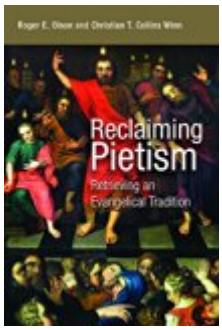
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Roger E. Olson, Christian T. Collins Winn. *Reclaiming Pietism: Retrieving an Evangelical Tradition.* Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015. xiii + 190 pp. $18.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8028-6909-8.



Reviewed by Benjamin Pietrenka

Published on H-Pietism (May, 2015)

Commissioned by Peter James Yoder (Reformed Theological Seminary, Dallas)

Pietism is not a "bad word" (p. x). In much the same way that "Puritan," "Baptist," "Methodist," "Quaker," "Spiritualist," and "Enthusiast" originally carried pejorative connotations and were used to ridicule nonconformist and dissenting Protestant religious groups in the early modern period, "Pietism" and "Pietist" are terms that remain largely misunderstood and still conjure negative feelings among modern evangelical Christians. The cacophony of accusations leveled at Pietists and the Pietist movement, including spiritual elitism, anti-intellectualism, emotionalism, religious legalism, and social disengagement, are the product of historical biases toward dissenting religious groups, misinformation resulting from the paucity of English-language historical scholarship on German Pietism in a field saturated with studies of English Protestants and Puritans in the long shadow of Perry Miller, and the inaccessibility of existing research on Pietism to potential audiences who are not trained academics or theologians. In *Reclaiming Pietism*, professors Roger E. Olson and Christian T. Collins Winn directly confront these issues by exploring the historical foundations of the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Pietist movement and its development in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In doing so, they seek to demonstrate that "Pietism offers valuable resources for contemporary, postmodern evangelical Christianity" (pp. 182).

The book employs a method of presentation typical of English-language publications about Pietism, focusing on major Christian devotional and theological writers that predated, shaped, and transformed Pietism. The substantive historical content relies primarily on translated excerpts of major Pietist works, such as Spener's *Pia Desideria* (1675), and influential secondary histories of the movement, including F. Ernest Stoeffler's *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism* (1971), Dale W. Brown's *Understanding Pietism* (1996), Jonathan Strom et al.'s *Pietism in Germany and North America, 1680-1820* (2009), and Douglas Shantz's *An Introduction to German Pietism* (2013). Interspersed with the historical narrative are chapters that delve deeper into important

conceptual issues regarding common characteristics shared (to a greater or lesser extent) by most Pietists, geographic idiosyncrasies of Pietism as it existed outside of continental Europe, and specific Pietist influences on distinguished present-day Christian theologians.

Following a short introduction to the "Pietist ethos," the book opens with an overview of how prominent critics like Albrecht Ritschl and Karl Barth repudiated Pietism by rejecting the Pietist conception of the "priesthood of all believers" and Pietism's alleged propensity toward "religious individualism," respectively. The specifics of these nineteenth- and twentieth-century critiques initiate a discussion of significant figures that preceded and built the theological and devotional foundation for the early modern Pietist movement. Emphases on the Incarnation and the individual's experience with God in the late medieval devotional writings of Thomas à Kempis and the ***Theologia Germanica*** influenced important predecessors of the Pietist movement, such as Caspar Schwenkfeld, Paracelsus, Johann Arndt, Jakob Böhme, and Jean de Labadie. These prominent early modern radical, separatist, and mystical writers erected the devotional scaffolding adopted by major Pietist figures such as Philipp Jakob Spener, August Hermann Francke and the Hallensian Pietists, and Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf and the Moravians, as well as Johann Albrecht Bengel, Friedrich Christoph Oetinger, and Württemberg Pietists.

The fifth chapter, entitled "A Portrait of Pietism: Its Authentic Hallmarks," stands out as the most useful section of the book for lay readers and nonspecialists. Olson and Winn present this chapter as a distillation of the wide-ranging and often convoluted genealogies of theological and devotional thought presented in more detail in the previous three chapters. They identify ten "key hallmarks of Pietism," which are: the acceptance of orthodox Protestant Christian doctrine, experiential Christianity, conversion, strong devotional life and personal relationship with God, visible Christianity, love of the Bible, Christian life lived in community, world transformation, ecumenism, and the priesthood of all believers (pp. 84-85). The authors wisely stress that these characteristics are not unique to Pietism and adherence to them varied depending upon the temporal, geographic, and cultural context of the group in question. In fact, the authors briefly speculate whether Zinzendorf and the Moravians, whom they proffer as among the founders of "classical Pietism," should be considered Pietists at all because scholars cannot agree on which adherents to "heart Christianity" should be included in the category (p. 81). Drawing attention to historiographic issues like this one highlights the problematic nature of identifying the center of a movement comprised of such theologically disparate, geographically dispersed, and often divergent groups. The strength of this chapter lies in its attempt to clarify these complicated notions and condense them into a more digestible form.

Deploying these hallmarks as a guide to thinking about the nature of Pietism, the following two chapters introduce some of the distinctive features of eighteenth-century Pietism in Great Britain and North America and the transformation of Pietism in the nineteenth century as the movement grappled with the challenges posed by post-Enlightenment secularization in Europe under the auspices of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Søren Kierkegaard, and the German Awakening movement. The legacy of Pietism that reaches back to the seventeenth century comes full circle in the final chapter, which presents four case studies that identify how various aspects of historical Pietism shaped the twentieth- and twenty-first-century theological thought of Donald G. Bloesch, Richard Foster, Stanley Grenz, and Jürgen Moltmann, none of whom would consider themselves Pietists in any formal sense. The authors posit the broad, mainstream influence of

these modern theologians as illustrative of Pietism's vitality and respectability.

In sum, Roger Olson and Christian Collins Winn have produced a user-friendly book that ably synthesizes some of the best scholarship on the history of Pietism and connects that history to significant issues in contemporary evangelical Christian theology in a thought-provoking manner. Students of religion and the religious history of Europe and North America will benefit considerably from the readable prose (the authors do a good job of clearly defining religious studies terminology), and a wide variety of Christian readers will find the history of Pietist devotion and spirituality both informative and edifying. Although written primarily for an evangelical Christian audience, all readers of this compact volume will come away with a solid introductory grasp of the scope and impact of this momentous, but often overlooked, religious movement.