

ORTHODOXY, RATIONALISM & PIETISM: WHICH IS THE BETTER WAY?

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I. Preliminaries: Some Definitions

Orthodoxy: Protestant orthodoxy in the more exact sense is based upon the practices of the Lutheran estates, i.e. the group of principalities and imperial cities which, at the Diet of Speyer (1529), signed the protest against the Edict of Worms which had proscribed Lutheran practices in the Holy Roman Empire. The word Protestant in German speaking areas still refers to Lutheran churches as contrasted with Reformed churches. In a wider context, Protestant orthodoxy refers to any of the Christian churches originating in Western Europe that separated from the Roman Catholic Church as result of the protests of Martin Luther (1453-1546), Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) and John Calvin (1509-1564). Yet a third branch of the Reformation challenged both Catholics and other Protestants, the Radical Reformation, or Anabaptists.

Rationalism: Similarly, Rationalism in the exact sense refers to the intellectual development within the German speaking regions originating out of the philosophy of Christian Wolff (1679-1754). It was a modification, with Aristotalian features, of the observations of the mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646-1716), and retained a greater residue of spiritualism, determinism, and dogmatism. On a wider front, Rationalism in Europe can be traced to Rene Descartes (1596-1650) on the continent and to the British Empiricists. Descartes drawing from his insights also as a mathematician, claimed to have been able to derive his own existence from pure reason (*cogito, ergo sum*). In England, John Locke (1632-1704) asserted individual natural rights against authoritarianism and urged each person to use reason to search after truth

rather than simply accept the opinion of authorities or be enslaved to superstition. Rationalists taught that all knowledge comes to us through experience or through observation of our senses and argued that starting with intuitively-understood fundamental principles, like axioms of geometry, one could deductively derive what was true. Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), an excommunicated Jew, labored to refine the foundations of rationalism within the confines of God. Rationalism draws its methods and conclusions primarily from reason and does not draw upon the forces of emotion and dogma.

Pietism: Pietism is a movement from within the Protestant Movement that started in the seventeenth century as a reaction against the Protestant orthodoxy. The goal of pietism was to revive Christian heart-felt devotion, loving charity and moral purity in everyday living over sacramental and dogmatic rigidity. Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705) first introduced pietism into the German Luther Church (circa 1670). Comparable movements had preceded it in the Reformed Church of the Netherlands¹ and on the German Lower Rhine.² In his most famous work, *Pia Desideria* (1675; translated as *Pious Desires*), Spener saw that Lutheran orthodoxy had hardened into a scholastic rigidity that was well suited for controverting Roman Catholic and Reformed foes and unsuitable for devotional living. He proposed changes to enhance spiritual development in everyday living. Spener's views were ensconced at the University of Halle under August H. Francke (circa 1692). Franke emphasized charitable work and missionary outreach and many Lutheran pastors received their training at Halle. Another important follower of Spener was Nicolaus von Zinzendorf (1700-1760), a count who assumed a

¹Luminaries include Gisbert Voetius, and Jodocus von Lodensteyn.

² A luminary include Gerhard Tersteegen.

spiritual leadership with many followers. Zinzendorf founded the Protestant denomination known as the Moravian Brethren. In contrast to the Halle Pietists' insistence for remorse and penance (cf. Roman orthodoxy), Zinzendorf's followers preached that Christ's atonement as the only requisite for salvation (cf. Lutheran orthodoxy).

It is perhaps through Zinzendorf that Pietism exerted its greatest direct influence outside Germany for John Wesley received his inspiration from the Moravians under Peter Bohler (1712-1775) while sailing through a terrible storm during his trip to Georgia in America. Wesley, by adopting pietistic elements such as the emphasis on saving grace into his fledgling evangelical movement went out to break the Methodist Church out of the main-stem of the Church of England. Other denominations borrowed from Pietism on pastoral theology, missionary activity, and modes of worship³.

II. The Westminster Confession

In 1643, during the heat of the English Civil War (1642-1649), an embattled English Parliament, summoned "learned, godly and judicious Divines,"⁴ to assemble at

³ The religious revivals of the 19th and 20th centuries were attributable to Pietism.

⁴ On June 12, 1643, an Ordinance calling for an assembly passed both Houses: "Whereas, amongst the infinite blessings of Almighty God upon this nation, none is or can be more dear unto us than the purity of our religion; and for that, as yet, many things remain in the Liturgy, Discipline, and Government of the Church, which do necessarily require a further and more perfect reformation than as yet hath been attained; and whereas it hath been declared and resolved by the Lords and Commons assembled in Parliament, that the present Church-government by archbishops, bishops, their chancellors, commissaries, deans, dean and chapters, archdeacons, and other ecclesiastical officers depending upon the hierarchy, is evil, and justly offensive and burdensome to the kingdom, a great impediment to reformation and growth of religion, and very prejudicial to the state and government of this kingdom; and that therefore they are resolved that the same shall be taken away, and that such a government shall be settled in the Church as may be most agreeable to God's holy word, and most apt to procure and preserve the peace of the Church at home, and nearer agreement with the Church of Scotland, and other Reformed Churches abroad; and, for the better effecting hereof, and for the vindicating and clearing of the doctrine of the Church of England from all false

Westminster Abbey for the purpose of revising religious worship in the kingdom of Charles I, which encompassed England and Scotland. In the year before, Parliament had abolished the episcopacy. After five years, emerged the Westminster Confession of Faith,⁵ a durable document in use today.

The participating Scottish Commissioners who brought them with the Calvinism of John Knox were pleased with the work - in 1647, the Confession was sent to the General Assembly of the Scottish Kirk, as well as, the English parliament to be ratified. The Kirk promptly adopted the document as written. The English Commons returned it to the Assembly, with instruction for list of proof texts from Scripture. The Confession thus fortified was in part adopted as the Articles of Christian Religion in 1648. Some sections and chapters were deleted after angry debate. The Scottish Parliament ratified the Westminster Confession without amendment in 1649.

1649 was also fateful for the House of Stuart for in that year, parliament caused the execution of King Charles I on a cold winter day outside the Banqueting House at Whitehall. Therefore, one cannot ever think about the Westminster Confession without recalling the beheading of a king, foolish and perfidious as Charles was. In his place came the English Commonwealth which saw rule by the Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell (ruled with Parliament from 1649-1655 and from 1655-1658 by personal rule⁶) and the revolutionary antics of the Rump Parliament (1648-1653) and then the Parliament of

calumnies and aspersions, it is thought fit and necessary to call an Assembly of learned, godly, and judicious Divines, who, together with some members of both the Houses of Parliament, are to consult and advise of such matters and things, touching the premises, as shall be proposed unto them by both or either of the Houses of Parliament, and to give their advice and counsel therein to both or either of the said Houses, when, and as often as they shall be thereunto required."

⁵Together with a Larger Catechism and a Shorter Catechism

⁶ Cromwell, whose civil war appellation was Lord General of the Army, took the new title of Lord Protector of the Realm; indeed the title of king was suggested, but wisely refused by Cromwell when a rumbling arose in the military ranks.

Saints (1653-1655). In 1660, after the disappointing failure of Richard Cromwell to continue in his father's footsteps⁷, the Long Parliament which had first seated in 1640 finally came to an end with the restoration of the monarchy in the person of Charles II, second son of beheaded king. With the monarchy, the Church of England was reestablished but religious turmoil and intrigue were yet to continue for another half century.

III. John Locke

Unbeknownst to most of his Cabinet, Charles II had signed the Treaty of Dover with Louis XIV of France who had succored him during exile. By this secret agreement, he was to receive a good income upon establishing certain conditions, one of which was the restoration of Catholicism. In 1672, Charles tried to pass the Declaration of Indulgences which was to grant religious toleration to all, including Catholics. Parliament furiously blocked the declaration, and instead passed the Test Act which excluded all Roman Catholics from public office. The king's Catholic brother, the Duke of York (and future James II), lost his position as Lord High Admiral and was exiled. Unlike his father, the Merry Monarch did not go to war against parliament - in 1685 he died enthroned⁸ but without heir.⁹ This English king received last rites as a Roman Catholic.

⁷ At the risk of oversimplification, the short life of the English Commonwealth can be explained by the predicament of Cromwell - though he enjoyed the unwavering support of the New Model Army, Cromwell was pressed between too many opposing forces including that of religion who could not compromise. His valiant efforts to please the army, the nobility, Puritans and Parliament and his high handed, even vicious assault against other parties, including Levellers and Catholics (especially in Ireland) resulted in fissure that his strong arm alone could hold together. With his death, everything unraveled within two years and England reverted to monarchy, albeit a more restrained one under the Merry Monarch who was devoted more to hedonism than despotism or religiosity. Charles II did take revenge on the executioners of his father by executing nine but refrained from more.

⁸ Merry Olde England reciprocated with a joke: "Charles II was always very merry and was therefore not so much a king as a Monarch. During the civil war, he had rendered valuable assistance to his father's side

It was during these tumultuous years that the Oxford scholar John Locke (1632-1704) made his mark. Locke was multifaceted in that he wrote on medicine, politics, economics and last but not least, religion for which he is remembered as one of the great liberal philosophers of his time. His best known works include the momentous *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* which sought to find the limits of human understanding. Locke believed that humans can understand morality with the same precision we know about mathematics, because we are the creators of moral and political ideas. Nevertheless, reflecting Plato with respect to natural phenomenon Locke believed that we can know only the appearances and not the underlying realities which produce those appearances, thus leaving the gate open for new propositions yet to come.

When the Glorious Revolution of 1688 disposed of James II and elevated William of Orange and Mary to the throne, Locke published *Two Treatises of Civil Government* which he wrote during the tension of Whig plots against Charles II in the early 1680's. *Two Treatises* set forth theories of natural law and natural rights which Locke urged to be applied to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate civil governments and also to be used to justify revolt against tyrants.

Respecting religion, Locke who was born of stern Puritan parents, perhaps is best remembered for his argument for toleration. When Henry VIII broke with Rome by placing himself at the head of the Church of England, he started a practice of an English state religion and this inevitably led to institutional discrimination and legal persecution of Catholics and wide array of dissenting Protestants (e.g Quakers, Puritans, Unitarians etc.). Politics became colored by the strife between religious orthodoxy and dissent; the

by hiding in all the oak-trees he could find. He was thus very romantic and popular and was able after the death of Cromwell to descend to the throne."

Restoration years were charged with and even marred by intrigue based on religious loyalties. Locke sought to resolve this divisiveness in his *Letter Concerning Toleration* which argued for that all important political doctrine of separation between church and state.¹⁰

His more popular works and his popular mis-appellations (Deist, Unitarian or even Hobbist) notwithstanding, the tome to be read for this paper is Locke's inquiry into the veracity of Christianity. This work carries the title *The Reasonableness of Christianity As Delivered in the Scriptures* and for reasons only known to the author was published anonymously in 1695. The premise of this work is that any person can know with certainty that the Trinitarian God exists. The reason is that, according to Locke, the essentials of the Christianity are few and simple, and such essence can be found by all persons for themselves by reading the Scripture. In the treatise, Locke sought to methodically demonstrate his premise by a detailed analysis of the New Testament and he sought to distill that which was necessary for and from what was secondary to reformed Christianity. This approach is entirely consistent with *sola scriptura* minus the irascibility of Luther. Instead, in the tradition of Anglican compromise and on the path of *via media*, Locke - who remained a communicating member of the Church of England, and who had the Psalms read to him on his deathbed - hastened to maintain that the availability of the Scriptures to all provided the foundation for toleration and accord among Christians, in the minimum amongst Protestants.

With an approach typical of his empiricist peers, Locke pursued theology from both nature and Scripture, that is through natural and supernatural revelation. Locke

⁹ He married Catherine Henriqueta de Bragança, a Portuguese princess but sired only illegitimate children.

¹⁰A doctrine subscribed to by most Protestant churches.

found the resolution of any tension between reason and faith in Christ himself who overcame the distinction between the ancient priestly function of propitiation and the ancient philosophers' role of teaching morality. Locke saw Christianity as the foundation of morality based on Scripture, itself open to easy, rational interpretation by all who would read without the office of an infallible intermediary such as the Church of Rome. Even so Locke having based his conclusion on the marriage of reason and faith rejected creedless deism on one hand and fundamentalist enthusiasm on the other. Perhaps because of the religious passions of the period, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, which read from today's perspective is at best methodical or even mechanical, was controversial at the time it appeared and never gained the renown of his other writings.

IV. John Wesley

In contrast to the rather reserved religiosity and rush to rationality of John Locke, John Wesley (1703-1791) was a very pious yet immensely practical man. Indeed, Wesley was one of the most successful English-American evangelists in the history of the Christian Church. John Wesley was fifteenth child of a former Nonconformist minister. Upon graduation from Oxford University, he was ordained a priest in the Church of England in 1728. From 1729, John Wesley became active in a religious study group (or "Holy Club") in Oxford organized by his brother Charles (1707-1788), its members being nicknamed the "Methodists" for their emphasis on methodical study and devotion. Wesley began not by starting a new Christian sect but merely societies within the

Anglican Church. A proven preacher and organizer of genius, John after a disastrous initial foray to America (1735-38) went on to co-establish Methodism, in the face of much opposition, and to lay the foundations for world-wide expansion of a new approach to Christianity. A secret of his success was the embodiment of his message into hymns (many of which were written by his brother Charles Wesley) and the use of inspirational music and singing during Christian service,¹¹ these being the pinnacle of an overall design to stir up the emotions during worship.

There is a rational side of Wesley and some of this can be seen in the *Plain Account of Christian Perfection - As Believed and Taught by the Reverend Mr. John Wesley from the Year 1725, to the Year 1777*. The purpose of the work is best conveyed by the author's own words:

What I purpose in the following papers is, to give a plain and distinct account of the steps by which I was led, during a course of many years, to embrace the doctrine of Christian perfection. This I owe to the serious part of mankind, those who desire to know all "the truth as it is in Jesus." And these only are concerned in questions of this kind. To these I would nakedly declare the thing as it is, endeavouring all along to show, from one period to another, both what I thought, and why I thought so.

It is a journal of his own personal maturing in faith which Wesley wanted to be shared with others.

Of particular appeal to me are Paragraphs 17, 19, 23 (questions only), and 25 which preserved a series of Questions and Answers according to Wesley and which in its own way formed the catechesis for the Methodist. To Wesley, a Christian should

¹¹ An example being the Charleston Hymnal (1737), the first collection of hymns compiled by John Wesley and has the additional distinction of being the first American hymn book.

manifest two concurrent characteristics: (1) holiness and (2) happiness. In *Plain Account*, Wesley defined holiness not as achieving sinless perfection but as having one's heart fully fixed on God, and to set aside all other affection for this "perfect love" of God. Wesley's emphasis on sanctification coupled with happiness became the signature of the Methodist movement. Wesley proclaimed that the mission of Methodism was to "spread scriptural holiness throughout the land" and preached that Christ fulfilled all of a person's deepest, truest desires, making the Christian a happier, more productive person. From Wesley's days at Oxford's "Holy Club" to the end of his life, he sought to be a True Christian, one to be distinguished from the many nominal "almost Christians" he found in the Established Church around him, for his fondest desire was to help others become likewise. Wesley's unabashed and popular approach found such reception by the frontier audience in America that an exuberant, new Christian denomination eventually would separate from the Church of England, and being unencumbered with the politico-religious baggage of the Old World, took root and blossomed in the New.¹²

V. Conclusion

The Westminster divines, John Locke, and John Wesley each epitomized their period of history and Christianity placed in the context of that particular time. The Westminster divines formed a partisan revolutionary committee of religion while serving

¹²To help matters for Methodists in their separation, the Church of England since its arrival in Virginia in 1607 did not ordain bishops in America. English churches in the colonies were under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of London, who administered with the aid of commissioners. Wesley took the unusual step of ordaining some ministers on his own authority - this step was key in the creation of the Methodist church and the first Methodist Episcopal Church was organized in Baltimore on December 24, 1784.

the interests of the English Parliament and Scottish Calvinists against that of King Charles I and his royal Church, crafted an enduring document in the form of the Westminster Confession which is used in the Presbyterian Church today. John Locke was the voice of moderation and rationality that can be heard in the calm after the passing of the fury of the storm. John Wesley was the song of exuberance and piety for a people discarding their worn baggage for the boundless hope of a new land and new day. In the overall analysis, each represented a vital and important part of the still unfolding portrait of Christianity in the world.

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