

## Church is a response... to which callings ?<sup>1</sup>

Michel Kocher, director of Médias-pro

As somebody who works in media, protestant ecclesiology is a fairly clear spiritual, theological and institutional construct, but confronted with many intertwined challenges that render discussions complex and often unfruitful. My priority, in the following lines, is to endeavour to untangle it. I propose unearthing the original groundwork which should clarify and facilitate how to share and reflect on contemporary truths. This theological origin is the Church heard as the response to a calling. Hence the subtitle of this article: a brief ecclesiology of the calling.

One of the first lessons on ecclesiology is to refer to the Greek word *ek-kaleo* (“to summon”) and the Hebrew words that it translates in the New Testament, namely *qol*, meaning “voice”. The word Church (*ecclesia*) attests in an undeniable and indelible way the call from God to his people to gather. The Church as we see it today in its diversity is effectively a response to a calling. But this calling is not as uniform as it seems. It is plural, it has been relayed throughout several stages of history, so much so that the divine *qol*, carried by the traditions that responded then and still respond now, resounds like a piece of music with four voices. As with choir singing, each voice is decisive, fundamental, legitimate and irreducible. In this sense, each of the voices can be heard on its own in part, meaning that it creates new harmonies with the other voices.

I will be speaking here of four callings to which the Church offers itself as a response. The first two have their roots in Judaism. Beginning with that of Moses, the call to follow a law that draws an ethical pathway. The next is that of Abraham, figure of a faith whose strength lies in allowing mobility. The last two callings find their roots in the newly-born Christianity. There is the call to seek the Living One that comes from the discovery of the empty tomb by the women. Finally, the call to live by sharing what is essential, a call that brings the Pentecost.

Let’s begin with the two fundamental callings that precede the Christian Church, of which it inherits though it doesn’t own it. It can only take ownership of them by rereading the past<sup>2</sup>, a perilous and delicate exercise in itself. The Christian responses to the callings are added to and interact with other responses, all those that find their claim in reading the Old Testament, whether Jewish, Muslim or even Baha’i or humanist. In fact, there is a whole facet of ecclesiological work that remains open. The Church can no longer ignore the fact as it often has done, including the recent past, such as the Shoah in its tragic memory. Today, more than yesterday, the Church seems to have understood the fact that its response cannot remain exclusive, that in being open to other responses, it will be enriched. This is obvious in our theology schools, in lay teaching, in catechesis.

---

<sup>1</sup> Published in french, in *La revue des Cèdres*, n°46. Lausanne, April 2017

<sup>2</sup> Rereading the past refers to the Old Testament category of election.

## 1. The calling to find a meaning to life in ethics

It is difficult not to agree on the importance of ethics nowadays. At a time when we are being alarmed by previsions of global warming, when political powers are procrastinating on abandoning nuclear power, when the financial powers are reducing the press to a bare minimum, we need to find ways to resist. Protestantism carries in its DNA genes of resistance, and didn't wait until the 21<sup>st</sup> century to make a stand. In French-speaking Switzerland, the manifesto of "Terre Nouvelle" [*New Earth*] from the Reformed Churches is one sign, among others, of their ethical stance. But do ethics still need religion? After all, many charities and NGO's committed to freedom and justice have cut themselves off from their religious roots.

Ethics don't need religion to operate; that's obvious. But in their plurality, in discussion and in construct, they draw undoubtedly from a number of sources and references. Religion can still provide. This is where Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, is coming from, a profoundly Biblical filiation: "In the holy Ark where Moses heard the voice of God, there were only the Tablets of the Law." His proposal is not to found an ethic based on religion, but to interpret it using the Bible. So, underlining the importance of ethics today doesn't mean renouncing the religious side of life. The search for the meaning of life and actions can be anchored in the reading of Bible texts. This becomes crucial for church communities. Once committed and active with all those of good will, will they be able to draw from their sources to find themselves at the crossroads where meaning comes to life?

*"Bring my people out of Egypt, the Sons of Israel."* Thankfully, even today, the call of God to Moses still has its heralds. For the patriarch, this was the meaning to his life. But the meaning of one life doesn't provide us with an all-in-one capsule, mass-produced and ready to use; as we know from the Biblical account of his life. Just like the image of the burning bush<sup>3</sup>, the meaning of a life submitted to hearing the word of God is a fire that doesn't burn out, that continues to burn, in the mystery of the presence and the name of the Holy One, audible yet unfathomable. The recipe for true spirituality. In this respect, the recent choice of "Pain pour le Prochain" [*Bread for All, a Swiss cooperative alliance of 11 Protestant organizations*] to launch a "laboratory for inner transition" is an interesting one. It is grasping the fact that ethical commitments, imperative today, are not being upheld ultimately as a development programme, rather as the search to a meaning of life that doesn't consume that life, nor the planet. "Find a meaning that doesn't consume itself" could be the slogan for this first calling.

## 2. The calling to enter into the dynamic of the provisional<sup>4</sup> of faith.

At a time when Christianity as it has been for centuries is disappearing, when Europe is being confronted with new criteria for religion and identity, the question of identity migration is a burning reality, inasmuch that it clashes with migration itself. Selling temples, closing communities, reducing the number of clerics, giving up a secular presence in certain places, is this not "leaving your country, your family, the house of your father to go to a new

---

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 3 : 2b-3

<sup>4</sup> « The dynamic of the provisional », written by Brother Roger of Taizé in 1965, subtitled « Heeding the new generations 1962-1968 ».

land”? Which Christian theologian today would dare say that this calling of God to Abraham<sup>5</sup> doesn’t contain the resources for our searing reality? On top of that, in a kind of reverse, we are seeing exiles of all cultural and religious origins knocking at the doors of a Europe somewhat folded in on itself, Germany being the exception.

A few years ago, the psychoanalytic reading of the journey of Abraham<sup>6</sup> by Marie Balmary, herself originally Jewish, was very popular in Christian circles. By translating the call of God as “Go towards yourself”, she was inviting us to read the journey of Abraham as a discovery of a new relationships with ourselves, our peers and our environment. The psychoanalyst was always clear about her work: *“My aim is not to reduce Abraham to a successful psychoanalysis, but to acknowledge that such a journey reflects the very structure of salvation.”*<sup>7</sup> Here we have it. The Bible narrative is definitely talking about a collective identity and can be life-changing for whoever reads it.

How can Christian churches go towards themselves? How can they leave the country of Christianity, their denominational family, the buildings inherited from their father to go towards new horizons? No Christian community can reasonably consider that they have no interaction with other religions, especially in a Europe marked by the Shoah. For the last few years, the Protestant Federation of France has developed a programme called “Mosaïque”, to facilitate encounters with protestants from other cultures. As for the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), they have finally given up trying to convert Jews<sup>8</sup>. Their priority is to renew the ties of fraternity. What we call, for lack of another term, “interreligious dialogue”, is that not effectively one way among others of responding to the call of God sent out to the father of Believers?

In our societies where faith tends to remain private, Churches can be found alongside all believers, just as much sons and daughters of Abraham as they are, in order to go towards themselves, journeying through these new mutual relationships. In the sensitive area of relationships with Islam, it is up to Christians to show to a secular society wary of Islam, that this religion, despite the obvious dangerous rapport with politics, is going through a deep transcendence. “Leave Christianity and go towards a new country” could be the slogan for this second calling.

### **3. The calling to seek for the Living One outside the tomb**

“Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom, and it’s the Church that came along.” This famous quote by Alfred Loisy is often cited even though out of context. The French catholic theologian was defending a form of continuity between the Gospel and the Church... posterity chose to retain the sense of discontinuity between them. Not by accident. There is a form of basic tension between the message of Christ and how the Church demonstrates it. We can translate this in two opposing ways. On one hand, many people today “like Jesus but not the

---

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 12 : 1 – « Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you. » (NKJV)

<sup>6</sup> « *Le sacrifice interdit. Freud et la Bible.* », Paris, Grasset, 1986 [*The forbidden sacrifice. Freud and the Bible.*]

<sup>7</sup> See book referenced under note 5, p. 132 (in French).

<sup>8</sup> Decision made by the Synod, 9th November 2016 in Magdeburg.

Church.”<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, many Christians strongly affiliated with their denomination love their Church and are uneasy about how radical<sup>10</sup> the message of the Gospel can be. Without realising it, we all express the paradoxical elements of the Christian Church. As the witness of Christ, the Church needs to always assume that it is within distance of its master, whose calls it must answer. And if Christ is present in its midst, he appears mysteriously, incognito as the breath of the Spirit which is itself moving in the direction of the Kingdom. Let’s go over these two points again, corresponding to the two specific callings relayed by the primitive Christian communities.

Where does the Church originate from? Paschal faith. This answer is uncontested historically and theologically. Yet, if paschal faith was to take the form throughout history of an unmoveable rock, a central core, it wouldn’t so much be a credo but a send-out call given by the women: “He is not here [in the tomb]. But go, tell His disciples—and Peter—that He is going before you into Galilee.” (Mk 16 : 6b-7a) Suddenly we have a new place of presence. What seemed solid (faith in the resurrection) turns out to be more « liquid » than it seems. In summary, with the resurrection, the community of the Resurrected One « owns nothing of its own, but can attest to and signify everything in the world. »<sup>11</sup>

Is there a reason to be so alarmed by how difficult it is for our peers to believe ? Maybe not. If Christian faith is not so much a creed as a sending-out, the ability of our peers to believe is very real and possibly waiting for perspective, a mobilisation. A meeting point is possible. Offering to our peers something liquid rather than solid, a way rather than a creed, could be our opportunity to recreate the Church. Not as a social place and body first, but as a symbolic space where we will see played out future deliverances, whether that means seeing out the tyranny of the “me” or overcoming the anxiety of the tomorrows (economic and ecological) that we have become disenchanted with. We are at a crossroads of the beliefs<sup>12</sup> of our ancestors, of our impetus and doubts of today, where Christian faith is an attitude of decentralisation from the forces of death in order to confront today, confident of all that could be caught up in it. Today’s liquid society is not necessarily that big an obstacle to the Christian witness<sup>13</sup>. The latter becomes the response to the third calling that we could summarise in one phrase: “The Living One is not where you expect him”.

#### **4. The calling to live while sharing what is essential**

In an era where communication dominates in a new way in the public arena, where event-planning has become a whole industry, Christians can be tempted to seek out a foundational event in the New Testament that could serve as a model. If there is one, then it

---

<sup>9</sup> Dan Kimball, « *They like Jesus but not the Church. Insights from emerging generations.* », Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2009

<sup>10</sup> A good example of this could be the offense felt by certain far-right politicians when they saw the crèche set up in the parish of Bagnes in Valais (Switzerland), showing Joseph, Mary and Jesus as migrants.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Gisel, « Corps et esprit. Les mystères de l’incarnation et de la résurrection. » Genève, Labor et Fides, 1992, p. 28. [Body and spirit. The mysteries of the incarnation and the resurrection.]

<sup>12</sup> Traditionally, there is a distinction between faith as an attitude (*fides qua creditur*) and beliefs (*fides quae creditur*).

<sup>13</sup> Marc Frédéric Muller, « Quel témoignage dans la société liquide ? » [How to witness in a liquid society], Perspectives missionnaires 71, 2016, p. 73-83 (French-language Christian magazine on missions).

would be that of the Pentecost. Though nobody can replicate this. For various reasons, one being that the whole surrounding theme is that of the calling. The one calling that the Pentecost could be related to is a calling by all accounts: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven?”<sup>14</sup> In other words, look elsewhere... but where? The answer is not in discourse, but in sharing, through faith, with resources and emotions. It was how the first disciples and the women shared, before the Pentecost. “Look at one another, share what is essential to you.” This is the implied calling that creates the interpersonal dimension of the Church as a community. An inner rather than an outer calling.

The Church is not founded on a call for intense communication, to gather adepts and transfer a message. If there is community, if there is transmission of faith, it’s a gift and not the result of a strategy, a communication plan, a know-how, a doctrinal corpus or a respected apostolic succession. What is this gift? It can be found among the act of sharing and the new forms of freedom in Christ. It is called incarnation. Along with the resurrection mentioned in point three, incarnation is another focal point for the Church, for which the Pentecost is a symbolic anchor, as well as a semantic one. As commented on by one of the greatest catholic specialists on pneumatology: “The Church isn’t purely and simply identical to Christ, it is only a relative analogy through incarnation.”<sup>15</sup>

What does this mean? That it is not possible to go to God through incarnation, via the Church which is Christ. The link between them is the Holy Spirit. How does this link work? It works in analogy with everything that makes man who he is: the Spirit links people with each other. Without using the charismatic or Pentecostalism as models to be replicated, what they do show in a positive and paradoxical way for historical churches, is a solidity and consistency in character, inscribed at the heart of a number of anthropological mediations, of this link. Incarnation is the gift, at the heart of all that makes us humans who relate, of an energy that goes through us, surprises us and inspires us in new ways, all in the name of the Gospel of Christ. To put it in layman’s terms: the Holy Spirit is not the One who calls us to take off, to leave behind the burdens of life, but He helps us find divine energy to go through the burdens and beauties of life, with joy and confidence.

Since having bypassed opening up to the charismatic, mainly for cultural reasons, the reformed church today is opening up to new mobilisations of the Spirit. I am thinking of *fresh expressions*.<sup>16</sup> The ways of meeting and sharing are new and the Reformed Churches perceive them in profound analogy with the social and spiritual situation of the modern Western man. In other words, what is being knitted between people is something solid, literally and figuratively. Solid because rooted in real life, and solid because mysteriously linked to Christ. If we were to summarise this fourth and last calling as a slogan, we could put it this way: “Don’t keep your eyes fixed on the heavens, share your essentials.”

---

<sup>14</sup> Acts 1 : 11a (NKJV)

<sup>15</sup> Heribert Mühlen, « L’Esprit dans l’Eglise », tome 2, Paris, Cerf (Bibliothèque œcuménique 7), 1969, p. 245 [The Spirit in the Church].

<sup>16</sup> As per Andy Buckler in his article « From Fresh Expressions to French Expressions », *Perspectives missionnaires* 71, 2016, pp. 6-29.

## **How to move on or when the response becomes a calling**

In this little ecclesiology of the calling, one thing we must avoid is a form of dissociation between the work of God which would be the calling, and the work of man which would be the response, set in motion via the Church. On one hand, we have a theological-mysterious reality handled by the clerics – a calling to be interpreted using Scripture – and on the other, we have a sociological reality, with the adequate counsel from management tools and human sciences – the response in its context, away from the mystery. It's more subtle and especially more interactive. God and man are tied together in the callings and the responses.

If, yesterday like today, we still have callings, it means that the responses to the callings of yesterday weren't intended to remain fixed responses as such (texts, institutions, rituals), but that they in turn became new callings. In effect, callings need to continue resonating throughout the very responses engendered. This is how the Church has unfolded over time and is enriched by all those who propose new responses... which become inasmuch new callings.

*English translation : Katie Mital*