

## DOING PHILOSOPHY AS A PIETIST

by

**Stephen S. Bilynskyj**

Copyright © 1989 by Stephen S. Bilynskyj

The Pietist tradition is not one known for its friendliness to the discipline of philosophy. Thus it has been with some tension that, for the past thirteen years, I have made my spiritual home within a church with Pietist roots. It is my intention to examine the tension between philosophy and Pietism historically and then to suggest that the philosopher does enjoy some benefits when working in the Pietist context.

### PIETISM

There have been several strains of Pietism in the history of the church. Its influence and characteristic emphases may be seen in the Reformed tradition, in Puritanism, in the Wesleyan tradition, and in contemporary Evangelicalism. One might also identify a Pietistic strain within Catholicism. However, Pietism is most frequently identified as a seventeenth century movement within Lutheranism. Since the roots of my own Pietist tradition are found in that latter strain of Pietism, I will focus my description of Pietism on that tradition. I will make reference to other strains insofar as they make connection with the philosophical endeavor.

The starting point of Pietism in the Lutheran tradition may be said to be Johann Arndt (1555-1621). His *True Christianity* is regarded by some to be a seminal work for the tradition. In any case, he capsulizes the tradition well:

As every seed produces fruit of a like nature, so the word of God must daily produce in us new spiritual fruits. If we are to become new creatures by faith, we must live in accordance with the new birth. In a word, Adam must die, and Christ must live, in us. It is not enough to know God's word; one must also practice it in a living, active manner.<sup>1</sup>

In the above, Arndt emphasizes the two most prominent characteristics of pietism: the new birth as a practical reality and the Bible (the word of God) as a guide to Christian practice.

---

<sup>1</sup>*True Christianity*, trans. Peter Erb (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), p. 21.

The definitive statement of the Pietist tradition comes from Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705) in his *Pia Desideria*, or "Pious Wishes." Spener's work is a critique of the Lutheran Orthodoxy of his century. The book arises out of several years of pastoral work promoting church renewal in Frankfurt. There Spener conceived the idea of *collegia pietatis*, small private gatherings in homes for the purpose of Bible study and cultivation of the Christian life. The emphasis was on practical piety, rather than adherence to creed or attention to formal theology.

*Pia Desideria* consists of three parts: A "Conspectus of Corrupt Conditions in the Church," an argument for "The Possibility of Better Conditions in the Church," and six "Proposals to Correct Conditions in the Church." In the first part Spener critiques civil authority, clergy and common people. For our purposes it is well to note that a primary critique of the clergy is engagement in useless controversies and wranglings over proper doctrine. Spener does not entirely belie correct doctrine, but he says "no little damage is done when one tries to be smart and clever without the Scriptures or beyond them."<sup>2</sup> Spener considered the main problem of the clergy to be a knowledge of Christian faith that did not include a lived practice of that faith. For the "common," or lay, people, much the same was said to be true. Their faith relied on participation in the forms of a church characterized by proper teaching, without becoming realized in the practice of everyday life.

Spener's argument for the possibility of better conditions in the church is a look at the church as it appears in the New Testament, in the writings of the Fathers, and in individuals of more recent church history. Insofar as these examples display a significant everyday practice of faith, then such practice should be possible in the contemporary church.

The heart of *Pia Desideria* is in the proposals for better conditions in the church. The six proposals regard:

- 1) More Extensive Use of the Scriptures

---

<sup>2</sup>*Pia Desideria*, trans. by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), p. 51.

- 2) Exercise of the Spiritual Priesthood
- 3) Practice vs. Knowledge of Christianity
- 4) Conduct of Religious Controversies
- 5) Reform of Schools and Universities
- 6) Preaching for Purposes of Edification

The first three proposals were addressed to the laity mostly in the context of the *collegia pietatis*. Those small gatherings were to be the context where the Bible was more diligently studied, the laity performed the spiritual acts of prayer, study, teaching, admonishment, comfort and chastisement, and where the Christian life would become a matter of the heart and of practice, rather than only a matter of knowledge.

The second three proposals were addressed more to the clergy and grow out of the basic Pietist concern for practice rather than an arid theological study. The fourth proposal is based on the simple premise that not all theological disputation is of value. In fact, disputation can be positively harmful. Here Spener quotes approvingly from Luther: "Truth is lost not by teaching but by disputing, for disputations bring with them this evil, that men's souls are, as it were, profaned, and when they are occupied with quarrels they neglect what is most important."<sup>3</sup> Spener is concerned here about disputations with unbelievers and heretics for the purpose of converting them to the truth. It is noteworthy that he cautions that disputation must always be tempered by a genuine "practice of heartfelt love toward all unbelievers and heretics."<sup>4</sup> The fifth proposal is that theological training would include training in piety as well as in biblical studies and formal theology. Professors would expect their students to display a genuine practice of Christian faith as well as a knowledge of theology. Students would, in collegial and friendly fashion admonish and encourage each other to practical forms of piety. The suggestions for reform of preaching are to the effect that sermons ought not be only discourses on correct doctrine, but must aim at the transformation of the inner person of the hearer, so that the result is the outward practice

---

<sup>3</sup>From the Weimar edition of Luther's works, 40<sup>111</sup>, 361, "Lectures on the Psalms of Degrees" (1532-1533), on Psalm 130:5. Quoted in *Pia Desideria*, p. 100.

<sup>4</sup>*Pia Desideria*, p. 99.

of Christian good works. Plain and direct communication should take the place of overemphasis on rhetorical art.

It is a witness to the pervasive influence of pietism that none of Spener's proposals sound particularly novel. Indeed, in our day, when popular preaching and religious practice often appear to lack content, and when emotionalism allows a preacher to build a large following on a very shallow construction of the Christian faith, one may wonder if the Pietist program has not become widely embraced and is now destructive of serious Christian understanding and practice. It is not my business to offer a general defense of Pietism here. It is surely the case that its emphasis on practice as opposed to theology can lead to abuses. Nonetheless, it is well to note that Spener and other Pietist notables were scholars and had philosophical and theological training which they do not repudiate. The Pietist call for practice of the Christian faith is, at its best, a call for such practice in addition to a solid knowledge of the faith.

Pietism was developed and given a place in academia by the work of August Hermann Francke (1663-1727), Spener's disciple. Francke experienced Pietist conversion in Leipzig in 1687 and touched off an "awakening" of spiritual fervor in the Pietist mode that spread in the university and was eventually suppressed by the dismissal of Pietist masters. He was appointed as professor of Greek and oriental languages to the new university in Halle in 1692. Halle was to become the academic home of German Lutheran Pietism. Halle Pietism made important connections with the German nobility and the Pietist devotional gatherings struggled to bridge class boundaries.

We may take brief note of Pietist awakenings and influence beyond German Lutheranism. Pietism might succinctly be characterized as an emphasis upon religion of the heart, experiential faith, nonetheless founded upon the Bible. From the Scriptures comes a call to new life in Christ which involves a living practice of one's faith. Given such a general characterization, Pietism might be seen, as mentioned above, in several branches of church tradition. As we will see, several philosophers from other traditions show Pietist leanings.

Yet the tradition we have just reviewed, issuing in the Pietism of Halle, is rightly regarded as the *locus classicus* for the Pietist tradition as a whole.

### PHILOSOPHY AND PIETISM IN HISTORY

German Lutheran Pietism could never be described as friendly to the philosophical endeavor. In *Pia Desideria* Spener quotes Luther approvingly:

“Beware! Satan has the intention of detaining you with unnecessary things and thus keeping you from those which are necessary. Once he has gained an opening in you of a hand breath, he will force in his whole body together with sacks of useless questions, as he formerly did in the universities by means of philosophy.”<sup>5</sup>

However, the Lutheran dismissal of philosophy is not the whole story of Pietism and philosophy. Spener himself had philosophical training at Strassburg and for many years corresponded with Leibniz on literary and historical problems. Though Francke was to cause much grief for a Leibnizian disciple, it was Leibniz that motivated Francke to concern for missions to the east by sending Francke a copy of his small book *Novissima Sinica* (*The Newest from China*). Francke became interested in missions in Russia rather than China, to Leibniz's chagrin, but they corresponded until Leibniz died in 1716.<sup>6</sup>

Halle Pietism was eventually to embrace the Leibnizian philosophy, but not without a struggle and not without a transformation of the original Pietist spirit. Christian Thomasius (1655-1728) helped found the university at Halle and came under the influence of the Pietists who gathered there. He was a personal acquaintance of Francke. Like the Pietists, Thomasius opposed scholasticism, Lutheran orthodoxy, the episcopal form of church government, and intolerance. He tended, like the Pietists, to regard philosophy as a tool for dealing with practical questions of ethics, social organization and law. With regard to

---

<sup>5</sup>From the Weimar edition of Luther's works, 10<sup>11</sup>, 165, 166: "Epistle or Instruction from the Saints to the Church in Erfurt," 1522.

<sup>6</sup>Gary R. Sattler, *God's Glory, Neighbor's Good* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1982), p. 76.

metaphysics, he believed the Bible to be the only source of truth and that only as made clear by divine illumination.

Therefore, the Pietists at Halle, under the influence of Thomasius, were to regard Christian Wolff (1679-1754), the great popularizer of the Leibnizian philosophy, with suspicion. Wolff was appointed professor of mathematics at Halle in 1707. When he gave a lecture in July of 1721 in which he declared that unaided human reason could attain to moral truths, Francke's ire was aroused. In the subsequent controversy Francke was to denounce Wolff, and even Wolff's family, from the pulpit. In 1723, Friedrich Wilhelm I expelled and exiled Wolff.

But Christian Wolff was to return to Halle in 1740 when a new king, Friedrich the Great, took the throne and reinstituted Wolff at that university. Eventually Wolff's philosophy and Pietism were to blend at Halle in a way that would lead the Pietists in many new directions, including a "Neo-Pietist" movement that gave consideration to Kant's philosophy.

At Wurttemberg, Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687-1752) made significant contributions to Biblical studies -- Bengel issued an important critical text of the Greek New Testament. He had earned a degree in philosophy, but came to the position that philosophy is more suited to teaching a person how to think, rather than what to think. That is, philosophy is more of a method than a science.<sup>7</sup> He cautions against being overly concerned with theodicy, as was Leibniz. In theology, the main service of philosophy is to teach good inference, that is, logic.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>See unpublished dissertation by John Weborg, p.47.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 177. It is this writer's observation that even if philosophy could do no more for theology than teach it logic, philosophy would nonetheless make an enormous contribution to contemporary theology.

Thus German Lutheran Pietism, while largely antiphilosophical both in outlook and practice, had its touchpoints with the philosophical world and existed in a kind of uneasy tension with figures like Leibniz and Wolff.

I would like to look briefly at three figures that illustrate both the connections of Pietism and philosophy and the presence of pietistic emphases in other church traditions. It will be immediately recognized that the Jansenist movement in the middle of the seventeenth century might be said to be a Roman Catholic version of Pietism. While the Jansenist affinity for the theology of Calvin led to its condemnation by the Catholic Church in 1653, it was nonetheless an attempt to foster a Roman Catholic piety through a return to the theology of St. Augustine.

By far the leading figure of the Jansenist movement was Blaise Pascal (1623-1662). Since his most enduring work generally takes the form of fragmented aphorisms, perhaps it is enough simply to quote a few fragments from the *Pensees*. "We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart."<sup>9</sup> Of course, "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing: we know this in countless ways."<sup>10</sup> Like the Pietists, Pascal took Scripture very seriously, and he sought to bolster the Christian faith by arguments from Scripture. "Thus without Scripture, whose only object is Christ, we know nothing, and can see nothing but obscurity and confusion in the nature of God and in nature itself."<sup>11</sup> And with regard to the Pietist concern for the practice of faith over and against a mere knowledge of true doctrine, "What a long way it is between knowing God and loving him!"<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup>*Pensees*, trans. by A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 110. The number here and numbers for *Pensees* hereafter refer to Krailsheimer's numbering of the fragments.

<sup>10</sup>*Pensees*, 423.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 417.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 377.

Soren Kierkegaard has been claimed as a Pietist by some writers of Pietist history.<sup>13</sup> Without attempting to pass judgment on that historical classification, I would simply claim that Kierkegaard's emphasis on subjectivity and passion, and his strictures against the merely formal religion of the state church of his day, ring harmoniously with the Pietist concern for a genuine Christianity of the heart. Yet Kierkegaard is also a philosopher and his presentation of Christianity as a matter of passionate activity in the individual life, while Pietistic in nature, is framed in philosophical terms.

The shining light of early American philosophy is Jonathan Edwards. He is also regarded as the primary mover in the first great spiritual awakening in this country. Edwards' concern for true conversion among his parishioners led to both genuine revival of spiritual life and to controversy as he pursued his concern with some harshness. He exhibits the dual focus characteristic of Pietism in his preaching of the need for personal conversion based on the authority of the Scriptures.

Edwards' philosophical work, while as rich and subtle as any produced in this country, is plainly at the service of his Christian and pastoral concerns. *On the Freedom of the Will* still repays the reader with a wealth of insight into the questions of modality surrounding God's knowledge of future action. He carries out an essentially compatibilist understanding of freedom with a great deal of care.

The emotions or affections were a strong focus in Edward's work. Like the Pietists, he placed the seat of Christian activity in the emotions. In the *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* he maintained that all human activity springs from the affections. True Christian life occurs when the affections which are the source of action are "gracious," that is the supernatural product of God's grace. The *Treatise* is a careful analysis which attempts to differentiate truly gracious affections from those which are simply natural. The *Treatise* was

---

<sup>13</sup>See, for instance, Donald G. Bloesch, *The Evangelical Renaissance* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1973), pp. 102, 122, 150.



the product of a purely practical concern to provide guidelines for understanding the appearance of emotion in the revival services which sprang up in the Great Awakening. Thus Edwards was very much the philosopher, but much of his philosophical work arose from Pietistic concerns, which for him were also pastoral concerns.

We have seen historically that, despite tension and some degree of antipathy, philosophy can and has occurred in contexts that are Pietistic in outlook. Moreover, philosophers have done credible philosophical work while operating from a base that is Pietistic. I turn now to a consideration of reasons why a Christian philosopher might choose Pietism as a spiritual home.

### **DOING PHILOSOPHY AS A PIETIST**

What follows is perhaps the most programmatic part of this paper. For three reasons, I wish to argue, philosophy, and the philosopher, may flourish in the context of Pietism. Despite the historical tension between Pietism and philosophy, there are advantages that accrue to the Christian philosopher who embraces the Pietist mode of faith and its way of life.

First, the Pietist emphasis on the essentials of the faith can (*contra* the impression Spener's strictures on dispute might give) foster a spirit of openness to diversity of opinion on doctrinal issues that will leave room for philosophical exploration of faith. That is, the philosopher who is exploring a particular doctrinal issue would be able, in the Pietist context, to consider the whole range of opinions concerning that doctrine within orthodox Christianity, without fear of censure. The philosopher would possess a great deal of freedom to follow the philosophical trail wherever it leads.

Thus Pietism need not be an intellectually repressive tradition. Given a central commitment to Christ and to the Bible as God's Word, the Pietist philosopher may move broadly within the bounds of the whole of Christian tradition. Thus, for example, the philosopher exploring philosophical issues surrounding the Atonement would, within in

Pietism, be free to consider all the traditional views of the matter and would be free to propound a novel view (if such there be) of the Atonement. To be sure, the philosophical conclusion of such an exploration might be questioned by other Pietist philosophers or theologians. But there is no creedal stance in the Pietist tradition which would prohibit such an exploration. Thus the Pietist philosopher is freed from the need to reach only a narrow range of conclusions when doctrinal matters are analyzed.

Nonetheless, the philosopher in the Pietist tradition remains responsible to the Christian community. Pietism calls for an allegiance to the Christian community. That allegiance is to be actively displayed in life. Alvin Plantinga advises that the proper course for Christian philosophy is a responsiveness in philosophical work to the needs and issues of the Christian community.<sup>14</sup> Spener's condemnation of theology and preaching which is removed from everyday Christian life would also apply to the practice of philosophy. So the second advantage of doing philosophy as a Pietist is a commitment to the community which makes it easier to carry out Plantinga's advice.

The living of a Christian life is not only a matter of belonging to the larger Christian community. Christian life is always lived in the context of a particular Christian community and tradition. That will generally mean participation in a local church or parish. If that local community is a Pietist one, then the limits of philosophical exploration of matters of faith will be governed by the core commitments of Pietism: new life in Christ and the Bible as God's Word. Philosophical theology will not be simply speculation, but will, as Plantinga suggests, unashamedly take its starting point from Scripture and Christian faith. In my own tradition, diversity of opinion on doctrinal issues is common and the community has traditionally been expected to challenge itself with the questions, "Where is it written?" and "Are you living yet in Christ?" Those questions, far from being a bondage into absolute literalism

---

<sup>14</sup>See "Advice to Christian Philosophers," in Michael D. Beaty, ed., *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

or uncritical experientialism, have provided the bounds for genuine freedom of inquiry in our tradition.

Thus the philosopher exploring the Atonement in a Pietist context will have the data of the community to work with. That is, the Atonement will be seen in the light of the community's understandings of what Scripture says about the work of Christ and in the light of the members' experience of atonement in their own lives. The Christian philosopher working in a Pietist community will have the benefit of checking philosophical work against the measure of genuine spiritual life and practice.

Finally, doing philosophy as a Pietist results in a distinct advantage for the philosophical endeavor of clarifying the truth about God, human beings and the world. That is, those students who actively attempt to put into living practice as much of such truth as they have acquired thus far will progress farther toward the goal of clarity about the truth.

One of the criteria for an acceptable philosophical viewpoint is its fit with human life and experience. Such fit is often itself the subject of philosophical debate. For instance, one may wonder what significance the pre-philosophical experience of feeling "free" in a libertarian sense has for inquiry into the nature of human free will. Is such experience evidence for the libertarian view, or should such experience give way to analysis which shows it to be the product of certain limitations in our self-perception? Whatever the final verdict is in such a case, it would seem to be beyond dispute that such experience must be taken into account and at least explained by any philosophical view which touches upon it.

The philosophical need to consider and explain human experience also exists when the philosophical subject matter is Christian faith. If the philosopher is attempting to clarify some matter of faith, then the clarification will need to consider and account for actual Christian experience. Thus the Christian philosopher is at a distinct advantage working in a community where examples of Christian experience are at hand.

Moreover, in checking a philosophical theory with experience it is well to pay attention both to the depth of the experience and to its quality as an exemplar of relevant human experience. Thus a moral theory will need to fit human experience, but virtue ethics suggests that the experience considered will need to be that of some of the best practitioners of morality. That is, we would do well to look to those who are in fact virtuous when we seek to understand the nature of virtue, and we would do well to have some personal experience of virtue if our goal is its analysis.

So it is that the Christian philosopher will be better served in the endeavor to clarify Christian faith when he or she has at hand the data of an adequate Christian experience of his or her own. Indeed, the more deeply the Christian life is experienced by the philosopher the richer will be the font of experience by which a philosophical analysis of matters of faith can be tested.

Therefore, Pietism benefits the philosopher by providing a spiritual context where one is challenged not to be content with a merely formal grasp of Christian doctrine. Instead, one is expected to combine both intellect and affection in a Christian life that takes a practical form within a Christian community. In such a community, I would contend, the Christian philosopher has a greater chance of success at the philosophical task.

One cannot possibly understand the teaching of the saints unless one has a pure mind and is trying to imitate their life. Anyone who wants to look at sunlight naturally wipes his eye clear first, in order to make, at any rate, some approximation to the purity of that on which he looks. . . Similarly, anyone who wishes to understand the mind of the sacred writers must first cleanse his own life, and approach the saints by copying their deeds. Thus united to them in the fellowship of life, he will both understand the things revealed to them by God and, thenceforth escaping the peril that threatens sinners in the judgment, will receive that which is laid up for the saints in the kingdom of heaven.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup>St. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, translated and edited by Sister Penelope Lawson (New York: MacMillan, 1981), p. 90.