
Evangelicals in the Reformed theological tradition are torn in two directions by the subject of Pietism, the European post-Reformation movement beginning within the Lutheran and Reformed families of churches.

On the one hand, there is the recollection that this movement which emphasized personal Bible study and prayer, devotional meetings with like-minded believers, a readiness to distinguish between pastors who were “in earnest” and those who were not, and the advance of world missions through voluntary agencies (earlier than their denominations) was very often a thorn in the side of the churches of the Reformation. Especially in Europe, there were periods when devotional meetings in homes (labeled “convicticles”) were banned by the public authorities, as tending to subvert the structures of state Protestantism. In addition, there has always been the lingering suspicion that the Pietists, who stressed the absolute necessity of inward religious feeling (in distinction from formal ritual), contributed over time to the weakening of doctrinal commitments. Was not Friederich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), the German theologian reckoned to be the father of modern religious liberalism, raised in a pietistic Reformed home? These are the reasons for wariness.

On the other hand, as Pietism has been, in effect, the European term of choice for movements of those same centuries which in the English-speaking world have been called “Puritan” and “Evangelical”, which have emphasized the need for earnest pastors, personal devotion through Scripture and prayer, the necessity of spiritual re-birth, the importance of foreign mission and the need for national spiritual awakening — how can we look askance at those European movements which are, on closer inspection, our own Evangelicalism by another name? If Pietism had on its fringes persons not sufficiently anchored in the Scriptures and too trusting of their own private judgment, has not Evangelicalism faced the same quandary? It has indeed. Therefore, for thoughtful evangelicals in the Reformed tradition, there can be no dismissing of Pietism out of hand. The two movements stood in conscious solidarity; English Puritan authors were devoted in Dutch and German translation. In the eighteenth century, John Wesley personally consulted with German Pietists in Georgia and in Saxony.

Christian T. Collins Winn and his three collaborating editors have done us a great service in editing the proceedings of a kind of “congress” on Pietism held at Bethel University, St. Paul, Minnesota in March 2009. The gathering drew one hundred eager participants and the fruit of it is this volume of twenty-five essays. It is the judgment of this reviewer that this stimulating volume accomplishes four things through these essays, grouped into seven categories.

First, two excellent essays by Roger Olson and Peter Yoder go a considerable distance in showing the extent to which Pietism has been misjudged, both in its original European setting and within North America. In its origin, Pietism was a strand within the churches of the Reformation seeking the advance of holy living, biblical knowledge and a curb on excessive doctrinal wrangling (as if that by itself assured Christian vitality). Olson — himself a somewhat controversial Baptist theologian now at Baylor University, Texas — convincingly shows that the Pietist tradition has been misrepresented on this continent. Yoder, an Iowa graduate student at the time of the congress, rendered the same service regarding Pietism in Europe.

Deserving also of comment is a second grouping of essays (encompassing two of the seven categories), also historical in character, indicating the trajectory of Pietism in the period to 1900. It is here that we begin to see the diversity of views encompassed within the Pietist movement and to grasp how, over time, there would be elements of this evangelical tradition which would serve to call into question the integrity of the movement as a whole. Seventeenth-century Pietist leaders such as Gottfried Arnold and Johann Heinrich Reitz dabbled in alchemy and Rosicrucianism. In the next century, a Pietist such as Johann Salomo Semler, in becoming one of the pioneers of biblical criticism, helped to sow seeds which are still yielding bitter fruit. Pioneering liberal Protestant theologian Schleiermacher (see above) and Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard were influential figures, drawn from Pietist stock in the nineteenth century; no one can claim that their Pietist roots set them in an unwaveringly steady course. Their Pietist devotion did not unerringly keep them on an even keel.

A third grouping of essays (sections 5 and 6) explore the ways in which the European Pietist movement, already transplanted to young America in the colonial period through Dutch Reformed and German Lutheran immigration, grew in North America due to waves of immigration from newly-emergent expressions of Pietism within Europe. From Switzerland came evangelical believers who had been awakened in the “Réveil” movement which followed Napoleon’s defeat. From German and Scandinavian regions came evangelical believers who had only very recently begun to stand apart from their state churches. By mid-century, these newer Pietists had begun to make common cause with North American revivalism and the emergent holiness movement. Here we can observe that Pietism had moved well beyond the “church within a church” model practiced by European believers who were solicitous for the
quieting of their state churches; by mid-nineteenth century, transplanted Pietism had become the seed-bed of the founding of new denominations, which over time had tilted more and more in the direction of Anabaptism—a quite distinctive trajectory of Protestantism.

Fourth, we are treated to a final grouping of essays which have as their theme the contribution of Pietism to the growth of world mission since 1700. In the English-speaking world, we go on speaking of William Carey (1761-1834) as the “father of modern missions”. But on closer inspection, it turns out that Carey was quite fully apprised of the earlier eighteenth-century German Pietist missionaries sent to South India with the backing of the King of Denmark and the German Moravian (Pietist) missionaries sent to the plantations of the Caribbean and the Eskimo peoples of Greenland and Labrador. It is past time for us to pay proper tribute to this movement which was the actual Protestant missionary pace-setter for three quarters of a century before Carey was prompted to attempt a mission to India.

The volume leaves us with a mixture of gratitude (for the great, though under-recognized, contribution that Pietism has made to world Christianity) and concern. Concern is appropriate because Pietism has done its best work when associated with major strands of Reformation Christianity and aiming to bring to fruition seeds of the Reformation (such as the universal priesthood of believers) not fully worked out in the decades following Luther. It was on its surest footing when the doctrinal legacy of the Reformation provided it with its own framework of Christian convictions. The volume begs the question of what is to become of a Pietist stream in Christianity which, when severed by controversy or immigration from European Pietist roots, becomes a virtual stream of world Christianity in and of itself with no clear doctrinal heritage to call its own.

Reviewed by Kenneth J. Stewart