The Recovery of Piety in the Post-Pious West

by MARK A. NOLL

Piety is not a going concern where I live, and I suspect it may not be faring so well in Northern Ireland either. One difficulty that stands in the way of a Christian recovery of piety in the present day is the nature of Western culture. Even more important difficulties have to do with the phenomenon of piety itself. My goal here is to reflect on how Christians might recover a piety both genuine before God and useful to others. But to get to that positive goal it will be necessary first to canvass thoroughly the ills of piety in our day.

The first class of ills are external and concern the attitudes and practices of western society. If ever a culture has moved beyond piety, surely it must be the modern West, with modern America charging ahead in the vanguard. The list of difficulties faced by piety in our culture is a long one. Piety is a nebulous asset; it is hard to market. Piety cannot work on television, where only the image of piety is able to sustain a viewership. The sad end to which that image has come recently in the United States is fully known to all who can read a newspaper. Piety, furthermore, does not observe the compartmentalisation of life that is so much a part of our existence. It is pushy and intrusive, always breaking through the casing of private, domestic existence to create awkwardness in the public square. In addition, piety fits awkwardly into the suburbs, the Elysium of modern existence, where everyone would be clean, prosperous, properly sun-tanned and brimming with animal vigour.

Much more troubling than the threats of modern culture to piety, however, are problems posed by the would-be pious themselves. Here a multitude of problems prevail. First, piety is

corrupted by the company it attracts. At least in the United States, there is a renewed interest in general spirituality, which quite easily adds Christian piety to its varieties. Shirley McLain plumps astral contacts, TV preachers hawk peace of body and mind, ex-fundamentalists swoon for liturgical bells and smells, classes in religion are said to be full at the state universities, New Age movements advance from strength to strength, athletes of all sorts pause to pray before they enter the lists, therapy and the therapeutic are supposed to ease every strain. So, sure, why not throw a little ol' Christian piety into the mix as well.

Christians, of all people, should be on their guard against the inward turns of the age. Seeking God with the whole heart is something other than being comfortable with one's self, something other than hunkering down to the pursuit of inwardness. Messages of judgement, even if the prelude to hope, have trouble finding sponsors. When piety is confused with the counterfeits of the age, it is piety that suffers most.

A related difficulty concerns the question of whether this is a proper moment for piety. When faced with significant cultural dislocation, we may well ask whether the turn toward piety might not be a concession to cultural defeat, psychological despair, or social alienation. The world as a whole is going to hell in a handbasket, shopping malls march across the American landscape like locusts, image has completed its conquest of politics, and most of us (by any reasonable standard) are consumed by the idolatries of consumption. Can this really be the time to turn inward? If cultivated taste is a refuge from the collapse of civilisation, is this the moment to indulge a hankering for the spiritual?

The need is very great for dedicated Christian action against the massing forces of self-centred greed. Volunteers are required to assist the armies of the dispossessed and to proclaim the gospel to an increasingly pagan Western society. A faithful meeting of such needs would seem to leave little room for the

cultivation of piety. To put it another way, offering the cup of water is hard to do when meditating.

Yet a third difficulty in calling for a recovery of piety is the record of piety with regard to the Christian mind. Ours is an age, as perhaps all ages are, requiring the most vigorous Christian thought, in order to understand the conditions of our existence and to grasp the many dimensions of the Christian hope. For these tasks, piety may seem a dubious asset. Or at least, that might be the conclusion from a little historical study.

The thrust of classical Pietism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was to call believers back from formal, dogmatic rigidity towards living Christian experience. On those terms, Pietism did breath a badly needed vitality into several varieties of Christian faith, from Protestants in Germany, Holland, England and America, to their Catholic counterparts in France and other parts of southern Europe. In its day, this Pietism had a timely appeal, for much calcification had taken place in the years after the Reformation and the Counter Reformation. And many valuable things did come from this Pietism. Pietists inaugurated the first widespread missionary movement among Protestants, they encouraged renewed seriousness about the priesthood of all believers, they turned laypeople back to eager study of the Bible, and they encouraged many acts of social compassion.[1]

The intellectual problem was not so much one of Pietism in itself as with the excesses of Pietism. Pietists had rediscovered the truth that Christianity is a life as well as a set of beliefs. The difficulty came when some Pietists began to view Christian faith as only a life, without much concern for beliefs at all. This led to fascination with practice, deep involvement in spiritual experience and absorption in the psychological dimensions of the faith. Objective realities of revelation were sometimes

1. The best studies in English are by F. Ernest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965); and *German Pietism during the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973)

eclipsed. In the early nineteenth century, religious teachers trained by Pietists, like Friedrich Schleiermacher, even began to argue that a 'feeling of dependence' was the foundation of Christianity.[2] Others hesitated to affirm that God could break into the world in ways unknown to human experience. As well-intentioned as they may have been, these proposals in fact undercut the Christian faith. Always the church had had a place for Christian experience, but in living communion with the objective character of the gospel. Pietists quite properly protested when this objectivity came to be regarded as the sum and substance of the faith. But a few overreacted by picturing the *experience* of faith as the new totality.

At its extreme, the Pietist emphasis on religious life tended to deprecate self-conscious efforts at forming a Christian perspective on the world. To be consumed by feeling was to have no time for thinking through the relationship between God and His creation. Once this stage had been reached, it soon became difficult to distinguish between those forms of feeling that remained within the Christian orbit and those which had spun off as meteorites with no fixed centre. Pietism played an important part in the revitalisation of the church in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Unchecked Pietism, however, also played a role in the rise of theological liberalism, nature mysticism, and the humanistic romanticism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It also had something to do with the flight by Christians of orthodox belief from serious labour with the mind.

So, a call for the recovery of piety runs into immediate difficulties. In our day there is much bad coin circulating under the name of piety to drive out the good. There is the question whether the inward turn is appropriate at a time of manifest need in social service and evangelism. And there is the sobering

2. For an overview, see Franklin L. Baumer, *Modern European Thought: Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1600-1950* (New York: Macmillan 1977).

example of Pietists who wasted their minds while seeking the fix of religious feeling. But these problems, bad as they are, are not the most serious difficulties.

The most serious difficulty standing in the way of a recovery of piety today is more basic still. It is the problem of self-conscious religiosity for a religion that professes to believe in justification by faith, salvation through the grace of God. Put precisely, the problem is not piety but the self-awareness of piety. If we are conscious of being pious, we are making a conclusion about our own status, our own religious dignity. Pursued beyond a certain point, the self-awareness may verge perilously close to self-satisfaction, self-justification, self-salvation. The temptation of piety, in these terms, becomes but another instance of idolatry. It is the danger of being captivated so thoroughly by my own religiosity that I have no consciousness left for what God has promised to do for those who trust in Him. No law exists that always transforms a concern for real godliness into an idolatrous fixation upon one's own spirituality. But in the modern West, where self-awareness is so much a part of our therapy, and so treasured a feature of our ideologies, the transit from other-directed piety to self-satisfied religiosity can be very short.

The one redeeming feature of this difficulty blocking a recovery of piety is that it inheres in us rather than in the thing itself. We may be in a situation where if we are aware of *feeling* pious, we are, because of that awareness, actually excluded from *being* pious. But that need not necessarily deter us from seeking piety. Such a situation leads rather to the conclusion that to recover piety in the post-pious West, we must not begin by pursuing piety itself.

The need for such a strategy—for a way of pursuing piety that avoids the perils of self-justifying religiosity—is great. If we lose piety, even in the post-pious West, we lose something irreplaceable. To rescue piety, we can begin at no better place than careful attention to how the notion has been defined

historically and in the Scriptures. This is a path that may show us how to pursue piety without being compromised by the pursuit itself.

The most obvious conclusion that even a superficial glance at the history of the term reveals is that until the last several centuries piety was regarded not as a quality of human consciousness, but of human action. In more specific Christian terms, piety was not so much a quality of existence *per se*, but of existence in relationship to God and to others. This sense of piety, moreover, was shared by Christians and ethical pagans alike.

Prior to the modern era, the word 'piety' stood for a multitude of virtues.[3] Figures as varied as the Roman author Virgil, the theologian Augustine, the Reformer John Calvin, and America's most significant early religious thinker, Jonathan Edwards, looked upon 'piety' as almost the sum of the good life. In the mid-sixteenth century, Calvin wrote in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that "the first step to piety is to know that God is our Father, to protect, govern and support us till he gathers us into the eternal inheritance of his kingdom".[4] For Calvin the practice of piety was anything but being 'holier than thou' or adhering to a legalistic code of behaviour. For him the term defined the essence of the Christian faith. To act in a pious manner meant to return to God through praise and obedience that which was due to Him. "By piety," Calvin wrote, "I mean a reverence and love of God arising from a knowledge of his benefits."[5] According to Calvin, the pious acknowledge with reverence the glorious deeds of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Such people pattern their behaviour

3. The historical material in the following paragraphs is adapted from the Introduction to *Voices from the Heart: Four Centuries of American Piety* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), and is mostly the work of my co-editor for that volume, Roger Lundin.
4. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* II. vii. 4.
5. *Ibid.*, I. ii. 1

after the divine example of redemptive concern. "Now, it may also be understood what are the fruits of repentance. They are, the duties of piety towards God, and of charity toward men, with sanctity and purity in our whole life.".[6]

This concept of piety had roots both in the Roman world and the Bible. In the *Aeneid*, written only decades before the birth of Christ, the epic poet Virgil celebrated the piety of his hero, Aeneas. One of the main virtues Aeneas repeatedly demonstrated was *pietas*, an attitude of humble devotion before the gods and a humble commitment to his family, to his people and to the missions the gods had entrusted to him. Virgil's conception of piety differed strikingly from some modern ideas of the quality: he was less concerned with inner states of the spirit than with outward acts. Indeed, Aeneas found his inner desires and outward duties in almost constant conflict. He had to counter a hunger for personal fulfilment in order to obey the gods, that is, to be pious. And the gods had set before him arduous tasks protecting the good of his people.

As important as these classical sources once were in shaping Christian ideals of piety, the Bible remains the single most important source for its definition. Many of the great figures of Scripture—Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Joseph, Ruth David, Jeremiah, Paul—show that genuine spirituality involved both meditation and action, both devotion and practice. Clearly, the piety of Jesus stands as the supreme example of the balance between prayer, reflection and action. On the night before his death, he defined for his disciple the link between devotion and deeds; "If you love me, you will obey my commands" (John 14:15). In his last few hours Jesus demonstrated the very 'piety' he was describing to his disciples. He spent much of his final night in prayer and contemplation, yet when the soldiers came for him, he went forth to do what his Father had willed.

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6. *Ibid.*, III. iii. 16.

Throughout the rest of Scripture, we find the life of godliness defined by a quality of certain actions, as much as by a distinct consciousness. Thus, in one of the few passages where our English translations use the word 'piety', we are instructed to 'practise piety' within our own families (I Tim. 5:4). And in the catalogue of the faithful in Hebrews 11, the verbs of action become an overpowering litany: Abel *offered* a better sacrifice; Noah *built* an ark; Abraham *obeyed and went*; Abraham *offered* Isaac as a sacrifice; Isaac *blessed* Jacob and Esau; Jacob *blessed* each of Joseph's sons; Joseph *gave instructions;* Moses parents *hid* him; Moses *chose* to be mistreated; Moses *left* Egypt; Moses *kept* the Passover; the people of Israel *marched* around Jericho; Rahab *welcomed* the spies. The author concludes with another flurry of such verbs: "What more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut up the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies" (Heb. 11:32-34).

Augustine of Hippo, writing in the fifth century as the Roman Empire crumbled around him, paid tribute to those scriptural and Roman ideals. In his masterwork, *The City of God*, he spoke with profound admiration of the example set by the early Romans: "The pagans," he explained, "subordinated their private property to the common welfare, that is to the republic and the public treasury. They resisted the temptation to avarice. They gave their counsel freely in the councils of the state. They indulged in neither public crime nor private passion".[7] Later in the same work, Augustine sought to correct a narrow misconception: "The word 'piety' (in Greek, *eusebia*), in its

7. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. G. G. Walsh, ed. V. J. Bourke *et al.* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1958), 112.

strict sense...ordinarily means the worship of God. However, it is also used to express a dutiful respect for parents. Moreover, in everyday speech, the word *pietas* means pity or mercy...God commands us especially to practice mercy, declaring that it please Him as much as or even more than sacrifices. Hence God himself is spoken of as pious, in the sense of merciful".[8]

This classical tradition, which viewed piety at once as both private and public, inspired also the Puritan movement. The history of Puritan piety, in Britain as in America, also, however, helps show how a comprehensive ideal—love to God flowing out to faithfulness in the world—came to take on the more limited scope of our modern conceptions of the term.

America's most important twentieth-century historian, Perry Miller, recognised that the "Augustinian strain of piety" dominated Puritan experience. It "was the inspiration for Puritan heroism and the impetus in the charge of Puritan Ironsides [during the English Civil War] . . . . It was foolishness and fanaticism to their opponents, but to themselves, it was life eternal".[9] The sermon that John Winthrop, first governor of Massachusetts, preached to his fellows on board ship for America shows how the Puritans linked internal experience with public duty. The sermon spoke eloquently of the experience whereby "Christ comes and takes possession of the soul and infuseth another principle, love to God and our brother".[10] In sober language, Winthrop told his fellow Puritans about their need to remain bound to Christ as devoted individuals. At the same time, he warned them that they dare not forget their covenantal duties and communal loyalties. If they were faithless in their relationship with God, he told them, they would face the

8. *Ibid.*, 188.
9. Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), 3-5
10. Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity", conveniently modernised in *The Puritans in America: A Narrative Anthology*, eds. A. Heimart and N. Delbanco (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 87.

certain destruction of their enterprise: "Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together in this work as one man. . . We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body".[11]

As noble as this vision of piety may have been, it did not long survive in the Puritan experience. Soon what one historian has called "the sharp distinction moderns make between the sacred and the secular"[12] was at work to nourish a divide between individual religiosity and communal secularity. In such a setting, piety was on its way to becoming an irrelevant indulgence.

In its original terms, however, as defined by Virgil, but even more by the authors of Scripture and the shapers of the Christian tradition, piety was not a special awareness of the self, though it certainly involved attitudes and dispositions of the heart. Rather, it was more a characteristic way of life, of acting, that arose from an awareness of God and His actions on behalf of humans. Piety in these terms vastly transcended what we often assume to be characteristic of the pious. In these terms, piety was not a personality trait to be studied, dissected and evaluated. It was a pearl of great price devotedly to be pursued.

Now let us ask how we may pursue piety without falling into the traps described earlier. The most important thing in such a pursuit, it might be urged, is to put piety out of our minds altogether. It would seem, in other words, that we become pious when we forget our piety and concentrate upon the person and acts of God. Such a strategy moves us from ourselves to God, and then from God to those about us. It is preeminently the path shown to us by the Lord Jesus.

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11. *Ibid.*, 91.
12. Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 21.

In John 14 we are made privy to a conversation with distinctly modern overtones. The disciple Thomas posed to Jesus a question familiar to us all: "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" How, Thomas wanted to know, may I secure my bearings? How may I put my life together? How may I know the way I should go? Jesus's answer, perhaps made trite by many repetitions, yanked Thomas out of himself abruptly: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." The answer to Thomas's concern for himself is found in God's concern, through Jesus, for Thomas.

And then another disciple, Philip, poses another question whose variations we all know: "Lord show us the Father and that will be enough for us." In other words, if only we are able to position the Father properly in the orbit of spiritual beings circling the sun of our existence, we will have our spiritual solar system in order. Once again, Jesus breaks through to lead Philip away from a concern for his own receptivity of the religious to a reality outside himself: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father..." And after a few more words, "If you love me, you will obey my commands."

One of the messages of John 14 to the post-pious West is, thus, that the way to recover piety is to follow the words of Jesus. Jesus said that the way to be properly religious is to know God. The way to know God is to love Jesus. The way to love Jesus is to keep his commands. It is therefore knowing Jesus, and then following Jesus, that enables us to be responsibly pious.

The effects of this kind of piety are great indeed. It is the presence of Jesus that enables us to exchange the need to feel pious for the reality of doing piety. Piety thus may be regarded not as a cloak of spirituality to put on when we are in the mood

and then discarded when we no longer are disposed for such an outfit. It is much more a quality of life that carries us through the exigencies of existence. This sort of piety gives meaning and purpose to education, it redeems desperate interpersonal relationships, it stands alongside in the raising of children, it is present where we work, where we play, when we are cheerful, when we are perplexed, and on and on.

The sort of piety Jesus preached is not primarily something in us. It is something essentially from God. Nowhere do we see how much genuine piety arises from outside ourselves more directly than when we confront the end of life. A pious death is one in which our would-be religiosity is swallowed up in the living reality of God. On this subject, the lines of George Herbert are compelling:

Death, thou wast once an uncouth, hideous thing,
Nothing but bones...,
But since our saviour's death did put some blood
Into thy face,
Thou art grown fair and full of grace.[13]

What Herbert saw about the end of life, Jesus tried to teach his disciples about all of life. In a word, the way to recover piety, even in the post-pious west, is to set aside preoccupations with ourselves and to act in the world as those who have been acted on by God. Even more simply, the way to recover piety is to forget piety and find Christ.

And now, in closing, a prayer for piety:

13. Herbert, "Death", *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Dent, 1974), 189.

Christ be with me, Christ before me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ where I lie, Christ where I sit, Christ where I arise,
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.
Salvation is of the Lord,
Salvation is of the Lord,
Salvation is of the Christ,
May your salvation, O Lord, be ever with us.[14]

14. St Patrick, *The Oxford Book of Prayer*, ed. George Appleton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).