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Olson and Collins' "Reclaiming Pietism" (Book Review)

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Reclaiming Pietism,

Reviewed by Kristin A. Vargas, Assistant Archivist, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, TX

Reclaiming Pietism is authored by Roger E. Olson, Foy Valentine Professor of Christian Theology and Ethics at George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Waco, Texas, and author of The Journey of Modern Theology. Co-author Christian T. Collins Winn is professor of historical and systematic theology at Bethel University, St. Paul, Minnesota, and author of “Jesus Is Victor!": The Significance of the Blumhardts for the Theology of Karl Barth.

Reclaiming Pietism is an introductory work suitable for undergraduates and readers interested in the early modern period of Christian history. The book is scholarly, but designed for those unfamiliar with the classical Pietism movement that emerged out of one of the darkest periods of the early modern era: The Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648). Those that survived the turmoil of war, famine, and plague were thirsting for a “religion of the heart” (p. 3). At the time, scholasticism had inundated Lutheran Orthodoxy, and some scholars worried that the church had lost touch with its spiritual and emotional dimensions. The Pietist ethos slowly developed and gained ground, both within Lutheran Orthodoxy and without, as certain theologians (Spener, Francke, Zinzendorf, et al.) strove to bring the Bible back into the hands of the common lay person. Pietism was essentially a reformative or revivalist movement.

Olson and Collins Winn do an excellent job of clearly and concisely putting the reader into the context of this period and the centuries following. They also explain why Pietism is now considered a bad word and they give the critics of Pietism their due by explaining the difference between classical Pietism and the more radical forms that developed among certain Christian sects, and why there are theologians today who distrust any form of Pietism. The connection between this movement and modern evangelism in America is made clear in the latter chapters, showing the reader how Pietism has left an indelible mark on the present.

My only awareness of Pietism before reading this book was in connection with the great Danish Christian philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, who was raised in a Pietist household. I was delighted to see the authors touch upon this fact and give the readers more insight. It was also fascinating to learn that such well-known scholars as Stanley Grenz and Jürgen Moltmann were deeply influenced by the Pietist doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

Overall, I highly recommend this book for the theological library and would point it out to students as well as faculty members.