EUROPEAN ROOTS OF EVANGELICAL REVIVALISM:
METHODIST TRANSMISSION OF THE PIETISTIC SOCIO-RELIGIOUS TRADITION

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The argument has been made that Evangelical Revivalism is a uniquely American phenomenon. While it may be true that both evangelicalism and revivalism have enjoyed far greater popularity in America than anywhere else, this does not mean that the movements were generated spontaneously in this country or peculiar only to American soil. The effect of these influences was quite profound on the development of American customs and institutions. The power of the evangelical and revivalistic tradition has helped to mold American politics, denominational history, folklore, values, education, and other cultural expressions.

For the first one hundred years of the American experience the transplanted religious sects remained virtually unmodified. It was only after a quarter of the eighteenth century had passed and a European "awakening" had begun that religion in America experienced substantial change. While this change may have been more intense and far more pervasive in America, it is important to view the phenomenon concurrently with the evangelical movement in Europe. Some historians feel that any attempt to examine the movements separately can only obscure understanding.¹

This essay will concern itself with expressions of evangelicalism and revivalism. Evangelicalism has been characterized by a belief in the infallibility of the Scriptures, the sovereignty of God, the depravity of man, and the importance of the conversion experience. Evangelicals have also accepted the acquisition of salvation only through the grace of God, the value of preaching, the death of Jesus for our sins, the supremacy of faith in the attainment of salvation, and the ethical content of Christian living as presented in the New Testament. A persistent radical strain of the evangelical movement has often embraced an emotion-based, revival-oriented religion suspicious of formal creeds and rituals. This radical tradition has often fought with more conservative evangelicals over questions involving theological in-

¹William Warren Sweet, Revivalism in America (New York, 1944), 1.

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tellectualism and the acceptance of scientific learning.

Revivalism is merely a proselytical tool of evangelicalism. It is a means of evangelism or the spreading of the evangelical faith for the primary purpose of saving sinners from eternal damnation. Because of the evangelical sense of mission to the unsaved, revivalism has become invaluable to and inseparable from the evangelistic tradition. To illustrate the intimate connection between the two concepts, I have chosen to use the term Evangelical Revivalism to describe the theological tradition examined in this essay.2

Forerunners of Evangelical Revivalism can be traced back to the Middle Ages. Peter Waldo of France, St. Francis of Assisi, Dominicus of Spain, Berthold von Regensburg, John Wyclif of England, and Geert Groote of the Netherlands all preached and converted thousands of people in the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries. In fourteenth and fifteenth century Italy and Germany preachers of repentance were common. These itinerants traveled the countryside seeking to change the evil ways of the masses. When affected by the emotionalism engendered by the revivalistic preachers, the assembled multitudes would cry out for mercy. In order to extract a concrete symbol for the inner change brought about by repentance the medieval evangelists often collected such items as cards, musical instruments, chess games, and paintings of women and publicly burned them. The subsequent emotional outpouring possibly found its source as much in sadness for the loss of recreation as in the joy of repentance. While these ministers did seek converts, their message was not as much for salvation as it was an appeal for moral atonement. Many years would pass and many theological changes would have to take place before evangelists could call for an individual to determine his own spiritual fate.3

Another essential step in the evolution of Evangelical Revivalism was taken with Martin Luther and the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation. While he described himself as an evangelist, even Luther was poles apart from American evangelicals of a later era. Nevertheless, it was Luther who set events in motion and prepared the setting in which later evangelicalism could function. He helped loosen the shackles imposed on the common man by the established church which served to remove an individual's choice of personal salvation. Before American evangelicalism could flourish a belief in personal responsibility for one's own soul had to find widespread acceptance in

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3Scharpf, History of Evangelism, 3-8.
the society.

In the first decades following Luther's reformation the Anabaptists worked to create a new form of evangelicalism closer in concept to the modern variety. Even though they were subjected to horrible persecutions, the Anabaptists traveled all over Europe spreading their belief in the power of the Holy Spirit. This faith in the Holy Ghost combined with a reliance upon the Scriptures established the Anabaptists as an important link between Luther and modern evangelicalism. Thousands of the people were converted by the sect, as they changed the face of European Protestantism.4

While the previously mentioned movements helped shape and define modern Evangelical Revivalism, they were only indirect influences. Certainly one of the most important and probably the first direct influence was German Pietism. The attempt to produce an acceptable definition for Pietism has been virtually impossible. For centuries debates have taken place between theological scholars over the boundaries and nature of the movement. The differences of opinion are attributable to the facts that no formal statement of doctrine was ever produced; the movement was markedly different as it evolved from one era to another; and the multitude of vantage points from which writers have viewed the movement has precluded the possibility of a common definition.

The definition which would possibly elicit the least reaction from students of the movement sees Pietism as an experiential religion. It was a religion of the heart and not the head. Emotion and moral reform were emphasized at the same time intellectual consistency was neglected. Thus, Pietism serves as a vital connection between the Medieval experiential (religion of personal experience) tradition and modern evangelicalism.5

Three main European religious traditions converge to form the American evangelical heritage: Pietism of Germany, the radical evangelism of the Dutch Reformed Church, and Wesleyan Methodism in England. Some scholars argue that these traditions are merely separate branches of one general, world-wide movement which finds its roots in the German Pietistic ferment.6 An examination of each tradition and its direct effect upon American institutions is in order.

Certainly, it is obvious that Pietism was extremely important in the evolution of the evangelical tradition. It serves as a focal point in the examination of the American evangelical heritage, not only for the

4Ibid., 10-17.
6Charles Hartshorn Maxson, The Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies (Gloucester, Massachusetts, 1920), 1-41.
reason that it is the first traceable direct influence, but because it is the
foundation for the other influential European traditions.

Philipp Jakob Spener of Frankfurt is sometimes credited with the
founding of Pietism. The term was first employed in 1674 as a
description of Spener and his followers. The movement began with the
establishment of change-oriented devotional societies within the
Lutheran Church. Spener’s reputation grew in Germany and soon he
found himself in a sufficiently powerful position to dictate the ap­
pointment of Pietistic professors at the new University of Halle. In a
short period of time Halle became the hub of Pietistic evangelicalism
and helped disseminate its ideas throughout the countryside.

By 1705 Spener was dead, and the leadership of the movement
had been assumed by A.H. Franke. This activist established various
educational institutions in Germany which further expanded the in-
fluence of the cause. Under Franke’s direction the movement continued
to serve as a powerful dissenting influence upon German Lutheranism.

The student of Pietism and its influence on subsequent ex­
periential religions must be careful not to overstate his case. The early
Pietism of Spener, Franke, and their followers was not the sensational,
emotional revivalism of a later era. While they laid the foundation for
it, the early Pietists did not advocate a religion of emotional en­
joyment. In general the Pietists were rational men with an evolving
interest in the reformation of morals. The areas in which the Pietists
broke new ground was in their belief in the sanctity of the Bible and
the methodology for utilizing it. Use of the Bible did not automatically
guarantee the intervention of God. The scriptures could only be ap­
plied and understood when the Holy Spirit worked through them.

Their most significant contribution was in the realm of doctrines
rooted in personal experience. In this area the Pietists helped remove
barriers to the emergence of future emotion-based religions. The
concept of personal salvation, so important to the evangelical tradition,
took on a new meaning to the Pietists. Repentance opened the door to
salvation, and while the early Pietists did not find pain and anguish to
be essential to the experience, they did not object to such feelings. As
Pietism slowly evolved, the process of repentance assumed standard

1Some historians trace the founding of the movement back to the beginning of the
seventeenth century and the preaching of John Arndt. This reformer emphasized a
religion of the heart and not the head throughout early seventeenth century Germany. If
he is not the first Pietist, he certainly effected a powerful influence on Spener and the

2Maxson, The Great Awakening, 3-4; F. Ernest Stoelfller, “Introduction,” Continental
Pietism and Early American Christianity, ed. F. Ernest Stoelfller (Grand Rapids, 
Michigan, 1976), 8.

features and a new importance. During this phase of the search for salvation the seeker was vulnerable to extreme emotional states characterized by visions, spectacular revelations, and physical manifestations of the spirit. This was willed directly to the American experientialists who exaggerated its intensity and made it the epicenter from which their system of beliefs emanated.10

There are two main roads by which the Pietistic influence found its way to America — one direct, the other by way of England. The Pietists had done an excellent job of spreading their doctrines throughout Germany. When large-scale German emigration to America began in the early eighteenth century, Pietistic systems of belief were an intricate portion of the German cultural baggage. The German sectarian bodies were the most important bearers of these principles. These dissenting groups included the Mennonites, the Schwenkfelders, the Dunkers or the German Baptist Brethren, and the Moravians. The other avenue by which Pietism reached America was through its profound influence on the English Methodists. The impact of Pietism on Methodism, and Methodism’s subsequent contributions to American Evangelical Revivalism will be examined later in this essay.11

First, an analysis of the influence of Pietism as embodied in the theology of the German sectarian bodies is necessary. Beginning in 1683 and continuing on through the 1700’s, various German religious sects emigrated to America. All of these groups, heavily influenced by Pietism, embraced a very evangelical religion characterized by frequent revivals. The Mennonites, the earliest and largest group to emigrate, were the direct descendants of the earlier Anabaptists. The theological expressions of this group came very close to the beliefs and actions of those associated with America’s First and Second Great Awakenings. In fact, it can be argued that the First Great Awakening began with the Mennonite revivals in Pennsylvania during the early 1720’s.12

When the influences of the other German sects are added to that of the Mennonites, the student of European influences on the American evangelical tradition can clearly see the impact of these groups. As the Schwenkfelders, the Dunkers, and the Moravians filtered into America between 1700 and 1740, the number of people exposed to revivals emphasizing emotional religion, the right of the common man to determine his own spiritual destiny, and other doctrines including such phenomena as love feasts, camp meetings, foot washing, and extreme manifestations of emotionalism, steadily in-

12Martin, H. Schrag, “Impact of Pietism Upon the Mennonites in Early American Christianity,” Continental Pietism, 74-121; Maxson, The Great Awakening, 4-10.
creased. Gradually the institutionalization of Evangelical Revivalism in America moved closer to becoming reality.\textsuperscript{13}

As previously mentioned, American religious organizations generally remained doctrinally unchanged for the first one hundred years of the American experience. The First Great Awakening must serve as the event which marks the beginning of the evangelical movement in America. From the time of the First Great Awakening to the present the character and spirit of American evangelicalism is virtually the same. With this in mind, it is important to note that the influence of Pietism, the Pietistic-inspired evangelicalism of the Dutch Reformed Church, and Methodism all set the stage and contributed to the effectuation of the First Great Awakening.

Building on the evangelical foundation laid by the German sects, the evangelists of the Dutch Reformed Church made a significant contribution to the coming of the Great Awakening and thus to Evangelical Revivalism. Theodore J. Frelinghuysen, an immigrant minister in the Dutch Reformed Church, was the originator of the revival within this sect. It has often been claimed, erroneously, that the Great Awakening began with Frelinghuysen’s revival in 1726.\textsuperscript{14} This cannot be accepted, for to view Frelinghuysen as the originator of the Awakening neglects the earlier revivalism of the German Pietists. Nevertheless, Frelinghuysen played an important role and exerted tremendous influence as one of many factors which moved America toward the First Great Awakening.

Like other Evangelicals of his time and especially those following him, Frelinghuysen’s most important desire was to initiate conversion experiences within his congregations. Born in Germany near the Dutch border, Frelinghuysen saw himself as an evangelist early in his life and enjoyed a reputation as an evangelist until his death.\textsuperscript{15} The fiery preacher consistently emphasized the need for an individual, emotion-based religious experience. In his sermons he chose his words to elicit such an occurrence. The following passage illustrates the manner in which Frelinghuysen exhorted his parishioners. Our familiarity with this type of harangue may illustrate the importance of Frelinghuysen, for such rhetoric was used by generations of subsequent preachers and

\textsuperscript{13} John R. Weinlick, “Moravianism in the American Colonies,” Continental Pietism, 123-47; Maxson, The Great Awakening, 4-5.

\textsuperscript{14} For a well documented discussion of Frelinghuysen’s role in the Great Awakening see Henry Harmelink, “Another Look at Frelinghuysen and His ‘Awakening’,” Church History, XXXVII (December, 1968), 423-38.

in a modified form by Evangelical Revivalists of our own day.

Come hither, ye careless, at ease with sin, ye carnal and earthly minded, ye unchaste whoremongers, adulterers, ye proud, haughty men and women, ye devotees of pleasure, drunkards, gamblers, ye disobedient, ye wicked rejectors of the Gospel, ye hypocrites and dissemblers, how suppose ye it will go with you? The period of grace is concluded. All earthly satisfaction ceaseth. Your agonies and pains as to soul and body have no end, for ye shall be cast into that lake which burns with fire and brimstone, where is weeping and gnashing of teeth, where the smoke of their torment ascendeth forever, where your worm dieth not and your fire is not quenched...

...Be filled with terror, ye impure swine, adulterers and whoremongers, and consider that without true repentance, ye shall soon be with the impure devils; for I announce a fire hotter than that of Sodom and Gomorrah to all that burn in their lusts.16

Undoubtedly, Frelinghuysen played an important role in the Great Awakening. The revival fires fanned by the minister spread to other groups who carried religious excitement throughout the colonies. One group in particular was the Scots-Irish Presbyterians. Given a pulpit and financially supported by Frelinghuysen, Gilbert Tennent began his revivalistic work in America which spread throughout the Scots-Irish Presbyterian Church in the colonies. By way of the Scots-Irish the legacy of Tennent was carried from north to south and far out onto the frontier. Through the establishment of his Log College many preachers were trained in the evangelical tradition. Thus, the Scots-Irish revival was a significant part of the Great Awakening and the evangelizing of America.17

The role of the new Methodist Church and the Methodist revivalists in the Great Awakening and the institutionalization of Evangelical Revivalism in America is without parallel. Under the leadership of the Methodists the colonial religious community witnessed the consolidation of a number of European and original American evangelical influences. As the Methodists consolidated these various strains, they added their own unique touches to the quickening revival and fanned the fires of excitement in the colonies. In addition to this vitalization the Methodists provided a leader for the movement and set up an intricate network through which the revival was institutionalized.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was deeply indebted to the Pietists for the foundations of his new religion. In his Journals Wesley made many references to the doctrines of Spener, Franke, and other important Pietists. He wrote at length of their influences upon his system of beliefs. Students of Methodism are not sure of the exact time Wesley read the works of the Pietists, but he was undoubtedly familiar with them...

16Abraham Messler, Memorial Sermons and Historical Notes as quoted in Sweet, Revivalism in America, 49.
17Maxson, The Great Awakening, 16-17; 21-25; Sweet, Revivalism in America, 49.
before his conversion to Methodism. The similarities between Pietism and Methodism are numerous and have been recognized ever since the early development of Wesley’s movement.18

One of the Pietistic German sects, the Moravians, exerted a deep influence on Wesley which initiated a questioning of beliefs which eventuated in the birth of Methodism. On his way from England to Georgia to fill an Anglican pulpit, the young Wesley was faced with a rough, stormy journey on a small, precarious ship. Wesley found himself quite scared and afraid to face death. A group of Moravians on board, however, were without fear even during the most frightful moments. Their indifference to death impressed Wesley and convinced him that his Anglican theology was not enough — something was missing. The period following this event was one of great uncertainty for the minister, and in a short time Methodism was developed.19

The relationship of Methodism to the development of evangelicalism in America is quite complex. Methodism served as a popularizer of German Pietism, as it borrowed so many of its doctrines from this source. It also served to integrate and inspire the various Pietistically oriented sects at work in America during the 1720’s and the 1730’s. One personality in particular was responsible for this latter function of Methodism—George Whitefield.

Coming out of the English revival, Whitefield sailed to America in 1739. After his arrival America would never be the same. Congregations were electrified from New England to Georgia by this Englishman with the great voice and the consuming desire to save souls. Imbued with Pietistic principles, Whitefield held open-air meetings throughout the colonies, attracting thousands of potential converts. The meetings were extremely large for a country with the small population of America in the 1740’s. Emotional response to Whitefield’s preaching was intense and not restricted to one religious sect. Methodists as well as Anglicans, Quakers, Presbyterians, and German sects were emotionalized and re-emotionalized by the orator.20

The social impact of Evangelical Revivalism was profound. The effect of the experiential religion on education was dramatic and quite interesting. The Pietistic tradition, transferred to most revivalistic groups in America, was the development of a Christian character based around the student’s familiarity with “living faith.” Thus, the use of catechisms was prevalent in both the early German Pietistic schools and those

18Nagler, Pietism and Methodism, 142-48.
founded in America. In general it must be maintained that evangelicals have generally endeavored fervently to establish schools centered around the inculcation and perpetuation of their faith. For centuries charges have been leveled against those who hold to emotion-based religion that they have rejected learning. The evidence points to a different conclusion.

Learning was not ignored, but rather respected as a positive value to be cherished. At the same time learning was valued, however, ministers were not required to be learned to be effective. In fact, in some areas a preacher's education was viewed as an impediment to his primary mission--that of winning souls. The evangelists' educational goal then was to make pupils pious instead of learned. This point is central to the understanding of Evangelical Revivalist education and can be traced throughout the history of schools founded by the movement.

If the schism which developed in New England between those who supported the emotion-based revival of the 1740's and those who opposed it is examined, the aforementioned characteristics of evangelical education are well illustrated. While many of those who supported the revival (New Lights) were undoubtedly "anti-intellectual" in temperament, this did not preclude their enthusiasm for the building of colleges. It was important for the New Lights to separate their disdain for a scholarly, reason-based religion from a general rejection of education. Schools existed for a specific purpose--to train the clergy and the laity in the ways of righteousness. The preparation of ministers to preach rationalistic sermons delivered from notes was antithetical to the evangelical theology. The preacher should be an exhorter who relies on the dictates of the Holy Spirit, not on logic. In this area learning could only serve to intercede between man and God.

To make a single general statement about the various denominational perspectives on the nature of their educational institutions would be misleading. There are many subtle and some not-so-subtle differences between sects. A few of the more radical groups absolutely rejected secular learning; other denominations found secular learning to be a vehicle by which the pious life could be attained. Characteristics common to all groups would include the goal of the pious man as more important than the merely learned man, the separation of learning from quality of preaching, and the perception of the need for universal education. When this last generalization is examined, the

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lasting impact of the revival-oriented church is clearly displayed.

When the great American institutions of higher learning are listed, evangelically-oriented schools are near the top of the list: Princeton of the revival-oriented Presbyterians, Dartmouth of the evangelized Congregationalists, Baptist Brown, Rutgers of the American Reformed Church, and the University of Pennsylvania by the efforts of Whitefield. An examination of the educational endeavors of the experiential Methodists and Baptists of the decades after the First Great Awakening displayed an educational interest unparalleled by any other sect in American religious history. By the early 1800’s the Methodists and the Baptists were exerting an educational influence in America far exceeding any institution in society.24

So, the social and cultural fabric of America has in part been woven and continues to be influenced by the Evangelical Revivalistic tradition. Experiential religion is as old as Christianity, but due to a multitude of inhibiting factors it never reached fruition until its transferral to American soil. Borrowing from the medieval emotion-based theological positions, the tenets of the Reformation, and the profound impact of German Pietism, America provided a friendly climate in which these European ideas could grow. The growth proceeded at such a fantastic rate that many Americans saw the movement as a uniquely American phenomenon, independent of forerunners and a foreign tradition. Actually, American Evangelical Revivalism was and continues to be one, albeit the most zealous, strain of a universal movement.