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Historical Introduction

Born in Moers on the Lower Rhine in 1697, Gerhard Tersteegen grew up in a diverse religious area, including all three major Christian confessions: Reformed, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic. Among the Protestant Reformed and Lutheran traditions he experienced further division, particularly in the early part of his life, by the ongoing controversy between the Orthodox factions and those who were designated Pietists. Before his death in 1769 at Mülheim on the Ruhr, Christians as a whole and he with them would be facing the impact of the Enlightenment and the onslaught of secular modernity.

Tersteegen struggled with all these complexities from within a wing of the Pietist tradition, often referred to as Radical Pietism.[1] Raised within a Reformed

[1] For a general overview of this movement see Carter Lindberg

(Calvinist) framework, Tersteegen lost his father, a textile merchant, at an early age, but was able nevertheless to gain a good humanistic education and a command of Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, and Dutch as well as some Spanish along with his native German. Too poor to attend university, in 1712 he was apprenticed to his uncle, a merchant at Mülheim on the Ruhr, where, in the midst of a spiritual crisis in his late teens he encountered pietistic groups, all of whom owed much to the earlier activity of the Reformed pastor Theodor Undereyck in the town, and the ongoing influence of the "founder" of the Pietist movement, Philip Jakob

(ed.), *The Pietist Theologians* (Oxford, 2005; the collection includes an essay on Tersteegen by Hansgünter Ludewig, 190-206) and my *Pietists* (New York, 1983). For a full discussion of such figures see Martin Brecht, *Geschichte des Pietismus*, 2 vols. (Göttingen, 1993, 1995) and in particular the sections by Hans Schneider, "Der radikale Pietismus im 17. Jahrhundert," 1:391-437, and "Der radikale Pietismus im 18. Jahrhundert," 2: 107-97.

Spener (1635-1705), the former superintendent of the Lutheran ministerium in Frankfurt am Main.

In 1675 Spener had published an introduction to the sermons of Johann Arndt (1555-1621),[2] later printed separately under the title *Pia Desideria: Or, Heartfelt Desires for a God-pleasing Improvement of the True Protestant Church.*[3] The *Pia Desideria* outlined Spener's hopes and intentions under five headings. After noting the decline in moral life at the time, it detailed at length the defects of political and clerical authorities as well as those of the populace, clarified the possibility of reform, and set down proposals to enact it. Scripture

[2] For details see my edition and translation of Johann Arndt, *True Christianity* (New York, 1979).

[3] *Pia desideria: Oder hertzliches Verlangen, nach Gottefälliger Besserung der wahren Evangelischen Kirchen, sampt einigen dahin einfaltig abzweckenden Christlichen Vorschlägen . . . Sampt angehengten zweyer Christlichen Theologorum darüber gestellten, und zu mehrer aufferbauung höchst-dienlichen Bedencken* (Franckfurt am Mayn, 1676).

reading by individuals was emphasized and a call made for sermons which would treat the biblical text in context. It was at this point in the argument that Spener outlined his proposal for the use of group meetings to stimulate Christian growth. Discussion of such conventicles led Spener to his second proposal: the necessity of practicing the spiritual priesthood of all believers. A call for the practice of piety was the *Pia Desideria*'s third proposal, and the specific characteristic of this piety was developed in the final proposals, pressing Christians to come to agreement through dedicated prayer, examples of moral well-being, and heartfelt love. The mark of the true Christian was above all signalled by experience, evidenced in a genuine sense of one's own sinfulness and heartfelt repentance (*Busse*), the New Birth in Christ (*Wiedergeburt*), and an ongoing Christian devotion and work centered on the love of God and neighbor.

Such principles seemed to many of Spener's contemporaries to be based on a questionable theology, which relegated doctrine to a secondary position and elevated experiential piety, personal assurance, and a high moral and devotional life, in practice if not in theory, to the rank of saving graces—a return to the "works' righteousness," "theology of human glory" religion so firmly rejected by Luther and his doctrine of forensic justification "by faith alone."

Despite this, Pietist concerns spread rapidly and by Tersteegen's youth had affected Protestant denominations in Germany, Holland, and Switzerland, and were carried to the Germanic-speaking areas of North America. Many of the adherents of the movement remained within the organized churches of their birth and saw in the Pietist spirit, the form and power by which their various congregations and traditions might be revitalized. Many others, however, the radical

Pietists, moved in the direction towards which Spener's enemies saw the whole revival oriented. Some of these, in fact, separated themselves from the churches with which they had initially been associated, forming new sectarian bodies as they did. It was within this latter framework that the work and life of Tersteegen was fixed.

In the midst of his religious search Tersteegen was fortunate in gaining the friendship of a spiritual director, Wilhelm Hoffmann (1685-1746), a follower of the separatist and mystically-oriented radical Ernst Christian Hochmann v. Hochenau (1670-1721) and a committed reader of sixteenth and seventeenth century Roman Catholic mystics (particularly Madame Guyon [1647-1717] and the Quietists of the time) as well as their medieval precursors.[4] Following his con-

[4] On the use of mystical texts among these radicals see my *Pietists,*

version after Pentecost, 1717, Tersteegen gave up his trade, supporting himself thereafter as a weaver so as to enter into the fullest contemplation, following the life of Jesus, initially experiencing visions and "dark nights of the soul," questioning the existence of God in the face of so many diverse and opposing religious options. A "breakthrough" was granted him however and he gained an assurance of God's existence, knowing in a "moment" the essential enlightening presence of the Lord in the ground of the soul, "the inner experiential knowledge that brings with it the power making one holy, and the embracing love of the divine."

With the discovery of this divine spark in the self, one discovered one's true self, Tersteegen taught—a self open to growth as the "I" (ego) of self-will and self-seeking was given up, as one gave oneself over in

Protestants, and Mysticism: The Use of Late Medieval Spiritual Texts in the Work of Gottfried Arnold (1666-1714) (Metuchen, N.J., 1989).

Gelassenheit (resignation) to God. His thought owes much to the work of the early patristic writer Macarius whom he knew through the edition of Gottfried Arnold (1666-1714)[5] and his own reading of Jean Bernières de Louvigny's (1602-1659) *The Hidden Life of Christ in God*,[6] a work widely circulated in Tersteegen's translation. Tersteegen nevertheless remains fully a Protestant in his emphasis on the grace, received by faith alone, that first grants the enlightenment in Christ. The point

[5] Details in *Pietists, Protestants, and Mysticism.* For an English translation see *Pseudo Macarius, The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter*, translated, edited, with an introduction by George A. Maloney (New York, 1992).

[6] *Das verborgene Leben mit Christo in Gott. Auf eine recht-Evangelische Weise entdecket, und nach seinen wesentlichen Eigenschafften und Wirckungen, vormals in Französis. Sprache beschrieben von . . . Johann von Bernières Louvignii. Anjetzo, aus allen dessen gottseligen Schrifften, in teutscher Sprache kürtzlich zusammen gezogen, und in dreyen Büchlein abgefasset . . . samt einer Vorrede des Ausgebers* (Franckfurt & Leipzig, 1728).

is explicitly made in his 1724 Maundy Thursday letter, written in his own blood to Jesus, his savior and redeemer. By this indwelling of the hidden life with Christ in and before God one can grow, always in and by grace, toward the fulfillment of one's salvation in Christ. This theology had an ecumenical orientation, but one in keeping with and intensifying Protestant teaching. It regarded the invisible church to which all true believers, including Roman Catholics, belonged, as the only way to consider Christian unity. More firmly than his fellow Pietists, Tersteegen tended to denigrate the institutional forms of the established churches, even of his Protestant co-believers and, as a result, misread the sacramental "objectivity" and commitment to the visible Church on the part of the Catholic mystics he admired.

Following his "second conversion" in 1724, Tersteegen began to offer instruction in his home, writing hymns and publishing his highly popular collection

the *Geistliches Blumengärtlein inniger Seelen*[7] ("Spiritual Flower-garden of Interior Souls") in 1729, translating mystical writing (note particularly his *Auserlesenen Lebensbeschreibungen Heiliger Seelen*[8] ["Selected Biographies of Holy Souls" 1733-1753]), and composing his own works in the evening hours following his necessary work (he gave up the latter in 1728 for health reasons), speaking publicly when requested and offering extensive spiritual direction not only to the "monastic" community of the "Pilgerhütte" that developed around him, but to the many circles of his adherents in neighboring and more distant areas. In the late 1730s the

[7] *Geistliches Blumen-Gärtlein inniger Seelen; oder kurtze Schluss-Reimen, Betrachtungen und Lieder über allerhand Warheiten des inwendigen Christenthums* . . . Dritte und vermehrte Edition. Nebst *der Frommen Lotterie* (Franckfurt & Leipzig, 1738).

[8] *Auserlesene Lebensbeschreibungen heiliger Seelen: in welchen nebst derselben merkwürdigen aussern Lebens-Historie* Dritte Edition (3 Bde.; Essen: Zacharias Bädeker, 1784).

Tersteegen movement suffered some persecution and he took a more reserved approach to his public appearances, but by the mid-1740s he once again spoke openly as the result of a revival in the area under the Dutch student of theology, Jacob Chevalier. In 1746 he had moved to a house beside the Church of St. Peter, where he often preached to large groups until 1756, despite continuing opposition from local religious authorities.

His influence continued to grow even after his death and extended into the mainline churches, in Germany especially during the great awakening of the early nineteenth century (*Erweckungsbewegung*) and in the English-speaking churches particularly through his hymns, translated into English by John Wesley (1703-1791) in the eighteenth century[9] and in the following

[9] See Paul Wagner, *John Wesley and the German Pietist Heritage: The*

century by Catherine Winkworth (1827-1878).[10]

His productivity can be measured to some extent by considering his published works. He wrote over one hundred hymns and some 1500 verse fragments, and the number of his sermons and spiritual letters have been estimated at 15,000, filling over 5000 printed pages, of which the mere 100 in Emily Chisholm's translation that follow offer a tantalizing and selective, but representative, taste for the whole. They serve as a companion volume for her *Gerhard Tersteegen: Sermons and Hymns* (Shoals, n.d.,), but aside from these works

Development of Hymnody, PhD diss. (Toronto School of Theology, University of Toronto, 2004), and compare John L. Nuelsen, *John Wesley und das Deutsche Kierchenlied* (Nashville, Tenn., 1938), translated by Theo Parry, Sidney H. Moore, and Arthur Holbrook, *John Wesley and the German Hymn* (Yorkshire, 1972).

10 *Lyra Germanica, First Series: Songs of the Household* (London: G. Routledge, 1855) and *Lyra Germanica, Second Series: The Christian Life* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1858).

relatively little of his writing has been translated for the English reader,[11] making these words all the more precious.

Considering the paucity of translations, one may admire Wesley in particular for his decision to translate Tersteegen's "Verborgene Gottes Liebe, Du"[12] (forgiving the freedom he at times takes with the original text and the reduction of ten stanzas to eight), a hymn that sums up as it were Tersteegen's spirituality and provides thus the best introduction to his letters:

> Thou hidden love of God, whose height,
> Whose depth unfathomed, no man knows,
> I see from far thy beauteous light,

11 Note *Constraining Love: and other Selections from the Writings of Gerhard Tersteegen*, edited by H.E. Govan (Edinburgh, 1928).

12 *Geistliches Blumen-Gärtlein inniger Seelen*, 3:26.

Inly I sigh for thy repose;
My heart is pained, nor can it be
At rest, till it finds rest in thee.

Thy secret voice invites me still
The sweetness of thy yoke to prove;
And fain I would; but though my will
Seems fixed, yet wide my passions rove;
Yet hindrances strew all the way;
I aim at thee, yet from thee stray.

'Tis mercy all, that thou hast brought
My mind to seek her peace in thee;
Yet, while I seek but find thee not,
No peace my wandering soul shall see;
O when shall all my wanderings end,
And all my steps to thee-ward tend!

Is there a thing beneath the sun
That strives with thee my heart to share?

Ah, tear it thence, and reign alone,
The Lord of every motion there!
Then shall my heart from earth be free,
When it hath found repose in thee.

O hide this self from me, that I
No more, but Christ in me, may live!
My vile affections crucify,
Nor let one darling lust survive
In all things nothing may I see,
Nothing desire or seek, but thee!

O Love, thy sovereign aid impart,
To save me from low-thoughted care;
Chase this self-will through all my heart,
Through all its latent mazes there,
Make me thy duteous child, that I
Ceaseless may, "Abba, Father," cry!

Ah no! ne'er will I backward turn;
Thine wholly, thine alone, I am:
Thrice happy he who views with scorn
Earth's toys, for thee his constant flame!
O help, that I may never move
From the blest footsteps of thy love!

Each moment draw from earth away
My heart, that lowly waits thy call;
Speak to my inmost soul, and say,
"I am thy love, thy God, thy all!"
To feel thy power, to hear thy voice,
To taste thy love, be all my choice.

Fittingly, Tersteegen himself opens the volume from which Wesley selected this hymn in an address "to the Reader":

Mensch, Gott dein Anfang ist; hast du ihn selbst im Wesen,
So hast du schon das End von dieser Schrift gelesen. . .

Reader. God is your beginning; if you have him in essence,
You have already read the conclusion of this book. . .

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"*Historical Introduction to the Work of Gerhard Tersteegen*" by Peter C. Erb

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