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# August Hermann Francke, 1663 — 1963

BY PHILIP J. SCHROEDER

**W**hy remember August Hermann Francke on the 300th anniversary of his natal year?

Certainly association and identification with Pietists and Pietism should not disqualify him for a niche in the hall of remembered saints. Though some still speak with caution and even opprobriously about Pietists and Pietism, the climate has changed especially with reference to the earlier Pietists. Much of the suspicion, detraction, and obloquy which became attached to the name and fame of Pietism stems from falsely attributing many excrescences and aberrations of later Pietism to the early founders of the movement.

Illustrative of the Pietist ethos as understood by many is the following "eulogy" spoken at the funeral of one of the followers of Francke:

The designation Pietist, now city-wide,  
is known.

What is a Pietist? One who God's Word  
doth know.

Why, that is right for everyone, I own;  
For what avails if homiletic art is all the  
preacher's treasure

And follows not the faith in fullest measure?

His heart must first the pious life contain  
If he would build the church and piety  
maintain.

Our gifted saint, a faithful Pietist,  
Is now in his demise also a Quietist:

His soul now rests with God,  
The body 'neath the sod.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This is a free translation from the German of a carmen supposedly used by Prof. Joachim Feller on the occasion of a funeral of a Pietist

Es ist jetzt Stadt-bekannt der Nam der  
Pietisten,  
Was ist ein Pietist? der Gottes Wort studiert,  
Und nach demselben auch ein heilig Leben  
führt.

Das ist ja wohlgetan! jawohl von jedem  
Christen;

Denn dieses macht's nicht aus, wenn man  
nach Rhetoristen

Und Disputanten Art sich auf der Kanzel  
ziert,

Und nach der Lehre nicht lebt heilig, wie  
gebührt.

Die Pietäet die muss voraus im Herzen  
nisten.

Die baut auch zehnmahl mehr, als wohlgesetzte  
Wort,

Ja alle Wissenschaft, sie nutzt auch hier und  
dort.

Drum weil der Seel'ge war bei mancher  
schönen Gabe

Und nimmer müdem Fleiss ein guter Pietist,  
So ist er nunmehr auch ein guter Quietist.

Die Seel' ruht wohl in Gott, der Leib auch  
wohl im Grabe.

The simple and easy shibboleth so common and so unhistorical that "Pietism is a reaction against the 'dead' orthodoxy of the Lutheran Church," has largely been relegated to the file of outdated hypotheses. J. T. McNeill in his manual, *Modern Christian Movements*, cites a tract which well demonstrates an incorrect understanding of a similar term: Puritan.

In the mouth of a drunkard, he is a Puritan which refuses his cups: in the mouth of a swearer he which fears an oath; in the mouth of a libertine, he which makes any scruple of common sin: in the mouth

pastor. J. G. Walch quotes it in the fifth chapter of his *Historische und Theologische Einleitung in die Religions-Streitigkeiten der Evangelisch Lutherischen Kirchen*. . . . Part the first, as published by Johann Meyers Witwe, Jens, 1730.

of a rude soldier, he which wisheth the Scottish War to end without blood.<sup>2</sup>

The same holds true of the epithet Pietist. The name has been and is to this day often attached to anyone who is unsympathetic to dice, dance, and drama, or, in fact, to any interest or pursuit of a cultural or secular nature.

August Hermann Francke also is receiving much more acclamation than defamation. (There is much more interest in his *Ruf* than in his *Verruf*.) He deserves to be remembered for a number of reasons. He pioneered in elementary education and eleemosynary activity. He established new and faster methods to disseminate the Word of God in print: not the least significant was the preparation of works in Tamil to aid the work of his missionaries in India. This article, however, is restricted to a review of his achievements in two areas: his contributions to theological training and the great mission endeavor.

One hundred years ago Heinrich Schmid, professor of theology at Erlangen, remembered Francke in a thorough and objective study of him and the Pietist movement in his *Geschichte des Pietismus*, published by Beck of Nördlingen in 1863. Here Francke appears not merely as *das zweite Haupt* but as the dynamic follower of Philipp Jakob Spener, who fairly outstripped his spiritual forebear in leadership. Francke implemented what Spener had initiated.

What impressed Schmid particularly was Francke's part in establishing and raising standards of theological study at the University of Halle. He promoted erudition but not for erudition's sake. His aim was

to develop the skills necessary for a profound understanding of what the Sacred Oracle actually had to communicate to man. He demanded not only piety, but he also stressed proficiency in the Biblical languages, in the art of preaching, and in the techniques of pastoral theology as requirements of the theological curriculum. In addition to this general plan he inaugurated a regimen of specialized study for selected students in the *collegium orientale theologicum*. For a period of four to six years those chosen for this special training received free board and lodging in what we would today designate a graduate seminary. They were required to read the Old and the New Testament in the *Grundsprachen*, to write commentaries on all of the books of the Bible and to learn to use *die orientalischen Hilfsprachen* for a more thorough understanding of the Sacred Scriptures. But this *verrufener Pietist* sought to accomplish even more with his theological students. He let them know that

the crutches for translations so often used, such as lexica and concordances, are completely inadequate. It is incorrect, on the one hand, to prefer the original text to the translations and, on the other hand, then to seek the meaning of the Greek *termini* on the basis of seemingly despised translations. . . . even Bible concordances which, to be sure, are indispensable as tools, cannot give the student a sure and satisfying understanding of the text. "The best concordance is painstaking reading of a profusion of profane writers. This alone can provide a reliable approach to a language."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> John T. McNeill, *Modern Christian Movements* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> This is a translation of the statement by August Nebe, in "August Hermann Francke und die Bibel" in *Zum Gedächtnis August Her-*

In his constant concern for the proper understanding of Holy Writ Francke gave evidence of keeping abreast of Biblical scholarship. He recognized, for example, that there was *Unsicherheit über das Alter der Akzente und Interpunktionszeichen*. He awaited with anticipation the *holländische Forschungen* which had not yet reached him.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore this Hallensian professor was familiar with Bible translations in other languages. He deplores that such terms as "Amen" were merely transliterated in German and prefers the French version as much more meaningful when it translates the "Amen" with *ainsi soit-il*.

His insistence on a thorough study of the Biblical languages (and we have here merely touched on the Hallensian methodology) at times led to clashes with his contemporaries. When he showed that even Luther did not always do justice to the original and in his *Observationes biblicae* suggested some improvements in Luther's translation, the Halle professor was subjected to severe censure. As a result

*mann Franckes* (Halle: Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1927), p. 7.

"Die bei dem Studium so viel gebrauchten Krücken der Übersetzungen, Lexika und Konkordanzen sind völlig unzulänglich. Es ist eine verkehrte Gepflogenheit, zwar grundsätzlich den Urtext der Übersetzung vorzuziehen, aber die Bedeutung der griechischen Ausdrücke dann doch aus den scheinbar verachteten Übersetzungen zu schöpfen . . . aber auch die Bibelkonkordanzen, die allerdings für die Erklärung unentbehrliche Hilfsmittel sind, können zu einer sicheren Textfassung nicht führen. 'Die sorgfältige Lektüre mannigfaltiger Profanschriftsteller ist die beste Konkordanz, ja die einzige, die uns Sicherheit über die Eigenart der Sprache geben kann!'"

<sup>4</sup> Nebe, *ibid.* The reference probably is to the work done in the Low Countries by the two Buxtorfs and others, far in advance of anything produced in Germany up to that time.

he was maligned by enemies and cautioned by friends. One of his opponents even declared Francke had learned these *Rathschläge in der Schule Satans*.

He was also attacked for publishing his studies on the text in German. The common people, he was told, were not familiar with the Greek and were in danger of losing their trust in the "good faith" which God had given to the beloved *Dolmetschung Lutheri*. Francke's coworker, Casper Schade, warned against publishing suggested changes in the text *um der Schwachen willen*.

When Francke was maligned in the pulpits and threatened with a summons before the Consistory, he replied that he had merely acted according to his convictions. We do well, therefore, to honor his memory for his unswerving devotion to the cause of the best possible understanding of God's written communication to man. He was in truth Germany's "marrow man," a consecrated exegete and teacher who had one concern: to tell his world what Christ told His world. Long after many of his detractors are forgotten, the Christian world remembers Francke for his modesty and for his dedication to the cause of the Master's word and work.

But we do well to remember August Hermann Francke for another reason besides the high standards of theological competence which he himself displayed and required of his students. He deserves to be honored for the part he played in carrying out the Lord's great commission to make disciples of all nations. It began in Tranquebar, it spread to Siberia, its influence was felt in America.

Already in 1715 Cotton Mather paid tribute to the impetus he gave to mission

endeavors in his *Nuncia bona e terra longinqua*:

The world begins to feel a warmth from the fire of God which thus flames in the heart of Germany and is beginning to extend into many regions; the whole world will ere long be sensible of it.<sup>5</sup>

The contemporary theologian and professor at the Martin-Luther Universität Halle-Wittenberg, Arno Lehmann, recalls Francke's vast and persistent efforts to establish the church in India, to give it functioning tools, and to provide it with spiritual sustenance. The story is told in *Es begann in Tranquebar*, published in 1956 by the Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, Berlin. When the Royal Danish Mission began its work at Tranquebar with the help of two young Germans, one of them, Bartholomew Ziegenbalg, wrote a farewell letter to Francke, his *Lehrer und geistlicher Vater*. In fact, both missionaries affirmed their Pietist affiliation and their dependence on spiritual guidance from Halle. Gustav Warneck states that without Francke the newly-begun Danish mission would soon have collapsed.<sup>6</sup> Francke himself selected all subsequent missionaries to India up to the time of his death, commissioning no less than ten. All had been his students, all had been coworkers at Halle. Lehmann points out that it was Francke who brought mission orientation to the church by means of the spoken and written word.

But it was not only the stimulation and encouragement from Halle which sustained the mission in India. The providing of

<sup>5</sup> McNeill, p. 74.

<sup>6</sup> Gustav Warneck, *Abriss einer Geschichte der protest. Missionen*, 8th ed. (Berlin: 1905) p. 54, as quoted in Arno Lehmann, *Es begann in Tranquebar*, (2d ed.), p. 141.

tools for the work was the accomplishment of Halle, and Halle was Francke. Lehmann summarizes the importance of Francke in these words:

Francke made the cause of Missions known in the church by means of the spoken and printed Word. The relation of church to missionary endeavor as a legitimate theological problem was unknown to Francke. He did not differentiate between the work at home and in the foreign field — all was motivated by the injunction of the Great Commission and was considered to be the commitment of every faithful pastor and Christian. It was an attack on the kingdom of Satan . . . the entire faculty of Halle was involved in the Mission effort.<sup>7</sup>

In the work of Protestant and especially Lutheran missions Francke unquestionably deserves to be recognized and remembered as a pioneer, a pioneer in missionary spirit, missionary methods, and missionary organization. In according him this honor and lamenting the tendency to forget Francke's achievements, Lehmann quotes W. R. Hogg's reference to that "provincialism which assumed that everything important happening in missions was British or American in origin."<sup>8</sup> It is a fact that

<sup>7</sup> This is a free translation of an extract from the Lehmann summary:

"Francke ist es gewesen, der die Sache der Mission in der Kirche heimisch machte durch Wort und Druck. Die Frage nach dem Verhältnis von Kirche und Mission hat er als legitimes theologisches Problem nicht gekannt. Im Grunde war ihm die Arbeit in Indien nichts neues. Sie war genauso Gehorsamswerk wie der kirchliche Dienst daheim, sie war nichts anderes als Seelenrettung, wie sie jedem treuen Pastor und Christen am Herzen liegen muss, sie war Einbruch in das Reich des Satans wie ueberall, wo Gottes Geist wirkt."

<sup>8</sup> W. R. Hogg, *Ecumenical Foundations* (New York: 1952), quoted by Lehmann, p. 189.

the Franckean students opened the first of the evangelical schools in India. The reports of December 28, 1707, tell of a school for girls. Lehmann adds that in Edinburgh (1910) *bat man offenbar davon nichts gewusst.*

In conclusion it may be pointed out that recently efforts have been made to remember August Hermann Francke also for initiating the ecumenical movement. In the decade in which Lehmann's book appeared, another German theologian devoted two significant works to Francke. The one published in 1953, *August Hermann Francke und die Ökumene*, was followed in 1957 by *August Hermann Francke und die Anfänge der ökumenischen Bewegung*. Both came from the pen of Erich Beyreuther. As both titles indicate, he casts Francke in the role of pioneer ecumenist. From his extensive research, based on more than 1,000 letters and original documents, Beyreuther concludes that Francke was the first in the history of Protestantism to bring together

members of various church bodies into an ecumenical work project that worked. But it is hardly correct to identify Francke with any conscious effort to inaugurate what we now call the ecumenical movement. He indeed felt that it was the Christian church's responsibility and commitment to bring the message of the Gospel to all people. He epitomized the spirit of the 18th-century evangelical resurgence which held that "men are going to hell all around us, and it is our obligation to do something about it." To be sure, Pietism, and especially Halle, as it became identified with foreign missions, became more and more ecumenical in its outlook. Yet it is hardly correct to consider Francke a pioneer ecumenist in the modern sense of the term. Perhaps McNeill gets closer to a balanced appraisal when he sees in Francke a "convinced and somewhat dogmatic champion of a new Lutheranism" and as being "narrow and angular in his theology."

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