



Piety

Mere mention of the word “piety” stirs up reactions. One reaction is to recall that piety has not always been thought of in a positive way, even from the earliest times. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares, “Beware of practicing your piety before people in order to be seen by them” (Matt 6:1). Nor is piety seen to be a prerequisite for God’s grace. The apostle Paul has written, “While we were yet helpless, at the right time Christ died for the impious [*asebōn*; RSV, “ungodly”]” (Rom 5:6).

It is clear that the ministry of Jesus was conducted chiefly among persons classified as the impious of his day. Yet it can be said that Jesus himself portrayed a form of piety and expected his hearers to share in it. The piety of Jesus might be called a “Kingdom of God piety”—a piety which expressed itself in word and deed, shaped by Jesus’ sense of the imminence and even the presence of the Kingdom of God. As God’s reign realized itself in his own ministry and among his hearers, Jesus saw the present as a time of declaring forgiveness, healing, giving little thought to the cares of the morrow, and entering the festive joy of the heavenly banquet. Within this perspective he could sense the nearness of God as the one who “clothes the grass of the field” and “makes his sun rise on the evil and the good.” That is a form of piety.

Paul, too, who declared that Christ died for the impious, exhorted his readers toward a way of life which might be described as a life of true piety. That is a life “in Christ” which consists of praying without ceasing, sharing in the Lord’s Supper, offering one’s life as a “living sacrifice,” walking by the Spirit, using one’s gifts of the Spirit to edify the whole body of Christ, and so on. Later the term “piety” (*eusebeia*) became one of the most important terms to describe the life of the Christian in the Pastoral Epistles: “Train yourself in piety [*eusebeia*; RSV, “godliness”]” (1 Tim 4:7).

Or again, in his Small Catechism, Martin Luther prefaced each of his explanations of the Ten Commandments with the words, “We should fear and love God so that....” Such words express a form of piety.

Every reader of this journal has encountered forms of piety of one kind or another. One can think of notable examples of piety in our own century in such diverse personalities as Dag Hammarskjöld, Pope John XXIII, and Mother Teresa. Or one can think of persons, both living and dead, who have had an influence on one’s life, and who have displayed an authentic commitment that can be described best as “piety.” Not to be overlooked either are those forms of piety which have been typical of the various denominations in America or on the world scene.

Piety is a subject worthy of renewed interest today. As the partitions are dismantled within denominational families, and between denominations, the old forms of piety are no longer taken for granted within the larger edifices. There is sometimes pain in that. What one person or

group has found to be satisfying, authentic, and truly expressive of the Christian life becomes bereft of its supportive context and is open to question. The pain of this experience has been felt especially within the smaller groups. The very “spirit” of a particular heritage is often its particular piety. Pain arises when that spirit is judged within the larger contexts as idiosyncratic, “ethnic,” or influenced by some “alien” movement (such as Pietism, revivalism, neo-confessionalism, or whatever).

The subject of piety also raises questions about the future of piety. There are two tendencies in tension as we move into the future. On the one hand, as partitions are dismantled, and as persons move about in our highly mobile society and become members of congregations and denominations reflecting heritages other than those they have known since childhood, there is a perceptible tendency toward diversity within congregations and denominations. This is particularly noticeable along the east and west coasts of the U. S. and Canada, but it can be seen elsewhere as well. On the other hand, there is a tendency toward commonality as common worship and parish education resources are used within a given denomination, as clergy move about to serve congregations of other particular traditions within a denomination, and as church bodies seek to form new denominational structures, as is currently the case among Lutherans, Presbyterians, and perhaps others.

The tendencies toward both diversity and commonality are equally inevitable in the years to come, whether in denominations, regions, or congregations. Some commonality is necessary within any churchly entity in order for its members to share a common life together and that nurture in piety can take place. Yet the most illustrious examples of true piety are persons who, though nurtured in a particular piety, are not bound by it. And those congregations and denominations that have various types of piety (which are at the same time congruent with the confessional commitment of the denomination) are the most richly blessed. Those which smother diversity are likely to run into difficulties.

This issue of the journal opens with two brief essays. *Arndt Halvorson* maintains that evangelism is “the heart-language of the gospel fueled by the heart-language of faith.” It is rooted in piety. But what kind of piety is salutary? He goes on to sketch out the profiles of a piety which arises out of the theological heritage of the church and overflows in evangelism. *James Gustafson* relates theology to piety. Theology has usually been thought of as discourse concerning

faith, “faith seeking understanding.” But he helps us take a fresh look at what piety is and then builds a case for thinking of theology as a discipline which is both moved and informed by piety.

Martha Myers reminds us that Christian piety has had many forms of expression through the centuries and illustrates them. She goes on to say that when one form is set up as the norm, the genuine piety of other persons is excluded. What is needed is a recognition of diversity and encouragement in it. *Joseph Sittler* has written concerning the new wave of interest in spirituality. He describes briefly the spirituality of Eastern and Western traditions and then develops the features of an evangelical spirituality. *William Smith* probes the concept of the “resident alien” motif in the writings of Augustine and shares his own insights about pastoral care which are derived from this motif and other considerations. Further, he shows ways in which

psychoanalysis and confession have both similarities and differences and how important Augustine's view of confession can be in the healing process. *Harry Davis* surveys ways in which various religious traditions and forms of piety have fared in the American political system and brings us up-to-date by an analysis of the New Religious Right and through a discussion of current assessments of the concept of "civil religion," which was proposed some sixteen years ago. *Ronald Thiemann* takes up the question of how theology can serve the formation of Christian piety. He maintains that an appreciation of narrative as that which is foundational for both Christian theology and Christian life is the place to begin: "the grand narrative configuration of Scripture is a key part of the overarching Christian story. The biblical texts depict the world within which Christian identity is to be sought." *Edna Hong* addresses the question of what is necessary in preaching...and what is not.

The Resources section illustrates forms of piety. *Todd Nichol* traces the history of the Norwegian-American liturgical tradition, showing how Americanization and upward mobility modified it in significant ways. *Russell Vardell* describes ways in which Lutheran clergy have been depicted in American novels. The sheer number of books is quite surprising; they range from telling tales of actual personalities (especially in the nineteenth century) to depicting fictionalized characters (as in John Updike). Then we go to Eastern Europe. *Christoph Klein* of Romania shares a brief description of a custom peculiar to the church in his country and thereby gives us a glimpse of congregational life in a church and country which are both relatively unknown to most readers of this journal. We are reminded of the rich diversity of Christian piety around the world.