Historical European Pietism and the
Death of Traditional American Religion

by

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When the latest Pew Research Center poll was released in May 2015\(^1\), religious commentators were stunned to see a decline in people who identified as Christian, coupled with a rise in the religiously-unaffiliated who also referred to themselves as secular\(^2\). Responses from conservative\(^3\) and progressive\(^4\) camps gave evidence that such trends have an impact on the politics of American religious life. In light of the Pew poll, and as religious/political pressure mounts in various states to protect “sincerely-held beliefs” through the passage of Religious Freedom Restoration Acts\(^5\), it could be seen as the first steps towards the end of traditional religion in America. However, a mixing of law with religion on the European continent transpired during a time when America was experiencing the “Second Great Awakening,” and it might have historical implications and consequences for America’s religious future.

**An Historical Reflection**

Luther’s articulation of the priesthood of the believer, coupled with the focus on the privileges and responsibilities of the individual believer, seemed favourable to people who felt as if organised and established religious bodies held more authority over their lives than was within their rights and duties. Yet when Luther, and especially the next generation after Luther, achieved that ecclesiastical freedom that he had struggled for, there was little follow through in this area. Some historians such as Lord Acton have levied charges against the Lutheran system, and pointed out that when it rose to become the prominent power in the State, it exercised less tolerance to groups with divergent

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\(^1\) [http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/](http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/)


\(^3\) [https://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us/focus-findings/religion-and-culture/rise-of-the-nones.aspx](https://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us/focus-findings/religion-and-culture/rise-of-the-nones.aspx)

points of view than had been done to them by the Roman Catholic Church during the
period of the Reformation.⁶

Within the Protestant states of Continental Europe (most notably Germany and the
Scandinavian nations), movements for the deepening of spiritual commitment emerged at
various junctures, sometimes making their impact at the centre of society, sometimes
existing on its margins.⁷ Such movements were of social and political as well as religious
significance. For example, pietists⁸ played a role during the political and religious unrest
of the nineteenth century, in which challenges were posed to the religious and political
ethos. On account of its role in this unrest, Pietism became a concern to the established
State-Churches, and attempts were made to put it down, perhaps even to eradicate it.
What were these challenges, and in what position were the Protestant governments and
churches that evoked such a response to a perceived threat? This era was also marked by
substantial flux, which made for difficulties on the behalf of the State-Churches to
hamper the cause of Pietism. What initiatives were attempted to stabilise the pressures
that were mounting, in order to avoid a potential critical mass?

The Lutheran understanding of the relationship between government and religion
had, from the time of Luther, demonstrated a concern for the strict ordering of society,

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⁶ Acton, Lord J. (1956). Acton also held that this sort of pattern is not restricted to the period of the
immediate post-Reformation. Acton argued that this pattern has been a part of the narrative of the relations
between Christianity and other people in the world, throughout the history of Christianity. (See Acton’s
essay, “The History of Freedom in Christianity,” 82-112.)
⁷ Craus, E. (1951). Craus emphasised that sectarian pietist groups such as Mennonites lived outside areas
controlled by a Lutheran State-Church, and were regarded as “aliens, who, at the beginning, lived there only
by sufferance and “concessions,” and these would only slowly make themselves at home.” (235-6) Pietistic
communities, such as the Mennonites, were withheld from the centre of society whereas the likes of Spener,
Francke, Arndt, and other Pietists operated at the centre of society from a seat of learning such as the
University of Halle.
with the bulk of authority ascribed to the godly prince which is the existing secular ruler, while the ruled classes were expected to submit to this authority. Interpreting power and authority on earth as ordained by God, Luther’s conception of authority and government effectively established a dichotomy of authority—sacred and secular. With this separation of power and the functions of authority, the Orthodox Lutheran “ordiology” thus created a dualism which was developed to suit the interests of German princes, whose chief aim was the preservation of power, both sacred and secular. To oppose the authority of the divine establishment was considered to be a sinful act, as one was expected to render complete obedience to the authorities, though the influx of other political thought of the time warned against excesses of power and its misuse and/or abuse.

After Luther’s death, the German princes tightened their grip on power, seeking an increased control over their territories. Those who displayed disloyalty to a “German” institution, such as the State-Church and the prince, who was established as the *jus episcopate* for their various territories and its Church, were smeared with dishonour (if not a worse penalty). This form of government and State-controlled religion was left unchecked by Luther himself, who had actually made provisions for its function. These prince-bishops had a specific place in Luther’s “emergency system” which at the time

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8 In this essay, I will employ the term ‘pietist’ (small p) as a generic term, whereas I will reserve Pietism/Pietist/Pietistic for movements and actions associated with renewal movements accorded that name within the several Lutheran churches of northern Europe.
9 Drummond, A. (1924).
11 Shanahan, p. 151.
seemed to be a necessity, if the Reformation was to take root and thrive in its early years.\textsuperscript{12}

In the aftermath of the Thirty Years’ War, the need to further reinforce the Lutheran concept of authority (\textit{Obrigkeit}) was most detectable in territories such as Prussia and the Nordic countries. Learning from past experiences,\textsuperscript{13} the Prussian government sought to use the established Church and the religious feelings of its people as a socio-political cohesive element to erect governmental power. Exploiting the need and dependence of the Protestant Church upon the Protestant State, the Prussian princes demanded obedience to their authority as the Pope, emperor, and master of the Teutonic Order in his own lands. This was quite a different attitude towards Luther’s admonition of authority not as “the source of law, but the embodiment of Christian duties towards the Christian commonwealth.”\textsuperscript{14} The same basis of Lutheran adherence to recognised authority was evident in Scandinavia as well, on account of the provisions made for the Danish king to have powers \textit{in sacra}, in addition to his secular authority. The mixing of religion with government—the prince as bishop and ruler—were fervent attempts to centralise power. This mixing of roles also provided preventative measures against the

\textsuperscript{12}“Prince-bishops” were charged with a dual role of both the overseeing of their respective territories/states, and the pastoral duties for the area, as well. Nichols, J. (1956). Nichols commented that “prince-bishops” were often considered to be “above the law,” which was problematic and regarded as an abuse of both government and religion in the minds of later political theorists, especially those preceding the French revolution.

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., 51. In 1613, the Elector Johann Sigismund’s conversion from Roman Catholic to Reformed broke the kind of single confession between prince and people, thus providing a catalyst that would transform the Prussian territorial church into a “subordinate part of the civil bureaucracy.”

\textsuperscript{14}Hope, N. (1995).
unravelling of an ordered and controlled society, which had been witnessed during the events immediately preceding the start of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{15}

The State-Church systems of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could not help but to reflect upon the implications of the Thirty Years’ War. Although not the sole reason for the conflict, the war had proven that the traditional, honoured relationship between politicians and the clergy had been altered. Since the Thirty Years’ War, princes had gained power, constitutions and government foundations had also been realigned, and as Hope acknowledged, “Customary law was politics . . . Power meant sharing and negotiating.”\textsuperscript{16}

Not all warfare was issued on account of an opposing force that threatened the safety of a territory, or whose ideals were not aligned with the State-Church ethos. There were occasions in which the opposing force in question was the establishment itself, bringing about social and civil revolutions from within. There could be no greater antagonist known to absolutist forms of social ordering than democracy itself. Instead of providing the social cohesion for which it was hoped, religion actually became a dividing issue within the European scene from 1792.\textsuperscript{17}

Fuelled by the Enlightenment, democracy demanded the government’s release from the areas that it had controlled. \textit{Laissez-faire} was not only intended for the minimisation of government interference in the monopolisation of economics and

\textsuperscript{15} Other authors, such as Raeff, argued a different approach to the views of the ordering of German life, presented in this essay. Raeff held that the goal was the “disciplining of behaviour in each sphere of life by keeping them separate, thus preventing uncontrollable excesses in one from affecting the other.” Raeff, M. (1983). P. 58-61.
\textsuperscript{17} McLeod, H. (1997).
business, it extended to the religious arenas of life as well. The religious nationalisation that had fuelled the vigour of the Protestant reformers was now working against them. Whereas the Reformation had been made possible by the “resentment of Germans against exploitations for the benefit of Rome and by the desires of princes to control the Church within their domains,” the political revolutionaries levied the accusations that the Reformation was “transparently more from the political ambitions and personal desires of the reigning monarch.”

The State-Church system found itself stretched in tension. It had helped to create a sense of national consciousness, yet the tenets that Christianity professed, transcended boundaries of race and nationality in an attempt to bring about the unification of humanity in a spirit of charity. Not every group that issued a call for the separation of religion and government agreed with each other on what it was that was sought. Some groups argued for an anticlerical release of the State from the control of the Church, while others wanted the Church to be separated from the State, “which all too often meant control by civic officials who had little interest in seeing that the Church presented the Christian message in its purity.”

This same distinction characterised the variety of Pietist groups that were emerging, or perhaps, re-emerging during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. At the core of this awakening (Erweckung) that transpired during this period lay the concern of the “relevance of the parish clergyman” and the “light of his spiritually

18 Latourette, K. (1959). Latourette argued that this force of social democracy made the heaviest impact upon the French government and the Swedish Church.
19 Latourette, K. (1941).
20 Chadwick, O. (1975).
distressed flock.”^22_ As a result of this concern, Pietists, Puritans and Independent groups emerged having roots in the Pietist tradition.\textsuperscript{23} Whichever view the Pietists held concerning the State-Church, their presence was made known throughout the European continent.

The agents for the spread of Pietism in its early stages in late seventeenth century Saxony and included the laity though the institutions of the various universities taught the ideals of Pietism\textsuperscript{24} to the clergy. Pietism’s message of religion as a quality of life, as opposed to a dogmatic system, and its inspiration/simplification of the Gospel spread from Halle, through the Germanic states and into Scandinavia through ministers trained in the academic centres of Pietism.\textsuperscript{25} The Pietistic movement also appealed to the theologically untrained laity, as it placed emphases on the priesthood of the believer and simple theological positions.\textsuperscript{26}

By the late eighteenth century, Pietism’s spread was more than the authorities were prepared to tolerate as it was becoming a serious threat to the State-Churches. The threats that Pietism represented were varied, but they all stemmed from the central concern over the loss of power, and control over a society that was continually being rebuilt in the wake of the Reformation, Enlightenment, and continued warfare on the European continent.

\textsuperscript{22} Hope, 354-5.
\textsuperscript{23} Latourette, K. (1938).
\textsuperscript{24} Stoeffler, F. (1965). Stoeffler argued that there are three common characteristics in all Pietistic movements: the ‘essence of Christianity’ is to be found in a personally meaningful relationship with God, a sense of religious idealism, and an emphasis on the Bible as a standard of authority for confessions, creeds, and all other aspects of Church life and polity.
\textsuperscript{25} Stoeffler, F. (1973). Stoeffler, however, argued that Sweden was less responsive to the initial influx of Pietism since they equated “Pietism” with “Prussian.”
Pietism also had the tendency to call into question the role of the civil government within society in general and the established Church in particular. In the case of a territory such as Prussia, the civil government allocated a didactic role to the Church, charging it with shaping and maintaining moral ideals and values in public life. However, this was a façade, since religion was deployed to serve a purpose of legitimising the power of the State.27 At the opposite extreme, under the influence of Dutch Calvinism and Anabaptism, Holland—on the whole—exercised religious toleration (1581) and in some cases, dissenters were protected from compulsory membership within the State-Church (1672), as was required in Germany and Scandinavia.28 Though only a minor threat in the grand scheme, some pietistic groups rejected the general State-Church (allegemeinde Volkskirche),29 hence the ongoing influence of the radical Anabaptists became detectable within their view of the relationship between Church and State.

The State-Churches could not yield to such a threat from an opposition group. Efforts were made in the attempt to either impede the progress of Pietism, or to proclaim it illegal, thus putting a halt to the movement altogether in order to keep it contained within the authority and fellowship of the State-Church. One of the earliest measures to be taken, using Denmark for an example, was to simply empower the king with Lex Regia, or a supreme power over all decisions relating to the church. However, as Hope has noted, the turning to an absolutist form of management diminished the role of the

28 Horsch, J. (1942).
29 Friedmann, R. (1949). Friedmann argued that the rejection of the general State-Church and confessional dogmas were the fundamental effects of Anabaptists on Pietist groups.
Danish superintendents/bishops to that of a civil servant, as the Danish Lutheran Church held no separate identity from any other government agency.\(^{30}\)

In comparison to Denmark, Brandenburg-Prussia took a different approach. In the aftermath of the Thirty Years’ War, electors in Brandenburg-Prussia came to the recognition that attempts at ecclesiastical unity would be virtually impossible and that toleration would be the best they would be able to achieve. By the late seventeenth century, the emergence of pietistic groups caught the attention of the government. An Association Oath was passed in 1699 which demanded that all citizens and clergy within Prussia maintain uniformity of faith.\(^{31}\) This Association Oath educed the obverse effect, as artisans and peasant enthusiasts searched for biblical grounds against the newly-enforced conformity.\(^{32}\)

In contrast to Brandenburg-Prussia and Denmark, the Dutch Church took a different approach when dealing with Pietist movements as social peace was the desired outcome rather than a uniformity of belief. Before the end of the seventeenth century, the Netherlands had committed itself to trade and news-gathering, which allowed for the influx of ideas and people from all over the world, thereby establishing a form of religious pluralism. This religious pluralism would eventually aggravate the Dutch authorities when the overall European economy was weakened in the latter part of the seventeenth century, when the mass of refugees and the larger part of the Dutch population proved difficult to assimilate.\(^{33}\)

\(^{30}\) Hope, p 80.


\(^{32}\) Ibid., 208. Ward also argued that Brandenburg was unusually tolerant to Pietist movements, as a series of edicts in the 1690s forbade polemical sermons against Pietists to be preached. Ward, W. (1999). p 78.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 83.
During the eighteenth century, Germany and Scandinavia tried a different approach to contain Pietism with the establishment of a Protestant canon law. Some Pietists such as Thomasius had been calling for a reformation of the Lutheran clergy, in which they were expected to become subject to public law as well as to be trained in disciplines of piety and spirituality in their rigorous theological studies. The subjection of the clergy to the civil law that had long since been in effect over the laity had implications for Protestant citizenship, as public law became the common bond of the \textit{Landeskirchen}. Thomasius also argued that it was impossible to force the parishioner to become pious, and recent history, marked by religious wars and a questionable outcome of the Peace of Westphalia, was proof enough to him for this assertion.

Thomasius also argued the need for every person to answer for themselves in terms of religion, and that the toleration of religious difference must be the mark of the ecclesiastical/civil relationship. The Danish jurist, Christian Ditlev Hedegaard (1700-81), argued for the contractual society of the laity (\textit{collegium}), who were allowed to exercise their freedom of religious conscience in a state that had abandoned \textit{Kirchenregiment}, although the government retained the right to shape the Church’s liturgy since it was still responsible for the rights and welfare of the citizens in an environment of civil peace.

Other portions of continental Europe were experiencing a religious awakening during the period of 1780-1850, and like Sweden, had to re-examine their policies regarding the emergence of Pietist groups. The nineteenth century was to become the

\begin{itemize}
\item[34] Hope, 93.
\item[35] Ibid., 94-5.
\item[36] Ibid., 300-1.
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century of great changes concerning policies towards Pietism. In the Netherlands, a secession of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kirk (Christian Reformed Church) in the two decades spanning 1820-1840 led to an appeal to the State’s constitution, which provided for religious liberty. Their appeal was rejected on the basis that the constitution “guaranteed religious liberty only to the bodies, which existed when it was framed.”

Even with such attempts to put away the dissenting groups, it was difficult for the Dutch Church to counter its own history of religious toleration that had emphasised social peace at the expense of religious uniformity.

**Conclusion**

The United States Constitution provides free exercise of religion and prohibits the government from endorsing one religious belief over others, which makes recent trends of the religiously-unaffiliated differ from the emergence of Pietists in Europe. However, similarities exist with how religious majorities react to the rise in challenges to their privileges, especially when seeking solace and protection behind legal shields and public demonstrations to proclaim an infringement of their religious liberty. The recent growth in non-theistic groups, charitable outreach organisations, and non-theistic pastoral caregivers are now resonating with and reaching more Americans, including younger generations. With this increasing diversity and rise in numbers, it could be perceived that America’s traditional majority religious demographic and appeal is being led to a decline.

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37 Ibid., 237-9.
Bibliography


Author’s Biography

Jase (Jason) is the current applicant to become the first Humanist Chaplain in the history of the United States armed forces. After being away from America for nearly 15 years, he has recently returned to serve as the Executive Director for the United Coalition of Reason, based in Washington, DC. Through his work with UnitedCoR, Jase nurtures 85 local Coalitions of Reason, in addition to supporting over 800 cooperating and affiliated groups within these local coalitions.

Jase took double majors in philosophy and practical theology at Howard Payne University before attending Brite Divinity School (Texas Christian University) for an M.Div. He then studied for an additional Master's in history and religion at The University of Oxford before completing further post-graduate certification from Sheffield Hallam University that qualified him to teach in the UK’s state-maintained schools. Among the 9 subjects that Jase teaches, philosophy, psychology, religious studies, and personal/social/health education have been his favourites. After working in the UK schools for 5 years, Jase gave 6 years of experience as the Headteacher (the UK equivalent of a “Teaching Co-Principal” in the US) in UK-curriculum international schools, and throughout his work, he has lived in and visited nearly 40 countries. He has recently completed a Doctor of Education in administrator leadership and his dissertation focused on empowering non-Western grassroots schools and teachers.

Jase is an endorsed and qualified Humanist celebrant and chaplain, a regular contributor to TheHumanist.Com, and gives regular volunteer time to chaplaincy work with student organizations at major American and British universities.