RELIGIOUS ROOTS OF THE EARLY MORAVIAN AND METHODIST MOVEMENTS

F. ERNEST STOEFFLER

Late in November of 1741 Nikolaus Ludwig, Count and Lord of Zinzendorf and Pottendorf, came to America where some of his followers had been laboring for a number of years. Among other things he meant to bring to realization a dream which he cherished, but which to his less imaginative contemporaries seemed little short of being fantastic. He meant to establish what he called a “Fellowship of God in the Spirit,” i.e., a group of committed Christians belonging to various communions who would worship and work together in fellowship with their once crucified, but living Lord and with one another. It was a bold vision which could not materialize at the time because the Christians of that day were not ready for it. Yet, it is such a sense of Christian fellowship, and its accompanying perception of the need for ecumenical cooperation, which, having since dawned upon substantial segments of Christendom, brings Moravian and Methodist together. We celebrate our unity in Christ by reiterating our common origins and reaffirming our common task, while acknowledging our separate histories and our unique contributions to the Christian enterprise.

In this connection it seems to be my task to focus our attention upon the roots out of which the Moravian and Methodist movements grew. Essentially this necessitates taking a look at late seventeenth and early eighteenth century Europe as we see it in retrospect. Thus to gain a fully adequate picture of the times out of which the movements in question have come we should really consider every facet of European culture which lies behind the origins of our two denominations. Since this is impossible in the present context, however, we shall confine ourselves largely to the pertinent religious developments.

We begin with England where Henry VIII’s marital needs proved to be the catalyst for a chain of events which convulsed that nation for a century and a half. In the process the power of Rome was broken, Anglicanism was established and slowly took recognizable form. For a season the monarchy was abolished, the king beheaded (1649), to be followed finally by the Restoration in 1660. During this extensive period of political upheaval and religious infighting the people were bewildered. They had difficulty even to agree on how to worship God. With considerable frustration Bishop Grindal described the chaotic practices associated with worship in his diocese in 1665 as follows: “Some say the
service and prayers in the chancel, others in the body of the church; some say the same in a seat made in the church, some in the pulpit with their faces to the people; some keep precisely to the order of the book, others intermeddle psalms with metre; some say in a surplice, others without a surplice.” In reference to the sacraments he continued: “Some receive kneeling, others standing, others sitting; some baptize in a font, others in a basin, some sign with the sign of the cross, others sign not.”

In addition to such ritualistic confusion the moral tone prevailing in the Establishment, though it had improved somewhat under Elizabeth I, left much to be desired throughout this period. With considerably more courage than tact Edward Dering tried to bring this to the attention of the queen when in 1569 he told her that many benefices were given to “dicers and carders,” that they were filled with uncouth ruffians who were more interested in hunting and hawking than in the spiritual welfare of their flock. The parson, he complained, is set against the vicar, and the vicar against the parson, “the Parish against both, and one against the other, and all for the belly.” Holding the queen ultimately responsible for these “whoredoms” he admonished her to abolish such “horrible abuses” or be called to her reckoning by God.

Yet while the political and ecclesiastical power brokers tried to manipulate the nation’s destiny there were other forces at work in the shaping of its religious life. Among them was Puritanism which arose during the reign of Elizabeth. Indebted partly to native religious developments such as Lollardy and mystical spirituality and partly to the Swiss-Rhenish Reformation, and having come gradually under the sway of Calvinism, it became for a time the dominant force in the religious life of England. While it started out as an effort to rid the Establishment of what were called “popish” remnants, Puritanism quickly moved on toward fashioning a life-style which its advocates, largely guided by Calvin’s understanding of the religious life, purported to read out of the Bible. Its emphasis was fourfold: The absolute authority of the Bible for faith and life, the religious renewal of the individual through an experiential appropriation of God’s redemptive work in Christ, a life of “godliness” based on the apprehension of God’s will revealed in the Bible (Calvinistically interpreted), and the shaping of society so as to conform as closely as possible to the divine design, the latter in the hope of making Christians instruments in God’s hand for working out his high purposes in history. This was indeed a monumental task which demanded one’s utmost sacrifice in both time and energy.

The chief means toward these ends was the Puritan sermon, ruggedly unadorned and deliberately so, rigidly schematized, and almost ruthlessly
direct in its application to particular problems. It was ably assisted by an accompanying concept of pastoral work which meant to point the sinner to God and to help him live the “godly” life through copious advice and moral support. The inevitable result was a vast array of edificatory treatises, some of the most widely read of which were: Lewis Bayly's *Practice of Piety: Directing the Christian How to Walk that He May Please God*, 3 John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress from this World to that Which is to Come*, 4 Richard Baxter’s *Call to the Unconverted to Turn and Live*, 5 and Jeremy Taylor’s *Holy Living and Holy Dying*. 6 The Puritans also perfected an elaborate system of casuistry which was partially based on Roman Catholic antecedents, and which was calculated to apply God’s law to every conceivable life situation. One of the best known works in this area is Richard Baxter’s famous *Christian Directory*, which more or less summarizes this whole development. 7

In time Puritanism issued into one of the most influential expressions of historic Protestantism. Its impact on both church and society was not merely felt in England, but in many parts of the world, including the continent of Europe, and, of course, the American colonies.

This leads us quite naturally to a consideration of a similar phenomenon in the Reformed territories of the European mainland. These include not only the provinces of the Netherlands, but the various segments of northwestern Germany into which the Reformed faith had found entrance. Because of significant differences in the historical context Reformed Protestantism on the Continent faced problems different from those of its counterpart in England.

After the Union of Utrecht (1579) the Netherlands became an almost solidly Protestant, and overwhelmingly Reformed, state, its autonomy being guaranteed at the end of the Thirty Years War. Thus the theological development within the Netherlands was relatively unimpeded by political events, being disturbed mainly by the emergence of new theological interpretations such as Jacobus Arminius’ emphasis on human agency and Coccejan 8 covenant theology. Hence there arose a more or less self-satisfied

---

3Its original publishing date is unknown. The third edition is dated 1613. It and John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* were probably the most widely read devotional books in the English language. For a brief description of the content of the *Practice of Piety* see F. Ernest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism*, 1965, pp. 71-73.

4It was published in 1678, was later enlarged and improved and subsequently published in numerous editions and various languages.


6For an analysis of its content see W. A. Clebsch, *Christianity in European History*, 1979, pp. 203-204.

7This was written in 1664-1665 and first published in 1673. For a description of its content see Wm. Orm’s introductory volume to his edition of *Baxter’s Practical Works*, vol. 1, 1830, pp. 543f.

8Johannes Koch (1603-1669), better known as Coccejus, was born in Bremen and was called to the University of Leyden in 1650 after he had first taught at Franeker.
orthodoxy, advocated by Franz Gomarus (1563-1641)\(^9\) and hardened by his followers into a system which tended to give priority to correctness of belief over against ethical sensitivity, and to intellectual formulation rather than attitudes of Christian devotion. Accordingly church life suffered in the Netherlands, and because the intellectual centers of Reformed Protestantism on the Continent were located in the Netherlands, the German-speaking Reformed territories suffered with it.

Against this background a religious renewal movement similar to Puritanism in England began to take shape in the Netherlands. It is sometimes referred to as Pietism,\(^10\) and sometimes as Precicianism. Its roots, too, are partly native, going back to the mystical spirituality of Jan van Ruysbroek (1294-1381) and his disciple Gerhard Groote (1340-1384), founder of the Brethren of the Common Life (as well as the Sisters of the Common Life) who had contributed the *Imitation of Christ* to the stream of Christian devotion. Yet, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that it was the Puritan movement in England which supplied the immediate impulse, in so far as England was regarded as the center of experiential Protestantism.

The father of Reformed Pietism in the Low Countries must probably be considered to be William Teellinck (1579-1629), a preacher of considerable note, and a man whose literary gifts were employed to create an extensive edificatory literature.\(^11\) A host of others followed in his footsteps, notably the very able Jadocus van Lodesteyn (1620-1677). The outstanding theologian of the movement was William Ames,\(^12\) or Amesius as he was called on the Continent, who had been born in England, educated at Christ College, and was a follower of William Perkins (1558-1602). Ames' famous *Marrow of Sacred Divinity* was as basic to the Pietist development in the Low Countries as it was to New England theology. From the Netherlands Reformed Pietism spread into the German-speaking Reformed territories where Friedrich Adolph Lampe (1683-1729) was the outstanding theologian of the time and a committed representative of Pietism.\(^13\) Other important representatives were Theodor Untereyck (1635-1693) and Joachim Neander (1650-1680), one of Protestantism's great hymn writers. While Reformed Pietism evidently had no direct influence on the development of Moravianism it eventually did have an im-

---

\(^9\) In 1594 Gomarus was appointed professor of theology at Leyden.


\(^11\) He was not only for individual but for social renewal as well. Thus he told the political leadership in his *Trumpet of Zion* that the fatherland is in jeopardy unless there is a moral and spiritual reformation. See his *Wercken*, vol. 1, p. 573f.

\(^12\) Ames filled the chair of professor of divinity at the University of Franeker for twelve years, during which time he wrote his famous *Marrow of Divinity*.

pact on The United Methodist Church through the contribution of the Otterbeins to the former United Brethren in Christ. 14

The basic concerns of Reformed Pietism on the Continent were essentially the same as those of the Puritans—regard for the Bible as the only trustworthy guide to faith and life, the religious renewal of the individual, a godly life, and a profound concern for the spiritual and moral health of church and nation. The main difference seems to have been that the continental development was less legalistic than Puritanism. There was more emphasis on felicity, 15 or happiness, as over against the meticulous observance of rules which preoccupied the Puritans. Furthermore, the Pietists in the Reformed territories of Europe tended to be less afraid of feeling than their Puritan counterparts. While the latter were want to base their religious certainty on a careful observation of their daily conduct, the former were quite willing to put some stock in the renewed person’s sense of Christ’s presence in his or her life.

This brings us to the Pietist movement in the rest of Germany. While it is now generally recognized that Pietism in Germany has various facets, what concerns us most here is its appearance within Lutheranism. This again must be seen against the background of the general situation in church and society during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

The German-speaking sections of Europe had come through one of the most confused and confusing religious struggles in history, called the Thirty Years War. Its ravages in both Reformed and Lutheran territories had been utterly traumatic and reconstruction was painfully slow. Lutheranism in the meantime had suffered through severe internal strains as Philippists (followers of Melanchthon) and Gnesio-Lutherans vied with each other for dominance. The result was that during the late seventeenth century the general mood in the church was largely fashioned by a rigid orthodoxy, which alleged to be truly representative of Luther’s solifidianism, and which regarded any emphasis on “good works” as suspect, if not downright contrary to the Protestant self-understanding. What made matters worse was that the message of the pulpit was too often polemical rather than edificatory, and the spirit of the clergy one of contentiousness rather than pastoral concern. Luther’s liberty of the Christian had been transmuted into the tyranny of scholastic theology, and the Bible was regarded as an arsenal of proof texts for elaborate theological structures.

Against this backdrop the rise of Lutheran Pietism must be seen. Within Lutheranism there was a relatively small, but quite vocal reform party, which took for granted orthodoxy’s emphasis on right belief, but

14See J. S. O’Malley’s Pilgrimage of Faith: The Legacy of the Otterbeins, 1973. The Otterbeins were trained at one of the centers of Reformed Pietism, namely at the Herborn Academy.
15The word often used in Geluckseligheyt.
in addition emphasized Christian conduct. It again was open to mystical thought forms and in time its religious perspective was more or less dominated by Johann Arndt (1555-1621), the author of True Christianity (Wahres Christentum), by far the most widely read, and profoundly appreciated devotional book on the Continent at the time. In its preface Arndt states the purpose of the book as follows: It is to indicate to the ordinary Christian “wherein true Christianity consists, namely, in the proving of true, living, active faith through genuine godliness.” The emphasis is on religious renewal, on being a new creature in Christ, and on the life of godliness in which this newness must be expressed. The author of this paper stirred up considerable controversy in Europe by making the statement that “the father of Lutheran Pietism is not Spener but John Arndt.” Be that as it may, Arndt’s tremendous concern with the experiential aspects of personal Christianity, which has been referred to, eventually reached Spener and was then reinforced within the Spenerian circle by the Puritan devotional classics which had also made their debut among his associates and friends. Spener himself confesses in his autobiography that he was deeply influenced in his religious maturation by Lewis Bayly’s Practice of Piety and Immanual Sonthom’s Golden Gem.

In 1675 Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705) published his famous little treatise Pia desideria (or Pious Desires). It was intended to be simply an introduction to a volume of Arndt’s sermons, but very quickly was published and re-published and thus became the much appreciated and much maligned Programmschrift for the aims of Lutheran Pietism. In it he insisted upon the need for spreading the Word of God, upon the priesthood of all believers (the religious responsibilities of the laity), the need for clergymen who are “themselves true Christians,” and therefore on the kind of theological education which will furnish the church such pastors, and finally the need for sermons such as are found in Arndt’s Postil.

With the publication of Pious Desires Lutheran Pietism was on its way as a movement aware of its genius and its mission. Spener had said little about the Christian life which had not been said within the reform party before him, but he had given the experiential approach to personal Christianity a tremendous boost. In time he also added the very controversial practice of permitting earnest Christians the privilege of meeting together, usually under the guidance of the pastor, to discuss matters which to them were of spiritual import. These meetings were presently referred

16Sechs Bücher vom wahen Christentum, 1866 ed., p. 11.
18The origin of this work is still shrouded in mystery. There is, however, a 1632 Strassburg edition in German which purports to be translated from the English by Emanuel Sonthomb. Whether the latter is only the translator, or the author and translator both, or whether the name is just a pseudonym is not known at this time. That the book is of English origin is fairly certain. So is the fact that it was prized as a devotional book.
to as *collegia pietatis*, and were thought to be necessary because of the large size of the churches of established Lutheranism and the general dearth of religious vigor which prevailed within them. In time a younger friend and disciple of Spener, August Hermann Francke (1663-1727), was called by Frederick III, Elector of Brandenberg, to join the faculty of the recently established University of Halle (1692) and to become pastor at the nearby town of Glaucha. Francke quickly established his leadership at the university and made Halle into the intellectual center of Lutheran Pietism. Because of his vast network of important connections Spener managed to have Halle-trained pastors installed in parishes throughout Germany. He also succeeded in inspiring a substantial segment of the German nobility to support the movement.

In the south, in the meantime, in the Dutchy of Württemberg, the reform party had introduced its devotional emphasis and its ethical concerns to a circle of people loosely associated with the University of Tubingen. During a visit in 1662 Spener helped to spark the flames of experiential Protestantism in that section of the country. In contradistinction to the Spener-Halle type of Lutheran Pietism, however, which was heavily oriented toward the nobility, it had its base chiefly among the common people. Out of it came Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687-1752) and his circle of “Swabian fathers,” who constitute the very heart of Württemberg Pietism. Its most scholarly and most influential achievement was Bengel’s famous *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (1742), on which the author had spent twenty years of his life, and which became the most widely appreciated commentary on the New Testament in all Pietist circles for many decades to come. By means of it he reinforced the insights and emphases of experiential Protestantism in general and Lutheran Pietism in particular.

The Pietism which prevailed among a significant segment of the Lutheran nobility of Germany was laid, as it were, into the very cradle of Count Zinzendorf (1700-1760), the castle of Grosshennersdorf in which he grew up having been made into a Pietist stronghold by his very able grandmother, Henrietta von Gertorf. Under her guidance he had learned, as he tells us himself, “to love the Savior dearly” at the age of four. This affective response to the crucified but ever living Christ remained absolutely characteristic of his life and became central to his theology. There are lengthy and learned discussions as to whether or not it was mystical spirituality or Lutheran Pietism which influenced his religious maturation most. Whatever the final verdict may be on the subject the end result

---

19 Among the chief interpreters of Zinzendorf’s theology who emphasize mystical influences are O. Uttendorfer, *Zinzendorf und die Mystik*, 1952; G. Hok, *Zinzendorf’s Begriff der Religion*, 1948; and L. Aalen, *Die Theologie des jungen Zinzendorf*, 1966. The following authors stress his dependence on the Lutheran tradition, putting more or less emphasis on his background of Lutheran Pietism: B. Becker, *Zinzendorf und sein Christentum im Verhältnis zum kirchlichen und religiösen Leben seiner Zeit*, sec. ed., 1900; W. Bettermann,
was basically a Pietist theological orientation with its roots in the religious atmosphere of Grosshennersdorf and reinforced during the six years he spent at Francke’s Paedagogium Regium. It is true, of course, that he later looked with certain misgivings at some aspects of Halle’s understanding of the religious life, notably its alleged emphasis on the need for a Busskampf, as well as its increasing tendency toward legalism. It is true also that in time he introduced certain theological innovations, which were widely opposed by Lutheran Orthodoxy and Pietism alike, as well as by Wesleyan evangelicalism. It must be admitted, finally, that at times he frequently availed himself of thought-forms and of a vocabulary borrowed from the representatives of mystical spirituality such as Jakob Boehme, Fénelon, and Madam Guyon, which the Spener-Halle Pietist tradition gradually came to regard with some apprehension. Nevertheless, the Ordinarius’ understanding of the meaning of religiousness stayed well within the perimeters of the Pietist perspective, putting the emphasis on the Bible as the source of religious authority, on religious renewal of the individual, the new life in Christ, the obligation to witness to it day by day, both at home and abroad, and the need for nourishing it by associating with likeminded people and by reading devotional literature.

While Pietism flourished on the Continent, however, the Puritan impulse toward religious renewal had spent itself in England. Large segments of Anglicanism had come under the spell of a cold and uninspiring rationalism. Thus there was again a need for religious renewal which the Wesleys were destined to supply.

The influence of Moravianism upon the Wesley brothers is well known and does not need to be belabored here. There can be no doubt, of course, about the fact that the religious maturation of the young John Wesley was governed by a mixture of Puritan legalism, high church sacramental Anglicanism, and the mystical piety found in the native Society Movement. Nor can it be doubted that he never meant to set aside this heritage. Yet, it was his contact with the Moravians on his way to the American colonies, as well as in the colonies, and especially with Peter Boehler after he returned from America, which produced the happening that began at Aldersgate; and without that heart-warming experience there would be no Methodism as we know it historically.


Perhaps the most effective critic of what were widely regarded as theological innovations made by Zinzendorf was J. A. Bengel, Abriss der sogenannten Brüdergemeine etc. in 1751.

We are thinking here of his advice to individual Christians and especially to his followers to regard themselves as the bride of Christ. See his In Zeyst—gehaltene Reden, etc., in Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, Hauptschriften.

Thus the Pietist impulse was transmitted by Zinzendorf and the Moravian community to John Wesley, as well as Charles, and through them to Wesleyan evangelicalism, both in Europe and America. It was strengthened by John Wesley's reading of Halle literature, such as Francke's *Nicodemus*, and especially by his considerable dependence on Bengel when he decided to write his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* as one of the theological guides for his preachers. His observation of the Moravian transformation of Pietism's *collegia pietatis* into their diaspora societies under the leadership of Zinzendorf furnished him the model for his societies under his own supervision.

Methodists are thus profoundly indebted to the Moravians. The fact that the two denominations went their separate ways must be attributed in part to cultural factors, in part to their origins in separate religious traditions, and in part to the fact that both movements were originally under the leadership of equally able and equally imperious personalities.

The burden of this paper is to trace in outline form the common roots of both Moravianism and early Methodism. They seem to be found in post-Reformation experiential Protestantism which took rise successfully in English Puritanism, in the Precicianism of the Reformed churches on the Continent, and in the Pietism within Lutheran territories. Finally the religious renewal movement was brought back to England by the Moravians, mingling there with native developments and thus bringing about the Wesleyan revival. At this moment in history our two denominations face the task of addressing themselves to the common problem of applying the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the global needs of mankind in the twentieth century.

---

23 According to his *Journal* John Wesley greatly prized this book and in time made it available in English translation to his societies.
24 This dependence John Wesley confesses in his introduction to his *Notes.*