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Michael R. Weed
Editor

M. Todd Hall
Assistant Editor

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Pietism, Pieties, and the Contemporary Church: Promise and Peril

Michael R. Weed

"Piety," in this essay, designates a universal aspect of human existence. Human lives are shaped by interpretations of reality—which provide visions of life's intent and purpose and direct human hopes and aspirations. Further, in spite of piety's associations with religion,[1] there are many kinds of "pieties" shaped and driven by what individuals and communities take most seriously (respect or reverence[2]), i.e., preoccupations which, for good or ill, shape the direction and goal of human lives.

An illustration may help clarify this concept of piety and pieties: October 4, 1969, found my wife Libby, a University of Texas student, and me (a UT ex) sitting in the student section of UT's Memorial Stadium (where my father had taken me as a child). This early fall afternoon, Texas was playing Navy. The invocation was offered (they did that then), the national anthem was played by UT's marching band and sung by the crowd of over 65,000, followed by "The Eyes of Texas." After Navy had taken the field, the UT

[1] In popular usage, piety's association with religion is commonly negative, e.g., "pious hypocrite" as exemplified by Uriah Heep in Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*. Similarly, referring to someone as "pious" has come to carry negative connotations.

[2] English "piety" is derived from the Latin *pietas* meaning "ultimate respect, reverence." Cf. *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P.G.W. Glare, (NewYork: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1378.

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Cowboys repeatedly fired Old Smokey and the Longhorns came onto the field through clouds of smoke as the crowd roared and broke into "Texas Fight."

This common experience illustrates the blending of a number of identifiable "pieties": family (memories of my father), patriotism (the flag and national anthem), regional loyalties ("The Eyes of Texas"), entertainment (band, competing teams, etc.), and religion (invocation).

While there are different religious pieties (e.g., Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, etc.), and even different Christian pieties (e.g., Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, etc.), pietism is commonly understood as a reforming impulse or tendency appearing in various forms in different Christian communions with the goal of recovering the affective or spiritual aspects of the Christian faith.[3] Consequently, pietism often appears as a renewal or reform movement where these aspects of religion are sensed to have been neglected or lost. In the study of church history, Pietism is used—capitalized and without modifier—to designate a significant religious development within the Lutheran state church following the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation and its tragic aftermath, the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648).

At least five factors contribute to the rise of Pietism: (1) Martin Luther's failure to develop a doctrine of the authority of scripture, (2) his reluctance to develop a doctrine of sanctification, (3) the inattention of Lutheran authorities to the role of laity in the life of the church,[4] and (4) a growing

[3] The Hasidic movement in Judaism (beginning in the 18th century) is considered an example of the "pietist impulse."

[4] Parenthetically, these three factors contributed to ongoing disputes within the Lutheran hierarchy and to a distancing between the church's leaders and its members. By the time of Luther's death in 1546, unresolved differences had become apparent between his own views and those of his colleague, Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560). Cf. Arthur Cushman M'Giffert, *Protestant Thought Before Kant* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 142f. M'Giffert observes that Luther's concept of saving faith, while of great practical importance, was insufficient as an effective

sense of the importance of the individual and of individual freedoms in the broader culture.

Finally (5), the emergence of Pietism cannot be understood apart from the devastation of the Thirty Years' War. Fighting over a combination of political and religious factors, armies from Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Bohemia, Spain, and France—including mercenaries and adventurers—ravaged Germany from 1618 until the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. By the war's end, countless villages, cities, and churches had been destroyed. Torture, maiming, and murder of civilians and prisoners had become commonplace—cannibalism was even reported.[5] Disease and famine were widespread and an estimated fifteen million persons had been killed or displaced.

The cultural and spiritual damage of the war was equally devastating. Large numbers of the surviving population were left distrustful of all official religion. Germany, which felt the brunt of the war, was divided into over 300 territorial states controlled by regional princes to whom Luther and Melanchthon had turned for support.[6] In reaction to the war, two major alternatives to doctrinal disputation and religious conflict emerged. Many turned from the religious and theological disputes of revealed religion to Deism, preferring the seemingly rational objectivity of nature's God, accessible to reason and

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principle for organizing a dogmatic theology. Further, many disagreements between Luther and Melanchthon, while of little practical importance at the time, had significant theological implications. Over time, these festered into continuing theological controversies, strife, and division within the Lutheran movement. It was not until 1580 that the Formula of Concord and the Book of Concord provided some stability to Lutheranism.

[5] Cf. Will and Ariel Durant, *The Age of Reason Begins* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), 568.

[6] Luther and Melanchthon's call for assistance had, eventually, led to permanent control, commonly exercised through a "consistory," or commission of lawyers and clergymen appointed by and responsible to the ruler. See Theodore G. Tappert, "Introduction," *Pia Desideria* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 3.

science.[7] The other major religious alternative to rise from the ashes of the Thirty Years War was Pietism.

Philipp Jacob Spener: *Pia Desideria*

Though he was not without precursors, Pietism's founder is regarded as Philipp Jacob Spener (1635–1705).[8] In 1670, as a Lutheran pastor in Frankfurt, Spener became concerned with the moral climate and lack of spirituality in the city. He sought to raise the spiritual level of his parishioners by initiating meetings in his home. These gatherings, involving Bible study, prayer sessions, and conversations about the Christian faith became known as *Collegia Pietatis* and gave the movement its name.

In 1675 Spener called for reform of the German state church with the publication of *Pia Desideria*.[9] Before introducing six proposals for reconstituting the church, Spener observed that there were serious deficiencies in the church. *Pia Desideria* then proceeded to assess the civil authorities, the clergy, and the common people.

Spener charged that few authorities knew what Christianity was, much less practiced it. Those showing interest in religion frequently did so out of a

[7] Believing in a Creator accessible to all through human reason (rather than special revelation), Deism initially appeared in England and was widely influential in both Germany and France. Understandably, much of Deism's "rational content" reflected centuries of Christian influence upon European culture.

[8] As a youth, Spener was an avid reader of books in his father's library where he was influenced by works such as Johann Arndt's *True Christianity*, and the work of English Puritans such as Lewis Bayly's *The Practice of Piety* (1610?) and Richard Baxter's *The Necessary Teaching of the Denial of the Self* (ca. 1650), all critical of conventional Christianity. See Theodore G. Tappert, "Introduction: the Times, the Man, the Book" in Philipp Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria: Heartfelt Desire for a God-pleasing Reform of the True Evangelical Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 8f.

[9] See Philipp Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*. The alternate title of *Pia Desideria* may be translated *Heartfelt Desire for a God-pleasing Reform of the True Evangelical Church*. It was originally composed as a preface to a collection of Johann Arndt's sermons and is addressed to readers concerned with the state of the church and open to corrective changes.

factious spirit, or for political advantage.[10] He also insisted that ministers needed to reform as much as anyone, adding that when "the people are undisciplined, … their priests are not holy."[11] Additionally, Spener charged that sermons were often disputatious and intent on displaying preachers' intellectual abilities.

Spener ironically observed that

> … the highly enlightened apostle [Paul], if he came among us today, would probably understand only a little of what our slippery geniuses sometimes say in holy places. This means that he derived his knowledge not from human ingenuity but from the illumination of the Spirit, and these are as far removed from each other as heaven is from earth.[12]

For Spener, such sermons emphasized correct doctrine but ignored heartfelt faith and charity toward others.[13] He proceeded to offer six proposals for reforming the church and recovering the essence of the Christian faith. These proposals reflect the following concerns:

> 1. Attention must be given to a more extensive use of the Word of God among us. (87)
> 2. The establishment and diligent exercise of the spiritual priesthood … according to which … all Christians are made priests by their Savior [and] are anointed by the Holy Spirit, and are dedicated to perform spiritual-priestly acts. (92)
> 3. … [T]he people must have impressed upon them … that it is by no means enough to have knowledge of the Christian faith, for Christianity consists rather of practice. (95)
> 4. We must beware how we conduct ourselves in religious controversies … with unbelievers and heretics … disputing is not enough to maintain the truth … or to impart it to the erring. (97, 102)

[10] Ibid., 43.

[11] Ibid., 44. This condition is regarded by some as a consequence of Luther's ambivalence regarding a doctrine of sanctification.

[12] Ibid., 7.

[13] Ibid., 56.

> 5. It would be especially helpful if the professors would pay attention to the life as well as the studies of students [preparing for ministry] and … speak to those who need to be spoken to. (107)
> 6. The pulpit is not the place for ostentatious display of one's skill. … Preaching should be the divine means to save people, and … everything be directed to this end. (115)

Pia Desideria evoked different reactions. Government officials could not overlook Spener's criticism of their role in directing the church. And while the reaction of theology professors was also largely negative, that of ministers was mixed. Initially, it was only a small minority of Lutheran pastors and lay persons for whom *Pia Desideria* was formative. It was only with subsequent generations that Pietism became an international movement.

In 1686 Spener left Frankfurt and became court chaplain to John George III of Saxony in Dresden. Here he met August Herman Francke (1663–1727), an instructor at the University of Leipzig who would become Spener's successor as leader of the Pietist movement.[14] As Francke helped form devotional groups within the university of Leipzig, faculty opposition forced him from the university, and he accepted a pastoral role at Erfurt.

In 1691 Spener became rector of Nikolaikirche in Berlin where he attracted support from the elector of Brandenburg (who would become King Frederick I of Prussia in 1701).[15] Here, Spener was involved in planning a new university at Halle and helped Francke obtain an appointment in the University of Halle, where he remained for the rest of his life.[16]

Philipp Spener died in 1705. What Spener could not have envisioned was the broader influence that his reform would have–influence extending beyond Spener's church and beyond his homeland.

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[14] Tappert, 21.
[15] T. A. Burkill, *The Evolution of Christian Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 317.
[16] Ibid.

Pietism: From Europe to India and America

Francke, as a professor at the new university at Halle, proved to be a man of ability and vision. Within a decade, he established a school for children of the poor, an orphanage, a dispensary, a publishing house, and a Bible institute.[17] And it was through Francke's efforts that Halle became a center of foreign missions. King Frederick IV of Denmark, seeking to provide missionaries to the Danish settlement of Tranquebar on the southeast coast of India, turned to Halle for help. The result was the famous Tamil mission.[18]

It was, however, through the efforts of Francke's student at Halle (and a godson of Spener), Nikolaus Ludwig, Count von Zinzendorf (1700–1760), that Pietism would exercise its greatest influence outside of Germany. In the 1720s, the Moravian Brethren (remnants of the Hussite church), sought refuge from persecution in Austria.[19] Zinzendorf welcomed the Moravians on his estate (east of Dresden) and committed to nurturing the religious life of the growing settlement of Herrnut ("Watch of the Lord").[20] In time, Zinzendorf became interested in foreign missions, sending missionaries from Herrnut to the West Indies (1732), Greenland (1733) and Georgia (1735).[21] In London (1738) a religious society was founded which would influence

[17] As a result of visiting Francke's various foundations, King Frederick William I adopted some of Francke's ideas in his own efforts to reform Prussian education.

[18] Two students at Halle, Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and Henry Plutschau, arrived in Tranquebar in 1706 and founded what would become the Tamil mission. When Ziegenbalg died in 1719, the mission consisted of a community of over 350 persons, had produced a translation of the New Testament in Tamil, and had developed procedures for transferring leadership of the church to native converts. Many missiologists view the Tamil mission as the beginning of Protestant missions. Cf. Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964), 227f.

[19] Burkill, 318.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

John Wesley.[22] In 1734 Lutheran authorities accused Zinzendorf of heresy and he was exiled from 1736 to 1747. During this time he became a Moravian bishop and established Moravian societies in the Baltics, Netherlands, England, West Indies, and the American colonies.[23]

As Spener, Francke, and later Zinzendorf were struggling against a sterile orthodoxy in Germany, similar impulses were appearing among English Christians.[24] Further, devotional groups (similar to Spener's) appeared among Anglican churches in the late seventeenth century.[25]

It was in part due to these stirrings, particularly Law's *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, that John (1703–1791) and Charles Wesley (1707–1788) became leaders of a student group at Oxford which met for Bible study, communion, and visiting jails.

In 1735 John and Charles Wesley sailed to Georgia as missionaries. On their ship were Moravians who, during a storm at sea, demonstrated courageous faith which impressed John Wesley and evoked a sense of the weakness of his own faith. After a short and failed ministry in America, the Wesleys returned to England (1737) and in London renewed friendship with Peter Boehler, a Moravian missionary en route to the Americas, who had established a religious group in London.[26]

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[22] Ibid., 319.

[23] Ibid. In 1747 Zinzendorf was allowed to return to Herrnhut where—except for six years as a missionary in England—he worked until the time of his death in 1760.

[24] John Bunyon's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), Isaac Watts' *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1707) and *Psalms of David* (1719), and William Law's *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1728) all sought a deeper and more heartfelt personal faith.

[25] Burkill, 319.

[26] Studies of Wesley variously describe his relationship with Boehler and Moravian Pietism. There are indications that Wesley met Boehler before going to America. Further, some descriptions of Wesley's Aldersgate experience suggest that it occurred in a Moravian meeting. Albert Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press,1964), 52.

Shortly afterward, on May 24, 1738, while attending a Moravian meeting, John Wesley received the spiritual confirmation he needed.[27] He records that while the preface of Luther's *Commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans* was being read, his heart "was strangely warmed," and he received assurance that God, through Christ, had saved him from "the law of sin and death."[28] In time, Wesley would travel on horseback over 250,000 miles of British roads preaching to factory workers, farmers, and the people of the land.

Pietism in America and American Pietism

While Puritans, Moravians, and eventually Methodists brought Pietism to the American colonies in the early 18th century, the American experience contributed to a social and historical climate which fostered pietistic tendencies among most versions of Christianity imported from Europe. In 1835, touring French aristocrat, Alexis de Tocqueville, observed that Old World churches were refashioning themselves in America's democratic ethos.

> As men become more alike and equal, it is important that religions … not collide unnecessarily with the generally accepted ideas and permanent interests that reign among the mass; for common opinion appears more and more as the first and most irresistible of powers; there is no support outside of it strong enough to permit long resistance to its blows.[29]

Additionally, the scarcity of clergy to serve America's small and scattered congregations necessitated more lay involvement and independence among churches—regardless of tradition or church polity—than did their European counterparts. Significantly, Tocqueville also observed that both

[27] Cf. Burkill, 322.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 423.

Catholics and Protestants were forced to de-emphasize traditions, rites, and rituals.[30]

American churches inevitably reflected the effects of Europe's devastating religious wars. Ninety-five years after Tocqueville's visit, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (on his first visit to America), observed that American churches were characterized by concern with neither creedal statements nor theological truth.[31] He noted that the word "church" itself was associated with "arrogance and intolerance" and was commonly replaced by "denomination."[32] Bonhoeffer conjectured that in America, Christians fleeing persecution in Europe found themselves facing "an immense multiplicity of Christian communities" which the term "denomination" acknowledges while avoiding questions of the unity of America's fractured Christianity.[33] For Bonhoeffer, American Christianity was so marked by European memories that "the concept of tolerance becomes the basic principle of everything Christian."[34]

Within three years of Bonhoeffer's visit, Charles Fiske, Episcopal Bishop in New York State, recorded similar observations. After a tour of churches, Fiske lamented lack of interest in dogma and noted popular slogans such as "conduct, not creed," "faith saves, not doctrine or theology."[35] To-

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[30] Ibid., 421.

[31] *No Rusty Swords* (New York: Collins + World, 1965), 90.

[32] Ibid., Bonhoeffer observed that "For the first generation of fugitives the journey to America was a decision of faith for their whole lives. For them the renunciation of the confessional struggle was therefore a hard fought Christian possibility. A danger arises here, however, for the subsequent generations, who are born into this battle-free situation. … What was for their fathers a right of their Christian faith won at risk of their lives becomes for the sons a general Christian rule. … The struggle over the creed, for which their fathers took flight, has become for the sons something which is in itself unchristian."

[33] Ibid., 93.

[34] Ibid., 99.

[35] Charles Fiske, *From Skepticism to Faith* (New York: Harper & Bros. Publishers, 1934). "In religion, it has been said, it is faith that saves, not doctrine or the-

gether, Tocqueville, Bonhoeffer, and Fiske sensed what is now widely recognized: American churches are fertile soil for "generic pietism" and are now reflecting the deficiencies and vulnerabilities inherent in that designation.

Christian Piety and Pieties

As represented by Spener and others, Pietism brought needed renewal and redirection to Lutheran and other Protestant churches. Subordinating theology to Scripture, involving the laity in the disciplines of prayer and scripture reading, emphasizing the importance of "heartfelt faith" and charitable acts, offered new visions of Christianity in Europe and America. Undoubtedly, Pietism's emphases on mission and fuller involvement of women in the life of the church were important and needed changes in European churches.

Negatively, Pietism early on demonstrated that it also posed risks to orthodox faith—not only deterioration into subjectivism[36] but also elitism.[37] As pietistic impulses today abound in a broader anti-intellectual and anti-authoritarian environment, some intrinsic weaknesses of pietism are becoming evident. Also evident is the degree to which effective and lasting renewal efforts draw shape and direction from the dogma, doctrines, and practices of the very churches which they seek to "renew."

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ology. … None of your dogmas, we are told; we want a practical religion; character, conduct, not creed; the essential thing is to follow Christ, not to define him." 27, 28.

[36] Cf. Fredrich Schleiermacher (d.1834), raised in a Pietist environment and one of the founders of liberal theology illustrates this point. Schleiermacher viewed all theological/doctrinal statements as attempts to verbalize the core of all religion, which he identified as the "feeling of absolute dependence." For Schleiermacher, conflicting confessions (e.g., Jewish, Muslim, Christian) are like different wrappings protecting the same gift–the feeling of absolute dependence on that greater than ourselves. Cf. Schleiermacher's *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958 (orig., 1799), 90f.

[37] While being a little church within the church ("*Ecclesiola in Ecclesia*") may have a leavening function, it may also give rise to intrigue and a sense of spiritual elitism.

As contemporary American churches attempt to market Christianity in a manner that is attractive to the broader culture, long-standing tendencies to de-emphasize doctrine and theology are intensified.[38] Countless numerically successful churches are altering traditional Christian pieties by diluting them—intentionally and unintentionally—with infusions from secular pieties of the surrounding post-Christian culture (e.g., common advertising techniques, established marketing and management strategies, and popular entertainment motifs).[39] Believers whose "hearts and minds" are molded in this syncretistic environment—attempting to combine non- and even anti-Christian aspirations and ideals with Christian faith—are inevitably drawn into "hybrid-pieties."[40] Their hyphenated-faiths mark them with spiritual anemia; they are restless and susceptible to the virus-like spread of contem-

[38] Frederick Sontag and John K. Roth, *The American Religious Experience: The Roots, Trends, and Future of Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 13f.

[39] Belief that these are "spiritually neutral" is a naive understanding of their influence on modern hearts and minds, viz., while not denying God, they make Him irrelevant "for all practical purposes."

[40] Cf. Edward Farley, *Requiem for a Lost Piety: The Contemporary Search for the Christian Life* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 50–64. Farley describes three stages through which Christian piety mutates. The first stage occurs when the realities of the gospel are captured in certain feelings and experiences. For example, when guilt and forgiveness are viewed in terms of our experience, the transcendent reality of God beyond our emotions is minimized. The second stage is with our emotions becoming the center of our Christian lives. For example, when the goal of worship becomes the experience of worshipful feelings, our efforts are drawn toward inducing such experiences. Our worship services are "successful" only when certain feelings are produced. The final stage in this mutation of Christian piety flows from the first two. If my feelings and experiences are the goal of Christian life, the object of concern is not God but me. Once my feelings are central, the next step is to censor the emotions, allowing in only those which I find comforting or exciting. Following Farley, the difference between emerging "worship pieties" is that some of these pieties simply may not be Christian.

porary idolatries which attempt to combine non- and even anti-Christian aspirations and ideals with Christian faith.[41]

Corrective Vision

The solution to this problem can only be found in a return to the fundamental beliefs, teachings, and practices of the church. Sixty years ago Dorothy Sayers spoke to postwar (and becoming post-Christian) Britain:

> It is worse than useless for Christians to talk about the importance of Christian morality, unless they are prepared to take their stand upon the fundamentals of Christian theology. It is a lie to say that the dogma does not matter; it matters enormously. It is fatal to let people suppose that Christianity is only a mode of feeling; it is vitally necessary to insist that it is first and foremost a rational explanation of the universe.[42]

True Christian piety shapes hearts and minds immersed in the historic Christian faith—dogma, doctrine, and polity. In the first century, the Christian message of God in Christ reconciling the world to Himself broke the grip of pagan pieties: the aura of Rome, Greek philosophy, and other gods of the age.

Today, different forces may dominate modern hearts and minds, but they are no less attractive, powerful, and destructive. In a naively "secular" world, churches must become vigilant in identifying the elusive gods of the age and the diseases of heart and mind which they spawn. Over forty years ago, Edward Farley cautioned that renewal programs popular among American churches were not providing disciplines for the full life of faith but only

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[41] In this regard, Gene Veith observes: "The old paradigm taught that if you have the right teaching, you will experience God. The new paradigm says that if you experience God, you will have the right teaching. … [N]ot only is objective doctrine minimized in favor of subjective experience, experience actually becomes the criterion for evaluating doctrine." *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 211.

[42] Dorothy L. Sayers, "Creed or Chaos?" *Letters to a Post-Christian World*, ed. and introduced by Roderick Jellema (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 31.

Christian "activities." Farley warned that something else will fill the void and Christians "will be more or less at the mercy of whatever comes along, especially the loud voices of the secular pieties."[43]

I close by returning to the football game between the University of Texas and the U. S. Naval Academy which my wife and I attended forty years ago. Some time in the second quarter, a Navy player lay face down, writhing and grasping the grass turf with his hands. His teammates frantically waved toward the Navy bench in front of the UT student section. Navy trainers sprinted onto the field. A stretcher was called for. The ambulance in the south end zone drove along the cinder track toward the Navy bench. Light applause for the injured midshipman was quickly eclipsed by the roar of thousands of UT fans chanting, "Hit 'em again! Hit 'em again! Harder! Harder!"

Versions of this annual autumn pageant are reenacted throughout the land … Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. It is a grand spectacle, as American as apple pie, and only part of what Robert Bellah over four decades ago identified as "American Civil Religion"—which observes winter, spring, and summer rites as well.[44]

Some days after the UT–Navy game, I related the above incident to a Christian friend. After a few moments, he observed, "Sounds like all that was missing were the lions and Christians."

He was wrong. Christians *had* been there.

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[43] Farley, 116. Recently, in a class in which six or seven different Protestant traditions were represented, the writer inquired if anyone's church was *not* adapting their worship practices to an entertainment format. All confirmed, without hesitation, that their churches were doing precisely that.

[44] Robert Neelly Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 96:1 (1967), 1-21.

Contributors

M. Todd Hall is Director of Library and Information Systems at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Allan J. McNicol is A.B. Cox Professor of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Thomas H. Olbricht is Distinguished Professor of Religion, Emeritus, Pepperdine University

Jeffrey Peterson is Jack C. and Ruth Wright Professor of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Stanley G. Reid is President of Austin Graduate School of Theology

R. Mark Shipp is Pat E. Harrell Professor of Old Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Michael R. Weed is Billy Gunn Hocott Professor of Theology and Ethics at Austin Graduate School of Theology

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