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## The Pietistic Roots of Evangelicalism Today

### Ranald Macaulay

If one needed a simple indicator of the importance of Pietism in the 17th and 18th centuries the experience of John Wesley would be sufficient. Immediately after his Aldersgate Street conversion in London on the 24th May 1738 he spent three months visiting Germany and the Pietist community of Herrnhut ("The Lord's Watch") founded and directed by Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf. Why? Quite simply because the spiritual reality of the Moravians whom he had recently met in Georgia and through whom now he had come to understand and receive the Gospel of grace, had made such an impact upon him. Here was a proper emphasis on the Gospel and conversion he felt; here was no formal religion but dynamic spiritual life and godliness; here was a zeal for missions which had already resulted not only in those whom he had met in America but also in others who, 34 years earlier, had gone to the Danish colony of Tranquebar in South India!

The Moravians (descendants of Jan Huss, 15th century) had for many years been refugees from Catholic persecution in Czechoslovakia and in 1722 von Zinzendorf gave them land on his estate as a place of asylum. The resulting community, however, was to be more than a refugee camp. Von Zinzendorf had already been fired by the Pietist vision of his godfather, Philipp Jakob Spener, the acknowledged founder of Pietism; Herrnhut was to be a community of saints with a vital spiritual experience devoted to the furtherance of the Gospel throughout the world. Hence the presence of the 26 missionaries as fellow seafarers with Wesley on his visit to North America; hence, too, the half a dozen Moravian churches in England when he returned -in one of which he had had his life-changing experience, the first-fruits of literally thousands of similar conversions during the decades of the Great Awakening which ensued. His visit to Herrnhut in August 1738 left its imprint upon him; "I would gladly have spent my life here" he wrote; and again "Oh when shall this Christianity cover the earth as the waters cover the sea" (Journal 12 August 1738).

So, significant the Pietist Movement certainly was. But what was it? And what became of it?

Essentially it was a Renewal Movement neither the first in the church's history nor the last. Which provides additional incentive for us to look more closely at it, surrounded as we are by a renewal movement of our own. Its aim was to renew the Lutheran Church of the day. Did it achieve this, and how? Both positively and negatively what can we learn from it about contemporary movements in the late 20th century? That is the main purpose of this article, to look back in order to understand better what surrounds us today.

The story begins with Reaction. When Spener was born in 1635 the Thirty Years War in Europe was still in progress. This was a conflict resulting largely from the religious upheavals of the previous century. The Reformers had successfully challenged the monolithic Roman Church and its unbiblical theology and practices. However, Rome had

been quick to defend herself and wherever possible to recover lost ground, if necessary by force of arms; hence the devastation of the Thirty Years War, Catholic versus Protestant (though purely political motives, as against religious ones, also played their part).

When the Peace of Westphalia (1648) brought an end to the armed conflict, Europe was left both physically and emotionally exhausted and a reaction against theological controversy quite naturally resulted. Amongst those sceptical about the possibility of certainty in religion; the watchword became 'toleration', but toleration "based less upon love than upon simple lack of conviction" (Jackson. No Other Foundation. p.184). For Locke and the French Encyclopaedists, the concept was increasingly secularised. The state should concern itself, they said, with Human Reason and Justice not Divine Revelation and Judgment. Religious dogmatism, being dangerous to the welfare of the state, should be tolerated only on its periphery. The apotheosis of such tolerance became, ironically, the French Revolution, swiftly producing an intolerance as barbarous as the Catholic Inquisition of the previous two centuries!

Such was the non-religious, or even anti-religious, reaction to the 30 Years War. The religious reaction was aimed not against theology as such but against what was called 'Theological Scholasticism', - which brings us to Pietism. By scholastic we mean an overly rigorous concern for theological systematisation; its goal, a theological formulation as complete and as consistent as humanly possible, (based, of course, upon God's written Revelation), thus ensuring the spiritual stability of the Church: or so it was hoped.

Not that this was an unnecessary task.. After its break with Rome in the 16th century, Protestant theology did need to clarify its different teachings and to address the controversies current at the time. The problem lay not so much in the task but in its execution. As Herder put it a century later, "every leaf of the tree of life was so dissected that the dryads wept for mercy" (Cragg. p.100).

Hence a reaction against scholasticism was both necessary and understandable.

The Pietist renewal is generally agreed to have begun in 1675. That year Spener published an introduction to the writings of an earlier theologian Johann Arndt (1555-1621), who had expressed similar concerns about scholasticism. This treatise was published separately the next year under the title "PIA DESIDERIA: or Heartfelt desires for a God-pleasing improvement of the Protestant Church". And immediately it became a bestseller.

Spener first outlined the spiritual confusion and poverty of the Lutheran Church. but he went on to hold up before his readers the possibility of improvement. "we can have no doubt that God promised his church here on earth a better state than this" Then he suggested a programme of reform under six headings: 1) the whole Bible was to be read and expounded in church, and Bible study (both privately and in small groups) was to be encouraged; 2) Luther's emphasis on the Priesthood of all believers was to be rediscovered and applied both in terms of the use of gifts and also in terms of mutual responsibilities one to another amongst the laity; 3) people were to be taught that Christianity involves not only knowing the will of God but doing it; 4) religious controversies, though necessary, should always be entered into with care knowing the importance of expressing love to those with whom one felt compelled to disagree; 5) theological education must be reformed to ensure that students were prepared for the ministry not only intellectually but spiritually; 6) preaching must be simple rather than abstruse, always designed to produce practical piety.

"This much is certain: the diligent use of the Word of God, which consists not only of listening to sermons but also reading, meditating and discussing (Ps.1:2) must be the chief means for reforming something ... the Word of God remains the seed from which all that is

good in us must grow. If we succeed in getting the people to seek eagerly and diligently in the Book of Life for their joy, their spiritual-life will be wonderfully strengthened and they will become altogether different people... (Pietist Writings ed. Peter Erb. SPCK. p.34).

Such sentiments, of course, constitute the authentic voice of reform and renewal at any point in church history and every Evangelical will endorse them without reservation. In a sense, Spener's protest was simply a restatement of Luther's a century and a half before: the Word of God made available to the people. But the context now was different. No longer was it a protest against the unorthodoxy of Rome. Now it was a protest against the dead orthodoxy of Luther's own church! The initial enthusiasm which greeted the publication of *Pia Desideria* was short-lived. Understandably, many clergy felt threatened by Spener's critique of contemporary preaching and by his emphasis upon the laity. For their part theologians objected to his remarks about the limitations and abuses of scholastic theology.

However, Spener had already for some years been involved in the formation of what were called *collegia pietatis* [assemblies for piety] - our fellowship groups - and the opposition he ran into merely drove him to emphasize their importance the more. *Collegia* sprang up throughout Germany. Auguste Francke, to take just one example, first attended an assembly of piety in 1684 as a 21 year old student in Leipzig. Three years later he had a conversion experience which profoundly influenced his subsequent theology and life. In 1692 he was recommended by Spener to teach at the newly established University of Halle in Central Germany, and later succeeded him as the principal force in German pietism in the early 18th century.

Here was the means of renewal within the 'main-line' churches of the day - *ecclesiolae in ecclesia* - little churches inside the bigger church; for these were to comprise those who had had a real conversion experience, who read the Bible and prayed together, who were committed to a practical demonstration of love of neighbour inside and outside the church.

The practical emphasis was a Pietist distinctive from the beginning - to be practical not merely in devotional activities such as Bible reading, meditation and prayer, but also socially. Which lent the movement a strong philanthropic dimension. Halle was outstanding in this: many "Halle institutions", as they were called, sprang up - an orphanage with affiliated schools (one for girls even!), a publishing house, a Bible College, a college for oriental studies (to assist the missionary endeavour) and a chemist. On a brief visit en route to Herrnhut, Wesley gives us this description of the orphanage: "that amazing proof that 'all things are possible to him that believeth'. There is now a large, yearly revenue for its support besides what is brought in by the printing office, the books sold there and the apothecary shop which is furnished with all sorts of medicines. The lodging chambers for the children, their dining room their chapel, and all the adjoining apartments are so conveniently contrived and so exactly clean as I have never seen any before. 650 children (we were informed) are wholly maintained there, and 3000 (if I mistake not) taught. Surely such a thing neither we nor our fathers had known, as this great thing that God has done here!" (Journal Wed. 26th July 1738).

The INFLUENCE of the Pietist Movement upon Wesley (and hence upon the United Kingdom) in this aspect as in all else - its emphasis on Scripture, conversion, preaching, godliness, meetings etc - was, as we have said, unmistakable and indelible. Nor was that influence confined to Wesley and Methodism. Pietism quickly spread to Holland, Switzerland, Scandinavia, the Baltic countries and even into Russia. Naturally enough it became a significant force in the development of the church in North America along with European, and specifically Lutheran, immigration in the first half of the 18th century.

In this connection, the earliest ripples of what later developed into the tidal wave of the American Awakening in the three decades before the Revolution can be traced directly to the Pietist Movement. Theodore Frelinghuysen, of Dutch extraction but born in Germany, had himself been renewed by Pietism in Europe before leaving to become a minister in the Dutch community in New Jersey. There he was shocked by the lifeless orthodoxy in his church and immediately launched a campaign of evangelism and reform beginning in 1720. By 1726 Gilbert Tennant, a Presbyterian in a neighbouring church in New Brunswick had come under his influence. And so the revival spread, augmented powerfully in 1740 by the arrival of George Whitefield for his second visit, who, before he returned to England, invited Tennant to Boston "in order to blow up the divine fire lately kindled there" (Lion Handbook of Christianity. p. 439).

The importance and value of Pietism, therefore, is obvious. As F. Ernest Stoeffler says, "Pietism is today considered one of the most influential Protestant reform movements since the reformation itself" (Erb. p.x).

Nevertheless, for all its virtues and achievements Pietism was deeply flawed from the outset. To say this is not to imply that its achievements were insubstantial, nor the zeal and commitment of its proponents insincere. We have been at pains to say the opposite and to give credit where credit is due. Nor is it cynicism to admit that all renewal movements are flawed - just as all churches and all believers are. The appropriate response, in fact, should be one of gratitude rather than grumbling - that God in his mercy should have used vessels so weak to such good effect. (With a corresponding lament for our relative uselessness to Him within our own generation!)

However, if grumbling is inappropriate, regret is not. Pietist attitudes and tendencies introduced into Protestantism in the 17th century soon weakened the body as a whole, for its influence, as we have seen, was ubiquitous. Chief amongst these were Subjectivism and Isolationism.

Too much attention, the Pietists argued, had been paid to the intellectual understanding of the doctrines of the faith and not enough to its experience. By way of reaction they represented increasingly an emphasis on experience at the expense of the mind. Not that any denied the mind or doctrine outright - though some came close to that one has to admit ("religion can be grasped without the conclusions of reason ... religion must be a matter which is able to be grasped through experience alone without any concept ... there is less at stake in the concepts than the truth of experience; errors in doctrine are not as bad as errors in methods ... reason weakens experience" von Zinzendorf: Erb. p.291). Such statements need to be balanced by the writings of others in the movement and by others, even, of Zinzendorf's writings; e.g. "everyone should be careful to comprehend the true foundation of the saving doctrine on which we are all agreed, so that we may be able to give an answer ... with wisdom and power" (Erb. p.327).

Clearly the doctrines of the Reformation lay at the centre of Pietist theology and its emphasis upon Scripture, expository preaching, careful Bible reading and study, individually and in groups, places this beyond dispute.

However, equally indisputable is the fact that the Pietists' concern for subjective experience resulted in a TENDENCY, increasingly discernable with the passing of time, which steadily undermined the importance, not merely of doctrine, but of all intellectual pursuits. Experience was where it was at - not doctrine, not the mind.

G R Cragg sums this up well: "Pietism failed to keep spiritual vitality and intellectual vigour in proper balance, and this was its most serious defect. It was responsible for the

relative sterility of Pietism as a theological force ... the intellectual timidity of the movement disguised itself in vivid, almost sensuous, forms of expression. Thought might be discouraged, but imagination was allowed free play” (Pelican History. p.104). And in relation to the later revivalist camp meetings at the end of the 18th century and the early 19th century he writes: “It explains the intensely emotional quality which has persisted in certain strains of American Christianity, (and is) responsible for the slightly defiant repudiation of the intellectual elements in the faith”. Hofstadter endorses this: "the Methodist circuit riders in the early 19th century evolved a kind of crude Pietist pragmatism with a single essential tenet; their business was to save souls as quickly and as widely as possible. For this purpose, the elaborate theological equipment of an educated minister was not only an unnecessary frill but in all probability a serious handicap ... the only justification was that he got results, measurable in conversions" (Anti-Intellectualism in American Life. p. 107).

One result of such theology, focussed as it was upon conversion and 'pious' experience, was the gradual removal of the church from all spheres of public life within the nation as a whole. The world out there was a world to be saved through the preaching of the cross. Concern for intellectual issues, even pleasures, was a distraction. Life had to be religious or it was unspiritual. Even involvement in philanthropic concerns was more the product of private/personal piety than an engagement in governmental and social life for its own sake. Philanthropy was what a good Christian should do, but more as 'social activity' -as pious activity. Engagement in the ideas or structure of the culture was frowned upon.

Hence the tendency to Isolationism, an isolationism, note, which was self-inflicted; as against the isolationism with which we are familiar, (commonly known as Marginalism), inflicted upon the Church by an arrogant and triumphant Humanism.

Here one becomes aware of the scale of the problem, of the approaching disaster in fact, which Pietism later became and from which we continue to suffer to this day. Reaction to a moribund scholasticism was understandable and, to a certain extent, commendable (think particularly of Spenser here). But what finally compels a more serious assessment of Pietism. Bordering on an severe indictment in fact, is simply its TIMING!

While the 17th and 18th century Pietists were advocating their particular brand of subjectivist and isolationist piety, a monster far more serious than scholasticism was being conceived on her very doorstep: a monster which was later in fact to devour not merely Pietist faith but the faith of Europe as a whole. Scientific Materialism was in the making, first via Descartes' attempted accommodation between science and philosophy; then in the Empiricism of Hume to Kant and Hegel, and hence to the Logical Positivism and Humanism of the 20th century. 'God is dead -a religious interpretation of the universe is unnecessary and in any event meaningless'.

The point is this: such philosophic ideas, inimical to the Christian faith, were being conceived at just the time Pietism was re-ordering the Protestant Vision. Instead of confronting them in their embryonic form, Pietism in fact ensured that its followers, both then and increasingly as the 19th century unfolded, would never, and could never, adequately confront them. The arena of conflict, the intellectual debate concerning truth and falsehood, was either deliberately abandoned ("reason weakens experience") or relegated to a subsidiary role beneath Experience.

This was the Pietist tragedy even if not understood then or later. For meanwhile the Awakening of the 18th century was giving rise to the Century of Missions in the nineteenth. The superiority of the simpler Pietist approach seemed everywhere to be confirmed. The

Gospel was being carried to the four corners of the earth. Churches were being established in India, China, Africa etc. Where was the problem?

The problem was in Europe - principally in Germany where pietism began. For despite a growing church world-wide and a consequent appearance of strength, at home, amongst the 'sending' nations, the advances of Enlightenment thinking were everywhere beginning to take their toll: first in philosophy as we have seen, then in Literature and Art, then lastly in Theology, - and hence in the churches. Darwin's Origin of Species in 1859 merely fanned an already fiercely burning fire of Scepticism and Materialism. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century the war was over bar the shouting. The Bible was no longer an authority to be trusted implicitly and looked to for intellectual and moral guidance as in the sixteenth century. To many it was simply an encumbrance to be discarded without more ado. Even churches, in their misguided belief that scientific and scholarly integrity required this, began to modify their message. Sin and salvation were passé: tolerance and social concern were all that were needed to bring God's peace to all men.

Paul Hazard's summary of this intellectual volte-face in Europe is blunt and telling: "despite the ill-temper and the violence.... we may nonetheless discern the vital question at issue - shall Europe be Christian or shall it not? ...It was nothing short of an attempt to achieve the total defeat, the complete annihilation of religion, that was now the object of the campaign ..." (European thought in the eighteenth century p.45, 46) Well, the campaign was successful Europe was relieved of its Christian moorings. Secular man was come of age.

Within such a perspective how then do we view the reactions of 17th and 18th century pietism?

Suddenly they appear less innocuous. A new theological atmosphere began increasingly to prevail, not only within expressly Pietist congregations but within Protestantism as a whole the hallmark of which was the elevation of Experience and the denigration of reason. Yet this was the very moment when the reasonableness of God's revelation needed most to be proclaimed and championed, when the cut and thrust of intellectual debate needed most to be engaged, when the 'foolishness' of human wisdom needed most to be exposed. Pietism rendered such a response impossible: now it was a case of even greater subjectivism and isolation culminating in the fundamentalist movement of the late 19th century.

Why? For the obvious reason that involvement in culture necessarily involves intellectual considerations: is Law derived from society or from God? Are there limits upon human freedom? etc.

When Evangelicalism most needed to present a vigorous refutation of man-made ideas she drew attention to herself, in fact, by her impressive silence. As the culture experienced its ever increasing crisis during the first decades of the 20th century a prophetic response from the Evangelical Churches of the west was completely absent. Pietism had prevailed.

But what, we may now ask, of Evangelicalism within the last decades of the 20th century? Has the picture not completely changed? Can it not be argued that Evangelicalism has effectively turned its back on Pietism?

Certainly a number of developments appear to confirm this: evangelical scholars have re-engaged Liberal higher criticism and successfully turned the tide against its characteristic scepticism of the Bible; many Evangelicals are now actively engaged in the public arena - in politics, the media, education, psychology etc.; the Lausanne Covenant of 1974 stands as a significant indication not merely of what had already been achieved by then to reverse the

Pietist influence, but also of Evangelicalism's formal and universal commitment into the future.

Nevertheless, we suggest, the picture is not quite so simple. Discontinuities with the past there most certainly are, but continuities remain - preoccupation with experience for example; a general disinterest in intellectual concerns; an impatience with doctrine; a continuing isolation in practice, Lausanne 1974 notwithstanding.

Admittedly such continuities have to be traced not simply to a Pietist heritage from the early 20th century or before. A general intellectual malaise afflicts Western society as a whole, as indicated for example by such a title as "The Closing of the American Mind" (Bloom). Hence, a distinction between Classical Pietism and late 20th century 'pietism' needs carefully to be maintained; the former representing a reaction against something (intellectualism in the church), the latter a receptivity towards something (contemporary irrationalism); the first an other-worldly spirit the second a subtle and very dangerous worldliness. The two pietisms are not to be confused. (More could be said about this - and probably should).

However, the point is this: one of the principal characteristics of Classical Pietism evidently still characterizes evangelicalism today despite sustained efforts to the contrary. To depreciate the mind earlier was serious; to depreciate the mind today is lethal. Classical Pietism's reaction occurred within a culture where, if anything, reason was over-emphasized, but at least it was respected. Today the opposite is the case; we find ourselves within a culture virtually submerged by irrationalism.

How much more important therefore, to learn from the mistakes of the past and to refuse the allurements and enchantments of subjectivist experientialism. To take just one example, the vivid and sensuous forms of worship that Cragg refers to in reference to Classical Pietism are as beguiling now as they were then. They give an impression of spiritual reality when often in fact merely disguising our current lack of intellectual clarity and conviction. (This is of course not to argue against emotion or experience per se, nor to advocate stultified forms of worship - which is simply to miss the point).

The issue is rather the objective truth of Christianity. If Christianity is objectively true it necessarily involves the mind. And because it is true then it may, and must, be experienced also. All people everywhere are to repent and not merely to understand; all are to put their trust in Christ even when tempted to doubt; all are to rejoice in God and not merely to assent to doctrines. Emotion is to have its proper place - but its proper place must be within and not without an intellectual conviction of and commitment to truth. This need not issue in Scholasticism though arid intellectualism remains always an opposite danger. Here too we need to learn from the mistakes of the past.

At present however, the danger lies overwhelmingly on the side of subjectivism. This was the Achilles Heel, so to speak, of the Classical Pietist renewal movement. It has developed into a malignant growth which threatens much of the renewal movement in the church today. Renewal it may purport to be and renewal it may in fact produce in limited areas and for limited periods - and for that too we must be careful to be thankful. But herein lies the chief lesson of our study; Renewal to be lasting must issue from a renewal in the TRUTH. Any other renewal is bound to be ephemeral. As Cragg says, "As a religious movement Pietism's full vigour was comparatively brief. Why? ...its view of doctrine was meagre and utilitarian" (Cragg p.106).

There is an important lesson for us in this even as we express a sincere admiration for and appreciation of our Pietist forefathers.