

11-1-1990

Henry Melchior Muhlenberg and pietism: a case study

John W. Kleiner

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Kleiner, John W. (1990) "Henry Melchior Muhlenberg and pietism: a case study," *Consensus*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol16/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Henry Melchior Muhlenberg and Pietism: A Case Study

John W. Kleiner

*Professor of Christian Ethics and Church History,
Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon*

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Lutheran Life Insurance Society of Canada, Waterloo, Ontario, and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), Bonn, West Germany, for generous financial support which made it possible for me to pursue work on this Muhlenberg project during my sabbatical year, 1988-89.

I. Introduction

Since Pietism continues to be a live issue in contemporary Lutheranism, it is not surprising that those who assess its impact on a major figure like Henry Melchior Muhlenberg should reach some rather different conclusions. The most recent biographer of Muhlenberg, Leonard R. Riforgiato, argues that Muhlenberg represents "a viable compromise between Lutheran orthodoxy and pietism."¹ According to Riforgiato the standard biography of Muhlenberg brought out by William J. Mann in 1887² failed to recognize this balance in Muhlenberg's theology. Riforgiato's criticism of this work is that it overemphasizes Muhlenberg's Pietism because its author was himself "deeply committed to the pietistic faction of American Lutheranism" and therefore took "great pains to plant his subject firmly in the Halle tradition."³ Paul P. Kuenning, in *The Rise and Fall of American Lutheran Pietism*, sees both Muhlenberg and his biographer in a rather different light. From Kuenning's perspective Muhlenberg is simply "Henry M. Muhlenberg: Pietist"⁴, and Mann is guilty of understating Muhlenberg's Pietism, presenting him as "an upholder of a strictly orthodox confessionalist theology" and excusing Muhlenberg's Pietism "as a lingering and degenerate

aspect of his German background which he had for the most part... discarded.”⁵ These two very different readings of both the primary and the secondary sources show something of the complexity of the issues under discussion.

This essay is written within the context of the above discussion and debate but it makes no claims to provide a definitive answer to the questions about Muhlenberg’s Lutheran Orthodoxy and his Pietism that have surrounded him for the last two hundred and fifty years. What this essay does offer is, first of all, a translation of a letter from the Muhlenberg corpus which was until recently available only as a handwritten copy in the Lutheran Archives Center, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Now, however, it is published in the new critical edition of *Die Korrespondenz Heinrich Melchior Mühlenbergs* which is being brought out by the Muhlenberg Section of Professor Dr. Kurt Aland’s “Institute for the Study of the History of Pietism”, under the capable direction of Dr. Karl-Otto Strohmidel.⁶ In the second place, this essay offers some commentary on the letter, essentially arguing that the major themes in it correspond quite closely to the major themes of Halle Pietism. Since this interpretation might seem to align me with the views of Paul Kuenning cited above, I would hasten to add that this letter presents only one side of a rather complex Henry Melchior Muhlenberg. Other primary and secondary sources with which I am familiar, including William J. Mann’s biography and his essay holding up the confessional Lutheran elements in Muhlenberg’s theology and practice, entitled “The Conservatism of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg”⁷, move me to a “both-and” position on this question at this point in my understanding.

The letter translated below, which was written in Providence, Pennsylvania, and dated February 20, 1747, is one of six recorded letters that Muhlenberg wrote to Baroness Wilhelmine Sophie von Münchhausen (1702–1750) of Electoral Hannover between the time of his departure for North America in 1742 and the baroness’ death in 1750. The baroness and her husband, Baron Gerlach Adolf von Münchhausen, who was high sheriff of Hannover and a key advisor of George August, Elector of Hannover (and King of Great Britain [1727–1760]!), were two of Muhlenberg’s noble patrons during his student days at Göttingen University (1735–1738). The baroness continued to support Muhlenberg’s work during her lifetime;

one of her major contributions was to supply him with the medicines he used to relieve the suffering of those whom he encountered with epilepsy and gout.⁸

The translation of this letter is based on the text in *Korrespondenz* 1:267–270. It is presented here without most of the critical apparatus that is found in the *Korrespondenz* and in the translation of Muhlenberg's letters from 1740–1747 that Dr. Helmut T. Lehmann, professor emeritus of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, and I are working on and propose to publish in the near future. The paragraphing and the numbering of the paragraphs are also elements that have been introduced for the purposes of this presentation.

II. The Letter of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg to Baroness Wilhelmine Sophie von Münchhausen, February 20, 1747

[1] Honorable Lady, Consort of the High Sheriff:

When I think of Your Grace, which I do quite often, I am always reminded of the blessed words of our great Saviour in Matthew 5 [:7], "Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy" [Matt. 5:7]. My experience for a considerable time already has taught me that Your Grace is merciful, taking to heart not only the physical needs of the human race, but more particularly the immeasurable depths of misery and the corruption of souls found in all nations and in each individual person. You sympathize with them and are most desirous to help to the extent of your means; and where your means and help are insufficient you constantly approach the all-sufficient God with the prayer that he would permit his kingdom and the time of refreshment to come. Thus one can truly say that Your Grace is twice blessed! Blessed because, as a result of your true conversion, the gracious God has granted to you repentance, faith and a merciful heart which is constantly active in responding to each and every misfortune. Blessed, too, because your Grace's mercy continually moves⁹ the immeasurably compassionate heart of the Father in Christ to many expressions of mercy toward you and the whole human race and its misery. If then Your Grace has been endowed with such mercy from above, which the most benevolent nature or best temperament

cannot resist, the result has been for a considerable time already that a major fresh support has been given not only for the spread of the marvelous gospel among the heathen in the east and among the Jews toward the north, but also among the scattered and erring Christian people in the west.

[2] It seems to me that it has not been sufficiently recognized that this century is truly a remarkable time. For when, in a good many centuries, has one heard that so many different, blessed, merciful souls have come together and tirelessly sought, with prayer, advice, assistance, and indescribable effort and expense, the salvation of the Jews and heathen and the improvement of corrupted Christendom? Even if the devil is still carrying on his old accustomed craft, so that he creates confusion everywhere, as he attempted to do during the age of the patriarchs and Moses and even in the more recent and more wonderful time of the kingdom of Christ and his apostles and again during the reformation of our cherished fathers, nevertheless our most blessed head, Jesus Christ, remains the same as he has been from all eternity. In his time he will indeed bring about a separation when he clears his threshing floor, gathering the wheat into his granary and burning the chaff [cf. Matt. 3:12; Luke 3:17]. As Satan and his companions from the beginning of the world down through all the ages have been like monkeys and have always erected their chapels alongside the church, so Satan continues to do to the present day. But, the "Word forever shall abide, no thanks to foes who fear it," etc.¹⁰ It is impossible that a prayer or even the smallest coin should ever be lost which children of God have put forward out of faithful hearts for the true expansion and glorification of the name of Christ among all the nations. For God is not so faithless, that he would forget such works of love—even if it would only be a drink of cold water [cf. Matt. 10:42]. The fact remains: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" [Matt. 5:7] and "as a person sows, so shall he also reap" [Gal. 6:7]. The aforementioned mercy which the eternal love has effected in you is accordingly the very reason why I and my colleagues and our congregations have become the objects of your compassion and acts of charity. We lack nothing because it is not a question of our worthiness but of our wretchedness. When Your Grace, the Countess, out of pity breaks open the

clouds [cf. Isa. 64:1] for all, even the most miserable person, through your earnest¹¹ praying, pleading and knocking, we are certain that we are included. And when [your prayers] issue in love and charity we too will not be forgotten.

[3] Our highly respected patroness may rightly ask if her mercy and charity have occasioned a blessing to flow back from the mercy of God, for we read: "They shall obtain mercy" [Matt. 5:7]. Just as the gracious God also directs his special providence toward the most insignificant things, so it is likewise our duty to pay attention to the most insignificant things. It is due to God's mercy that I, a great sinner in my benighted fatherland, have been enlightened through God's Word and set on the path of life through an upright teacher who was an instrument of God. It is due to God's mercy that during my time in Göttingen there were various persons, eminent counts and other members of the nobility, who shone forth as lights and inwardly shamed me and some others and moved us to deeper reflection. Thus one is forced to conclude: if such persons deny the world and its glory, truly change their way of life and become like children, following the Lamb and learning in his school to walk in a truly gentle and humble manner, where does that leave a poor, worthless person and particularly a student of theology [*Studiosus Theologiae*]? Which hill and mountain will protect him from the anger of him who is seated upon the throne if he does not consider the things that make for his peace [cf. Luke 23:30 and 19:42]? It is God's mercy and his reward for the earnest desires and prayers of so many merciful souls that in Göttingen already several instruments of his have been prepared for the honoring of Jesus Christ in the churches and schools. It is an accomplishment of the mercy of God that in this century an attempt has been made to evangelize among the Jews, and although the harvest does not match the sowing, the Lord who gives the increase [cf. 1 Cor. 3:6] can produce a harvest in his own time, if only it is sown in tears [cf. Ps. 126:5] and commended to the Lord. Indeed, in our time the living word of God, written and preached, has been so genuinely and truly planted by the friends of Jesus according to the flesh, as has not happened since the time of the apostles. Who can deny that the whole host of the merciful, blessed children of God, acting out of mercy and compassion,

helped to bring the light of the gospel to the heathen in East India, to trim the light among the thankless and slumbering Christians in Europe, and to kindle a light among the slumbering covenant people in western lands? Who, indeed, can deny that this mercy of God is a recompense and a blessing which the merciful have brought about?

[4] It is not my opinion that all that has been reported previously is in the Matthew 5 [:7] text, if one interprets it in the most narrow sense [*sensu strictissimo*]; but it is included in it if one interprets it more broadly. We have already carried on trade for several centuries with the poor heathen who have sat in darkness and the shadow of death [cf. Luke 1:79] and we have used their precious jewels and herbs, but we have had little concern to send them the treasure of the gospel! The Jews have lived scattered among us Christians already for some/many years, but there is no century to which one can point in which an ongoing and serious effort was made to remove the veil from their eyes and minds [cf. 2 Cor. 3:14]. We may not simply cast a general glance at the distant past, to the dark, deplorable centuries before the reformation; rather we also have to lament the fact that, after the dear, sincere fathers of the reformation fell asleep, there was very little concern among Christians in their teaching and life for the clear and pure articles on true repentance, faith, justification and sanctification, even though they are stated clearly enough in the witness of the prophets and apostles and are put down on paper in our Symbolical Books. Consider how Arndt was denounced for his four books on true and vibrant Christianity. Consider how Jacob Spener and so many honest servants of God had to suffer.

[5] How can the host of the children of God in Europe fail to be mightily strengthened in faith, encouraged in love and fortified in hope if they have continued until now in mercy and compassion? Has the Lord not shown himself to them to be mighty in his promises? Has he not given in return as they have given? Has he not again measured with the same measure that they used [Matt. 7:2]? If things here have not always turned out as perfectly as they may have wished, then in eternity, when they can better bear it, he will lay into their lap

a measure pressed down and running over [cf. Luke 6:36]. Has not the strenuous and compassionate undertaking among the Malabars already borne its first fruits? Has there already been a Reuben here or there among the children of Israel who has addressed the heavenly Joseph [cf. Gen. 42:22]? Who knows how near at hand the time may be that the heavenly Joseph will reveal himself to his brothers when the famine finally drives them to him [cf. Gen. 45]? Can one not hear the pure and clear sound of the sweet gospel of the grace of God in Christ to the east, west and north? Does one not hear an earnest pleading for true and heartfelt repentance, faith and a godly life in kingdoms, electorates and duchies, in earldoms, noble seats and free imperial cities, where in previous times the seats of those who accused others of heresy were to be found?

[6] If someone were to counter this and say that great clouds of heavy judgment have filled the horizon and great storms full of errors and impurities have poured out over the earth, it nevertheless remains true: *Happy are those who trust in him!* And *when they pass through the waters, the rivers shall not overwhelm them*, etc. [cf. Isa. 43:2]. The Lord will preserve his grain and gather it into his barn. There have been errors from the beginning, immediately after the fall. We are still in the church militant, and as blessed Luther says, where there is driving, there the mud will also cling to the wheels.¹² In the meantime the children of God should not become tired or weary or despairing, and they should not regret their many efforts and their conscientiousness, but always let themselves be found more believing, more trusting and more confident, particularly when they see that the cause of what is good is advancing, even though all good things have to pass through great difficulties and all kinds of trials. If I may be permitted to write a little about ways I have been led, then I also have to sum up all the good I have experienced with this statement: "I received mercy" [cf. 1 Tim. 1:13, 16]. Mercy.

This letter was dated and written in Providence, February 20, 1747.

III. Major Themes in the Letter

The biblical verse that provides the leitmotif for this letter, Matthew 5:7: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain

mercy", sets the tone for the whole letter which is a celebration of those merciful ones in Muhlenberg's century who are obtaining mercy from God through their faith and their exuberant religious activism.

Paragraph 1: The baroness to whom the letter is addressed is Muhlenberg's first example of the kind of person who is merciful and thus calls forth from God divine mercy. As a result of her intercessions, "the marvelous gospel" has been spread "among the heathen in the east", "among the Jews toward the north", and also "among the scattered and erring Christian people in the west." These three areas of missionary activity in the eighteenth century—the East India mission, the mission to the Jews in Europe and the Near East, and the ministry to the Lutherans who were immigrating to North America—will be held up by Muhlenberg quite a number of times in the course of this letter. These undertakings, plus a fourth area that Muhlenberg also refers to quite often in connection with them, namely, the ministry to the dormant and indifferent Christians in Germany and Europe in general, serve as very significant signs of the results which merciful persons can obtain through their prayers to God.

The key to the baroness' mercy, which she both receives and extends, is her "true conversion" (*wahre Hertzens Aenderung*). It is as a result of her conversion that God grants her "repentance, faith and a merciful heart" which empower her constant activity.

Paragraph 2: Muhlenberg's enthusiasm for the kinds of things that are happening as a result of the "prayer, advice, assistance, and indescribable effort and expense" of "so many different, blessed, merciful souls" leads him to proclaim that "this century", the eighteenth century, "is truly a remarkable time." So enthusiastic is Muhlenberg because of what he sees in his century—and here he refers again to the standard signs of blessing for him, namely, active concern for "the salvation of Jews and heathen and the improvement of corrupted Christendom"—that he seems to put the present age almost on a par with the three ages of *Heilsgeschichte* that would traditionally have been elevated by Lutheran Christians: "the age of the patriarchs and Moses", "the more recent and more wonderful time of the kingdom of Christ and his apostles", and the age of "the reformation of our cherished fathers".

Noteworthy in this paragraph as well is the implicit but very obvious critique of the mainline, establishment church which Muhlenberg designates here as "corrupted Christendom"; it has not "in a good many centuries" demonstrated the kind of zeal and activity that Muhlenberg holds up here for recognition and praise. Even the "separation" which Muhlenberg foresees Christ will make between himself and his followers, on the one hand, and "Satan and his companions", on the other, seems to be polemical and made with an eye to the line of division running through the church in Muhlenberg's day. It is not understood eschatologically and in terms of a separation between faith and unbelief, but can be seen as a separation between the representatives of "corrupted Christendom" with whom Muhlenberg obviously does not identify and the Christians of Muhlenberg's stripe who are involved in "the true expansion and glorification of the name of Christ among the nations." For his part Muhlenberg is confident that the "earnest praying, pleading and knocking" of people like the baroness will not go unrewarded by a faithful God and that he, his colleagues and their congregations will benefit concretely when her prayers "issue in love and charity".

Paragraph 3: In this paragraph Muhlenberg examines the claim that those who exercise mercy also obtain mercy as Matthew 5:7 promises. First of all, he tests out this claim in relation to his own life. Going back to his student days at Göttingen, Muhlenberg recalls the two most important instruments of God's mercy in his life at that time: "an upright teacher" and "various persons, eminent counts and other members of the nobility". The teacher was Professor Julius Oporin who came to Göttingen as the first professor of theology in 1735 and in whose classes in moral and dogmatic theology Muhlenberg became "enlightened" and was "set on the path of life".¹³ The "eminent counts and other persons of the nobility appear in the *Journals* as the XIth Count Reuss, the High Sheriff of Münchhausen, the XXIVth Count Reuss, Count Erdmann Henckel, and Count von Stollberg Wernigerode.¹⁴ All these people functioned as instruments of God's mercy toward Muhlenberg and some others in Göttingen, and their mercy called forth God's promised mercy: "It is God's mercy and his reward for the earnest desires and prayers of so many merciful souls that in Göttingen already several instruments of his have

been prepared for the honoring of Jesus Christ in the churches and the schools."

In the second place, Muhlenberg appeals to the already twice-cited missions and ministries—"to evangelize among the Jews...to bring the light of the gospel to the heathen in East India, to trim the light among the thankless and slumbering Christians in Europe, and to kindle a light among the slumbering covenant people in western lands"—as examples of acts of mercy carried out by "the merciful, blessed children of God". These actions of preaching and planting "the living word of God" go beyond anything that has happened since the time of the apostles, writes Muhlenberg, thus asserting that the eighteenth century whose virtues he is extolling outshines both the periods of the early church and the reformation! But, more to the point, these assertions reinforce Muhlenberg's basic thesis of this paragraph, and he concludes: "Who, indeed, can deny that this mercy of God is a recompense and a blessing which the merciful have brought about?"

The theme of conversion also plays an important role in this paragraph. Muhlenberg's experience in Professor Oporin's classes was understood by him as a conversion experience, as we can see somewhat more clearly from some other Muhlenberg sources which describe these same events. In his *Autobiography* he speaks of these things as a *Sinnesänderung*, a term very similar to the one he uses in Paragraph 1 of this letter to describe the baroness' conversion (*Hertzens Aenderung*).¹⁵ The nobles "who shone forth as lights" are also exemplary because of their conversion. Muhlenberg presents them as converted Christians and, indeed, his description of them could stand as a general description of what Muhlenberg might expect converted Christians to look like: "such persons deny the world and its glory, truly change their way of life and become like children, following the Lamb and learning in his school to walk in a truly gentle and humble manner." Muhlenberg's comments show that he felt such a conversion experience was particularly necessary for him because he was "a student of theology" and thus a future pastor. These sentiments about the need for a converted clergy are interesting because they agree with those expressed in the little treatise known in English as *The Defense of Pietism* which was written in 1741 by "D. M."¹⁶ It has generally been accepted by Muhlenberg scholars that "D.

M." stands for "Diaconus Mühlenberg", our own Henry Melchior Muhlenberg who declares there: "Whoever ordains or admits unconverted men to the office of minister of the word will have to answer for it when he goes to meet his God in eternity."¹⁷

Paragraph 4: This paragraph is again a strong critique of establishment Christianity. Muhlenberg points out that Christians have carried on trade with "the poor heathen" but have had "little concern to send them the treasure of the gospel", that Jews have lived among Christians for centuries but at no time has there been "an ongoing and serious effort" to convert them. Unfortunately such charges cannot only be levelled against the pre-reformation church, writes Muhlenberg, but they must also be made against the church of the post-reformation period. Although the confessional writings contain the correct doctrines, there has been "little concern among Christians" for the "clear and pure articles on true repentance, faith, justification and sanctification" which the Confessions contain. Thus, when Johannes Arndt and Jacob Spener tried to encourage the living out of these doctrines, they were denounced and made to suffer.

Paragraph 5: Here Muhlenberg returns to the leitmotif of the letter: if God's people are faithful, God is faithful as well. He enumerates the already familiar examples of faithfulness in this century: the East India mission (here referred to as "the undertaking among the Malabars"), the mission to the Jews, and the "earnest pleading for true and heartfelt repentance, faith and a godly life in kingdoms, electorates and duchies, in earldoms, noble seats and free imperial cities" in Germany. Given these signs of Christian faithfulness, Muhlenberg is confident that God will be demonstrated to be "mighty in his promises".

Paragraph 6: This final paragraph is a call to courage and faithfulness. Muhlenberg does not deny that there are "great difficulties and all kinds of trials" for Christians; these are inevitable since we "are still in the church militant". Nevertheless, Christians cannot give in to pessimism or despair because "the cause of good is advancing" and thus there is every reason for great faith, trust and confidence.

IV. Conclusions

Muhlenberg's letter makes a significant contribution to the question of his relationship to Pietism—at least at this point in his life and development—when we recognize that the major themes that emerge as central to Muhlenberg's letter are also the themes that were central to what has been variously known as Halle Pietism, the Spener-Francke school of Pietism, or even classical German Pietism.

In stressing conversion (or what is also referred to as regeneration, rebirth, the new birth, etc.) Muhlenberg was in line with what recent scholarship has come to see as the heart and centre of classical German Pietism. Particularly Martin Schmidt has emphasized this as the "essential fact" (*Grunddatum*) or cornerstone of Pietist theology and spirituality. According to Schmidt, Pietism placed conversion "at the top of its Christian value system."¹⁸ On the basis of Muhlenberg's statements in this letter he would seem to have been more comfortable with the broader and somewhat vaguer interpretation of conversion as found in Arndt and Spener than with August Hermann Francke's more specific understanding that it was "an instantaneous, once-for-all breakthrough of grace."¹⁹ Nevertheless, there can be no doubt of the importance of conversion in his understanding of Christian faith and life.

Paul Kuenning has winsomely summed up this first theme that we have found in both Halle Pietism and Muhlenberg as "a deep inner spirituality, centered in Scripture and prayer, with an experience of conversion as its hallmark."²⁰

The second characteristic of Halle Pietism, which Kuenning sees as growing out of the first, also relates very directly to our Muhlenberg letter. Kuenning writes that there was in Halle Pietism "an intense outward thrust of missionary and benevolent activity as the inevitable and necessary expression of the New Birth, or living faith."²¹ For Muhlenberg, as we saw, the visible manifestations of Christian faith and life that he extolls over and over again in his letter are the East India mission, the mission to the Jews, the ministry to the Germans who had immigrated to North America, and the attempts to renew and revitalize the church in Germany and Europe. All of these undertakings are inextricably linked to Halle and the Franckes who made that place synonymous with Pietism: August Hermann

Francke (1663–1727), the founder of the Halle institutions, and his son, Gotthilf August Francke (– 1763), who carried on his father's work. The East India mission, although technically called into being by King Frederick IV of Denmark, had its centre in Halle and owed its existence mainly to August Hermann Francke. Francke "supplied the missionaries that went to India, he founded the first German missionary journal, he raised money for missionary purposes, and he led Protestant Germany to include missions in its scope of activity."²² Halle was also the centre for missions among the Jews: with the encouragement of August Hermann Francke, Johann Heinrich Callenberg established the *Institutum Judaicum* at Halle in 1728 and sent out missionaries from there to various European countries.²³ In North America the association of Halle with the ministries in Ebenezer, Georgia, and in Pennsylvania is well known and does not need documentation. Also the Halle Pietists' involvement in the movement for the renewal and revitalization of the mainline Protestant church is similarly well known; perhaps less well known is the fact that Francke's goal was to make Halle the spiritual and physical centre of a movement for reform that would encompass all of human life and that would join in a close network numerous communities and institutions throughout Europe and, indeed, the whole world.²⁴ While it is interesting to note that Muhlenberg nowhere in this letter ties his "pet projects" to either Halle or the Franckes—in fact, these names are not mentioned in the letter—there can be no doubt that they were closely associated in Muhlenberg's own mind and that his correspondent, the baroness, was also totally aware of their role in the activities Muhlenberg was praising. Thus Muhlenberg's repeated references to these missions and ministries clearly demonstrate his affinity for this activist thrust of Halle Pietism.

It is also interesting to note that although Muhlenberg nowhere mentions Lutheran Orthodoxy, it is clear that this reality is very much under discussion and that he stands over against it in a rather polemical manner. It is, after all, Lutheran Orthodoxy which is the establishment church that represents the "corrupted Christendom" (par. 2) which has left the German fatherland "benighted" (par. 3) and which has shown "little concern" for Christian "teaching and life" and has denounced proponents of a living faith like Arndt and Spener

(par. 4). This polemical thrust which we noted in the letter is another characteristic that Muhlenberg shares with Halle Pietism. Martin Schmidt points out that there was an element in Pietism that wanted to avoid conflict and simply pursue a God-pleasing life of love and simplicity; however, from the very beginning Pietism's claim that Lutheran Orthodoxy was inadequate and had failed to accomplish the tasks appointed to it inevitably made it party to a bitter controversy.²⁵ Perhaps too the basic Pietist contention that true Christian faith bears fruits that are visible makes a confrontational approach unavoidable: it expects to see visible results and where these are not in evidence Pietism in general and Muhlenberg in particular feel justified in challenging the legitimacy of the Christian faith in question.

Muhlenberg's enthusiastic conviction that the eighteenth century is "truly a remarkable time" (par. 2) whose chief characteristic is that "the cause of what is good is advancing" (par. 6) aligns him with the optimistic view of history and the hopeful eschatology of Halle Pietism. These views, which stand in some considerable tension with the more pessimistic and apocalyptic views of Luther and Lutheran Orthodoxy, originated with Philipp Jakob Spener. Already in the treatise which laid out the program for classical German Pietism, the *Pia Desideria* (1675), Spener expressed the confidence that God had "promised his church here on earth a better state" than the one that it was presently experiencing.²⁶ In 1693 he spelled out more fully in his *Assertion of Hope for Future Better Times* his belief that "good times were just around the corner" for the church.²⁷ With August Hermann Francke the accent seems to shift somewhat from hope to realization: Francke sees his Halle institutions and ministries as signs of the providential working out of God's will in the world, God's "footprints" in history as it were.²⁸ Muhlenberg's repeated references to these same institutions and ministries in the letter under consideration and his conviction that "the cause of good is advancing" (par. 6) are persuasive arguments for the fact that his views are very close to Francke's on this important point.

Another less critical but still important point of contact between Muhlenberg and Halle Pietism was the circle of noble patrons they both cultivated. August Hermann Francke in particular was able to attract a significant number of noble families

as patrons of his work in Halle and he came to orient his institutions to them. Martin Schmidt points out that although the Halle orphanage and school started out as institutions for poor children, by the time of the senior Francke's death in 1727 out of 2234 children at the school only 137 were still poor orphans and the rest were the children of noble and wealthy parents.²⁹ The curriculum at Halle was also adapted to the needs of the young nobles to the extent that they were taught to fence, dance and ride, even though such activities were outside the regular pietistic canons.³⁰ The younger Francke, Gotthilf August, carried on his father's tradition of relating positively to the nobility, and the members of the nobility whom Muhlenberg encountered at Göttingen or through his contacts with them all appear to have been members of the Halle circle. In later years Muhlenberg would often inquire about or send greetings to his patrons through the fathers in Halle.³¹ The correspondence between Muhlenberg and Baroness Wilhelmine Sophie von Münchhausen was based on the premise that Muhlenberg and the baroness had the same understanding of the Christian faith, an understanding that was rooted in Halle Pietism. The fact that Muhlenberg, like the Franckes, cultivated his relationship with these Pietist nobles and saw them as promoters of a vital Christianity (as Paragraphs 1 and 3 of this letter amply document) shows that Muhlenberg and the Halle leaders shared a similar conservative political orientation and worldview.

Several of the issues we have discussed in the preceding paragraphs give rise to a further question. It is the question of Muhlenberg's theological stance in relation to the basic stance of Luther and the Reformation. The question inevitably emerges because of the emphases we have noted as the dominant ones in this letter: the stress on activism and the visible fruits of such activism, the call for conversion, and the optimistic view of history and eschatology. Since these emphases were not traditionally associated with Luther and with those who saw themselves as Luther's descendants but appeared to be those of Muhlenberg and the Halle Pietists, the "Lutheran-ness" of this latter group could be called into question. The issue is a complex one and has been worked over for three hundred years. I would offer two comments in connection with it. First of all, I do not see that it is either possible or desirable to

deny the fact that there is a shift in emphasis between Luther, on the one hand, and Muhlenberg and the Halle Pietists, on the other hand. Martin Schmidt's observations about Luther and the Pietists recognize this shift:

The central thrust of the Reformation, the justification of the sinner by grace alone through faith alone, was in no way abandoned.... However, justification itself came to be subsumed under the new birth which was seen to be the greater and more all-encompassing reality.³²

And again:

The Pietists wanted to enhance Luther's teaching about living faith once again, but in the process they shifted Luther's emphasis: for them the vitality which was expressed in good works counted for more than the faith itself, which—in Luther's understanding—held on to the divine promise and trusted that the believer was totally pleasing to God.

My second comment relates to the more critical question of how one interprets this shift of emphasis. Here I would personally follow the basic thrust of Paul Kuenning, acknowledging the different emphases but arguing that Lutheranism is broad enough to encompass both streams. So in the sixteenth century Luther and Melanchthon (with his Augsburg Confession!) plotted divergent theological courses, but "even though Luther's emphasis was often quite different on these matters, he... refused ever to condemn Melanchthon's theology."³³

There is one final point that I would like to make. Earlier in my commentary I spoke of the "exuberant religious activism" of both Muhlenberg and the Halle Pietists. The phrase was deliberately chosen, for it was intended to stand over against one of Paul Kuenning's phrases, namely, "exuberant ethical activism".³⁴ Kuenning makes the argument, indeed it is a central thesis of his book, that such "exuberant ethical activism" is a hallmark of Halle Pietism and Muhlenberg. Although social concern and social activism are obviously a part of Halle Pietism and Muhlenberg, they do not appear to me to be as central as Kuenning would make them out to be. It is interesting to see in this letter that although there are a couple of references to "charity" and "acts of charity" in Paragraph 2, Muhlenberg also plays down "the physical needs of the human race" over against what could be described as its religious or spiritual needs in Paragraph 1. Thus, although this letter witnesses to an "exuberant *religious* activism", as we have tried to

show, it does not seem to demonstrate what could be termed "exuberant *ethical* activism". Certainly this single text does not invalidate Kuenning's thesis, but it does throw some interesting light on it and raise some questions.

The argument of this essay, that Muhlenberg stands within the stream of Halle Pietism, is not particularly bold or new. In many ways that connection has always been obvious: it was from Halle that Muhlenberg was sent out, it was to the "Most Reverend Fathers" in Halle that Muhlenberg addressed much of his voluminous correspondence, and it was these same fathers that publicized Muhlenberg's work in the famous *Halle Reports*. Nevertheless, the relationship between Muhlenberg and Halle Pietism has been problematic enough to cause Muhlenberg's most recent biographer, Leonard R. Riforgiato, to conclude that Muhlenberg "cannot be classified as a Halle Pietist."³⁵ The letter we have translated and examined, however, which Riforgiato did not use, seems to suggest that Muhlenberg's ideas were very much in line with Halle Pietism. Although I would again want to insist that there is more to Muhlenberg than this Halle Pietism, I would also argue that he cannot be understood apart from it.

Notes

- ¹ Leonard R. Riforgiato, *Missionary of Moderation: Henry Melchior Muhlenberg and the Lutheran Church in English America* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1980) 11.
- ² William J. Mann, *Life and Times of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: G.W. Frederick, 1988).
- ³ Riforgiato, *Missionary*, 9.
- ⁴ Paul P. Kuenning, *The Rise and Fall of American Lutheran Pietism: The Rejection of an Activist Heritage* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988) 34.
- ⁵ Ibid. 34-35.
- ⁶ Kurt Aland (ed.), *Die Korrespondenz Heinrich Melchior Mühlenbergs* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1986 ff.). Three volumes have been published, a fourth has gone to press, and the fifth and final volume will be completed within two years. References in this essay will be to Band I: 1740-1752 and will be abbreviated as *Korrespondenz* 1.
- ⁷ William J. Mann, "The Conservatism of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg" *The Lutheran Church Review* 7 (1888) 18-46.
- ⁸ Cf. Theodore G. Tappert and John W. Doberstein (eds.), *The Journals of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg* 3 vols., vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg

- Press, 1942) 88, 146; hereinafter cited as *Journals*. See also *Korrespondenz* 1: 75, 258, 345.
- 9 Reading *rühret* rather than *rühmet*; cf. PM 95 A 1742–48, p. 188, and *Korrespondenz* 1: 267.
 - 10 Martin Luther, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (1528), v. 4; cf. *Lutheran Book of Worship*, Hymn 228.
 - 11 Based on the conjecture that the text should read *ernstlichem* rather than *erstlichem*.
 - 12 German proverb. Cf. Wander, *Deutsches Sprichwörterlexicon*, vol 3, col. 1455, no. 41; for Luther’s use of this proverb see especially *Luther’s Works* 24:203, as well as *Luther’s Works* 24:204, *Luther’s Works* 39:57, etc.
 - 13 Cf. *Journals* 1: 3.
 - 14 Cf. *Journals* 1: 4, 10; *Korrespondenz* 1: 6, n. 6, 12, n. 5; Mann, *Life and Times* 10–12; Riforgiato, *Missionary*, 22–23.
 - 15 Heinrich Melchior Mühlberg, *Selbstbiographie, 1711–1743*, ed. W. Germann (Allentown, PA: Brobst, Diehl & Co., 1881) 5–6.
 - 16 C.W. Schaeffer, “Mühlberg’s Defense of Pietism,” *Lutheran Church Review* 12 (1893) 349–375.
 - 17 Ibid. 362–363.
 - 18 Martin Schmidt, *Pietismus* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1972) 14. (Note: Here and in succeeding quotations from Schmidt’s *Pietismus*, the translation is my own.) Cf. Manfred W. Kohl, “Wiedergeburt as the Central Theme in Pietism,” *The Covenant Quarterly* 32/4 (November 1974) 15–35; Johannes Wallmann, “Wiedergeburt und Erneuerung bei Philipp Jakob Spener,” in Andreas Lindt and Klaus Deppermann (eds.), *Pietismus und Neuzeit: Jahrbuch 1976 zur Geschichte des neueren Protestantismus* (Bielefeld: Luther Verlag, 1977) 7–31.
 - 19 Riforgiato, *Missionary*, 32.
 - 20 Kuenning, *The Rise and Fall*, 13.
 - 21 Ibid.
 - 22 *The New Schaff-Herzog Religious Encyclopedia* (1911), s.v. “Pietism,” II, par. 11. Cf. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *Three Centuries of Advance: A.D. 1500–A.D. 1800* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1939) 278–279.
 - 23 *Korrespondenz* 1: 270, n. 6.
 - 24 Martin Scharfe, *Die Religion des Volkes: Kleine Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte des Pietismus* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1980) 142.
 - 25 Schmidt, *Pietismus*, 9.
 - 26 Philipp Jakob Spener, *Pia Desideria* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964) 76.
 - 27 K. James Stein, *Philipp Jakob Spener: Pietist Patriarch* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1986) 176–177.
 - 28 See Franke’s *Pietas Hallensis: Or a public demonstration of the footsteps of a Divine Being yet in the World*, 3 parts (London: J. Downing, 1707–1716). Cf. Schmidt, *Pietismus*, 76.

²⁹ Schmidt, *Pietismus*, 70, 73.

³⁰ Ibid. 77.

³¹ *Korrespondenz* 1: 110, 156–157, 196, 258.

³² Schmidt, *Pietismus*, 14.

³³ Kuenning, *The Rise and Fall*, 23.

³⁴ Ibid. 13.

³⁵ Riforgiato, *Missionary of Moderation*, 37.