

REFLECTIONS ON MORAVIAN PIETISM

BY ELIZABETH ZORB*

NOT everyone who has been crucified, burned at the stake, or thrown to the lions has left his mark on history.

But John Hus did.

John Hus was burned at the stake in Constance in July, 1415, and his martyr's death had far reaching consequences—as far reaching as Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and Salem, North Carolina—cities on a continent of which Hus had never even heard. His death rekindled a Bohemian national religious revolt that led, some forty years later, to the founding of a pre-Reformation church, the *Unitas Fratrum*. Members of the *Unitas Fratrum*, also known as the Bohemian Brethren, were protestant pietists, long before either of these words was generally used or had acquired its present meaning.

By 1550 there were three branches of the *Unitas Fratrum*: in Bohemia, in Moravia, and in Poland, with a membership of about 200,000. About a century and a half after its founding, the *Unitas Fratrum* had a great leader and bishop, John Amos Comenius (1592-1670), who is best known as a pioneer of modern educational theories, a man of universal learning, author of some two hundred treatises on an immense variety of subjects—scientific, philosophical, literary, and linguistic, as well as theological. He transmitted a reverence for learning and a high standard of education to the succeeding generations of his Moravian Brethren. Comenius is known to many as the father of the elementary school, of the grade-school method, and of visual education. He apparently issued one of the first picture books ever written for children and his book *The School of Infancy* was particularly famous.

In his *Janua Linguarum Reserata* (The Gate of Languages Unlocked) Comenius made Latin palatable to the youth of his day. He contributed enormously to the Moravian and Bohemian revival

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of learning in the 17th century and attracted men of caliber to the Unitas. He made no distinction between his work as a bishop and his labors as an educational reformer. The two, religion and education, were for him mutually indispensable. The secular and the sacred went hand in hand and were in his eyes equally important. He believed that knowledge, virtue and piety were the three requirements of man. "Man should know all things, have power over all things, and over himself, and should refer all things to God, the Source of all." He labored unceasingly for more progressive and vital education and wrote with fervor on his favorite subject, pansophy, the correlation of all knowledge by means of a unifying principle.¹

The Counter Reformation, inaugurated in 1621, virtually annihilated the Bohemian Brethren, and Comenius had little hope that his church could survive. He himself spent over thirty years of his life in exile as a religious refugee, moving from place to place to escape persecution, and more than once his entire library and manuscripts were burned or lost. Finally, in Amsterdam, he wrote out for posterity a history of his church, its origin, progress, discipline, and constitution and, as his last will and testament, so to speak, commended it to the spiritual care of the Anglican Church.²

The word "pietism" became prevalent in Germany in the 17th century, and it is associated particularly with the names of Philip Jacob Spener and August Hermann Francke. It is usually said that pietism had its roots in England and Holland (the Puritans in England a whole century earlier were, in effect, a pietist group), but actually pietism is a spirit, an attitude, a way of life rather than a specific doctrine or a group movement. Pietism, like mysticism, is a powerful undercurrent of religious life and it belongs to many religions and to all ages. Whenever there have been groups within Christianity, and there have been many, that have attempted to revive "primitive" Christianity, they were, in all likelihood, pietist groups.

For the pietist, religion is primarily and essentially a matter of inner spiritual experience. Pietists usually wish to raise the standard of church discipline instead of adjusting it to the weak-

¹ M. Spinka, "Comenian Pansophic Principles," in *Church History*, June, 1952.

² S.T.D. deSchweinitz, *The Moravian Episcopate* (London, 1877), 7.

nesses of human nature. They invariably stress personal piety and purity of life. For them correct theology is not of primary importance. Church customs are good, but knowledge of God and love of the spirit are better. The pietists' message throughout the ages has been, with only slight variations, that the Christian must serve in "newness of spirit and not in the oldness of the letter." Like mysticism, Christian pietism crosses denominational lines. It is a revivalist form of Christianity, and as such is part of the larger religious stream that has been conveniently and rather fittingly called "enthusiasm." It recurs again and again in church history in widely scattered movements, widely separated in time. It tends to be contagious and to form group movements. It often displays an excess of zeal that threatens church unity. Pietists often begin with an attempt to improve their church and later voluntarily or involuntarily leave it. Strict pietists have frequently formed one sort or another of Third Order Christians.³ In their desire to become "primitive" Christians, like first century Christians, they usually become puritan Christians.

When the term "pietist" was first used in the 17th century, it was an expression of ridicule. Philip Spener was not pleased to have his followers called that. In his famous "*Pia Desideria*" (1675)⁴ Spener protested against externalism in the Lutheran orthodoxy of his day, and called for greater emphasis on feeling. He advocated conventicles or drawing-room meetings, later known as "*ecclesiola in ecclesia*," or little churches within the church. These extra-church meetings were to encourage the laity to take a more active part in church life, to do more Bible study, and to enlarge their knowledge of Christianity and their practice of Luther's principle of the priesthood of all believers. They were to be an addition to, in no wise a substitute for, the regular church life. What he called for was a reforming of the Lutheranism of his day which had become too orthodox, too scholastic, too involved in theological hair-splitting, and too complacent.

People must have been ready for Spener's message, for the

³ "Third Order" or "Tertiary" generally signifies the lay members of some specific religious order, i.e., men and women who, while remaining in the world and in their various professions, live spiritual lives of obedience to the vows taken by the cloistered members of the order.

⁴ A new edition of this work, "The Keystone of Pietism," appeared recently in Germany, *Pia Desideria* (Herausgeber, Kurt Aland, Walter de Gruyter & Co., Berlin, 1955).

result was a revival of devotional intensity that apparently surprised Spener himself. Like Luther, he had given impetus to a larger popular movement than he had anticipated.

Into this deepened devotional climate Count Zinzendorf was born and reared. Spener was not only a close friend of Zinzendorf's family, he was also the boy's godfather. It was a pietist school which the young count attended in Halle from his tenth to his seventeenth year. This academy, whose headmaster was August Hermann Francke, was by all accounts a strict, austere institution, but what Zinzendorf learned there was that life was meant for service, and that wealth and rank were to be regarded as greater opportunities for usefulness. While there young Zinzendorf shocked his family by announcing that he wished to enter the ministry. Clerical orders for persons of high aristocratic rank were most uncommon in the Lutheran Church and frowned upon by aristocrats. Zinzendorf was soon withdrawn from the school. His subsequent university study at Wittenberg, the stronghold of Lutheran orthodoxy, did not cause him to lose interest in religion. It was in Wittenberg that his eyes were opened to the unhappy results of theological contentiousness.

After a year spent on the customary grand tour, the young count, obedient to the wishes of his family, became an official at the Saxon court, having studied law at Wittenberg, but in private life he held religious drawing-room meetings for all who would attend. He had, just before assuming his court duties, married Erdmuth Dorothea, Countess von Reuss, who shared his pietist convictions, and who was to be a most cooperative helpmate for the next thirty-four years. Zinzendorf also published a weekly paper on the order of the English moral weeklies, called the *Dresdner Socrates*, in which he attempted to justify Christianity to his worldly and secular-minded colleagues in court.

At about this time an itinerant evangelist asked Zinzendorf's permission to allow some religious refugees from Moravia to settle on his estate. Although he little knew it, these settlers, some of whom were Bohemian Brethren, were to furnish him with his life work. They settled at the foot of the Hutberg and later became known as the Herrnhuters, meaning those under the Lord's care.

They were a zealous company of refugees for whom religion was of primary concern. In 1727 Zinzendorf, having resigned from

the court, took charge and devoted himself entirely to this rapidly growing fellowship that was soon to be sending missionaries to the far corners of the world. It is unlikely that this small group could have grown as rapidly as it did, had it not been for Zinzendorf's personality, driving power, organizing ability, and extraordinary liturgical gifts. Zinzendorf proved to be one of those rare religious geniuses whose confident faith was highly contagious, who seemed to spread assurance of God's love and grace by his very presence, and whose influence on the spiritual life of succeeding generations was immeasurable.

Hus, Comenius, and Zinzendorf are the big three in the history of the Moravian Church. Hus unintentionally founded it, Comenius thought he was burying it, and Zinzendorf unknowingly helped to revive it.

The pietist revival, more particularly Moravian Pietism, had a decided influence in the sphere of social development and also on the literature of its day, especially on the later Romantic movement in Europe.⁵ Pietist poetry and hymns have won high praise and they enriched the literary currents of the period. Zinzendorf left some 2,000 hymns to posterity. It is said that he could versify more rapidly than he could write. A noted literary critic, Josef Nadler, called him the greatest impromptu poet Germany has ever had.⁶ Klopstock's *Messias* is probably the great German epic of pietism. Wieland and Schleiermacher came from pietist homes and were educated in pietist schools. The *Sturm und Drang* movement in German literature is inconceivable without the whole sweep of religious enthusiasm and mysticism, as typified in Johann Georg Hamann, who in turn so powerfully influenced Herder. Lessing and Herder both wrote in praise and defense of Zinzendorf. Herder praised his literary talent, his poems, and hymns. Varnhagen von Ense, who knew Zinzendorf personally, wrote one of the earliest biographies of this extraordinary count.

In the early conventicle meetings on the continent, all manner of people met together, people of all professions and walks of life—master and servant, artisans, doctors, lawyers, aristocrats, students, and merchants. This intermingling of the classes was

⁵ John Weinlick, "The Moravian Diaspora," MSS Dissertation, 1951, in the Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pa.

⁶ Josef Nadler, *Literaturgeschichte der deutschen Stämme und Landschaften* (4 vols., Regensburg, 1923), II, 395.

carried farthest among the Moravian Brethren, where everyone was called "Brother" and "Sister" regardless of their station in life. One of Zinzendorf's most intimate associates was a simple potter, Martin Dober.

The wig, imported from France, had immediately been discarded by Spener and other pietists. Luxuries, extravagances, and other symbols of court influence were abandoned. The absolutism of the German rulers, attempting to ape the French pattern, was attacked; the use of French, the court language, was dropped. In fact, both Latin and French were abandoned during the 18th century in the interest of the native idiom. Dress was likewise simplified among the pietists.

A vital religious movement of any depth, however, has more than a temporary or strictly religious influence. Its effects are diffused over the whole society and culture of its day and on that of posterity. True to their inherited respect for education, the Herrnhuters in Germany and later the Moravians in America, founded many schools, among them some of note. The very fact that they were so early on the scene made them pioneers in American education. Zinzendorf's daughter Benigna, who accompanied her father on his second journey to the New World, began a school for girls in this country. It is now the Moravian College for Women in Bethlehem, Pa. More than 7,000 girls attended it during the first one hundred years of its existence, and it is the oldest school for girls in the United States. It influenced other schools for women, and in 1794 Linden Hall, a seminary for girls, was opened in Lititz, Pa. Comenius had held that women were fully as capable as men and had urged their education. The Salem Female Academy, established in 1802, was the first girls' academy in the South. It is now Salem College for Women in Winston-Salem, N. C.

The first nursery school on American soil grew out of the necessity of caring for Moravian missionary children. By 1747 there were fifty infants, all under the age of five, in a special nursery school in Bethlehem under the direction of a J. C. Franke. A boys' school was founded in 1743 in Nazareth, near by, and a number of Indians and a few Negroes attended. Of the 510 Moravians living in Bethlehem in 1756, 102 were active in missionary work and 62 were occupied in the education of children. Zinzendorf and the Herrnhuters characteristically respected the simplicity of the child. Adults, they believed, should learn from children, as well as

children from adults. A child's will was never to be "broken" but molded by kindness and good example. Zinzendorf expected much from his teachers.

Zinzendorf's establishment of a true Christian community at Herrnhut, which served as a model for the later Moravian settlements, was certainly one of his greatest achievements. It was not an easy task to bring harmony into that heterogeneous group of Moravians, Separatists, Schwenkfelders, and the others who had settled on his estate. Having been persecuted for their religious views, these people all held tenaciously to what they believed. Yet with tact, insight, and patience Zinzendorf was able to demonstrate the feasibility of surmounting confessional differences and of selflessly working towards a common goal. "The Statutes of a Congregation" which he drew up, and which was agreed to by three hundred "Brethren" and "Sisters" in 1727, was a social experiment, "a disciplinary system at once economic, social, and religious." The Statutes combined the civil and ecclesiastical but it was in the last analysis the spirit, the quality of their fellowship, that made Herrnhut and the Moravian Church a genuine "koinonia." Zinzendorf's stress on community, practical Christianity, the strength of group consciousness, the desire to serve, helped many a person out of the isolation of self-destructive individualism. In the discipline, inner harmony, and spiritual fellowship achieved by the Herrnhuters there is a message for modern man. It is also the abiding content of the Christian message.