CHAPTER 3

Connectedness in Hope

*German Pietism and the Jews*

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The history of the relationship between the Pietist movement and the Jews is a history of contacts and interaction as well as of ideas and beliefs. 17th and 18th century Pietists lived in a world in which Jews were present, albeit marginalized and disenfranchised as a cultural and religious minority. Relating to Jewish people meant relating to a group that was perceived to be different, set apart from an otherwise homogenous Christian society by strict social and religious boundaries. While Pietists generally maintained these boundaries, they also recognized that there was nonetheless a deep connection between the Christian faith and the Jewish tradition, a connection reaching back to the memory of shared origins, yet also, and more importantly, reaching forward to the expectation of a shared future. Much of the Pietist interaction with Jews, as well as the Pietist interest in Judaism, was shaped by this sense of connectedness in hope.

The history of Pietist-Jewish relations, in one sense, concerns forms of social interaction: how Pietists engaged Jewish individuals and groups both in day-to-day contacts and also in deliberate encounters that went beyond conventional norms. Given the religious dimension of these interactions, it is not surprising that many Pietists found themselves faced with complex conceptual and theological issues, such as questions about different identities, competing truth claims, and the right interpretation of Holy Scripture. The presence of the Jews challenged Pietists to think about the place of the Jewish people in God’s plan of salvation and to consider their own place in relation to them. This, in turn, raised the question of the appropriate attitude and behavior towards the Jews. Thus, the history of Pietist-Jewish relations is also a history of how Pietists understood and interpreted Judaism and the Jews within the framework of their theology and sense of religious identity. The present chapter seeks to be responsible to both perspectives, paying attention to forms of interaction with Jews as well as to the ideas and concepts that shaped these encounters.

It is widely acknowledged that, by and large, the Pietist movement displayed a surprisingly positive and appreciative attitude towards the Jews. While there

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is, as we will see, a wide spectrum of perspectives among the various strands of Pietism, there is little evidence that Pietists ever preached hatred against the Jews. Some called for non-coercive forms of missionary activity, others recommended respectful restraint, still others approached the Jewish community with a particular sense of awe and appreciation. None, however, would have desired or condoned acts of harm and hostility against the Jews. In this way Pietists seem to have anticipated Enlightenment ideals of religious toleration, yet their attitude towards the Jews sprang from a deeply held belief that God, according to the biblical witness, had not rejected his people (cf. Rom. 11:1). This is particularly significant, given the long and painful history of Christian anti-Semitism.2

Probably the earliest scholarly treatment of Pietism and the Jews was written by Koppel S. Pinson (1904–1959), an American historian of Jewish descent, shortly after World War II. Noting the prevailing anti-Jewish sentiments in 17th century Protestant Orthodoxy, Pinson traced the decisive shift that was initiated by Spener’s call for a reform of the church and that involved both an increased sense of concern for the welfare of the Jews and a new appreciation of their role in the history of salvation. Pietism, he concluded, “thus was responsible for introducing a much friendlier attitude towards the Jews and, wherever it penetrated, it induced a softer spirit among the Christian population.”3 Unfortunately, Pinson’s piece has remained largely unknown and did not spark any further interest in this topic among American scholars.

The stage for German scholarship on the subject was set by another Jewish scholar, historian Hans-Joachim Schoeps (1909–1980), who published in 1952 a study on 17th century intellectual history, introducing the concept of “Philosemitism” as a historiographical category.4 Although none of the figures

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2 The positive role of the Pietist movement within the context of the history of Jewish-Protestant relations has been noted by Yaakov Ariel, “The One and the Many: Unity and Diversity in Protestant Attitudes Toward the Jews,” in Jonathan Frankel and Ezra Mendelsohn, eds., The Protestant-Jewish Conundrum, Studies in Contemporary Jewry 24 (Oxford, 2010), pp. 15–45, here 22–23.
