism has many variations before and after Spener, yet there are certain characteristics which are more or less common to this personal religion within Christianity. First, the emphasis upon inner depth of feeling and oneness with God is the foremost characteristic of this movement of the heart. Pietism is but a part of the whole wave of mysticism which came as a reaction to the utter chaos of the Thirty Years’ War. The neo-supernaturalism of today in Barth, Brunner, and the other dialectical theologians arising as a reaction to Germany’s defeat in the First World War is the modern equivalent of seventeenth-century pietism and mysticism. Second, the doctrine of the general priesthood of the laity. Laymen who were pious and capable of expounding the truth should assist the regular clergy. The gulf between the clergy and the laity should not exist. This doctrine marks a return to Luther. Thirdly, Christianity should be more practical. The Christian is an active Christian possessing a purity of life and a service of love above reproach. This emphasis upon good works brought upon Spener’s head the wrath of the orthodox theologians. In conclusion, the essence of Pietism may be expressed by a quotation from Augustine, “in interiore homine habitat veritas.” Truth which speaks within has for Pietism an active manifestation in practical life.

Conclusions

The stress upon religious experience was a purifying element in the Lutheranism of the day. The official clergy realized that Scholasticism was not appealing to human needs. The emphasis upon the Bible paved the way for subsequent biblical criticism. The weaknesses of Pietism are evident, especially when carried to the extreme, namely lack of appreciation of sound learning, undue emotionalism and pessimism over world affairs leading to a withdrawal from the world and affairs of state. It may be said, however, that the religious status quo is frequently purified by a return to the religion of personal experience, witness Jesus and Judaism, Luther and Catholicism, Spener and Lutheranism, John Wesley and Anglicanism, not to mention recent separatistic tendencies. Many of the schisms in the history of the Church are difficult to justify, yet a separation is seemingly necessary. Basically, a personal faith is needed, anchored to an historic Christian institution for the successful continuation of the Christian enterprise. The religion of personal experience, when kept within an established organization, despite all disadvantages, is the saving element of the Christian Faith.
