

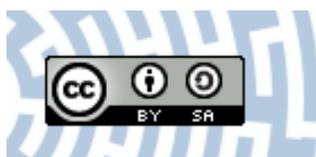


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Laurent SCHLUMBERGER: *À l'Église qui vient*
Lyon: Olivétan, 2017, 316 pp.

Among the many ecclesiological and ecumenical issues addressed today, there is the issue of the future of the Church. This conceptualisation also includes the question about the future of the entire Christianity. Within the context of perceptible evolution in today's world, there is a concern for the communities of the Church, for whom these changes often become a serious challenge. Laurent Schlumberger, in his publication *À l'Église qui vient* poses questions about the shape of the Church which comes along with the changes of today. He develops his contemplation inspired by faith, spirituality, theology, and the mission of the Church, as well as the path of ecumenism.

The author of the reviewed publication is a pastor of the Evangelical Reformed Church in France. In the years 2010—2013 he was the president of the mentioned community deriving from a Calvinist tradition. From 2013 to 2017 he served as the head of the United Protestant Church in France, which was created as a result of the union of the Church of Calvinist and Lutheran traditions. The author is primarily an active ecumenical promoter. In addition to the discussed publication, he also authored the following publications: *Devant Dieu* (1995), *Dieu, l'absence, la clarté. Essai sur la pertinence du protestantisme* (2004), *Sur le seuil* (2016).

The book consists of four parts. The Foreword was written by Brother Alois of the Taizé ecumenical community. In the Introduction, the author familiarises the reader with the project of his publication, its purpose, and specificity. He explains what it means to be a Protestant in France and what specific tasks in changing the world it involves. The publication also includes a subject index, which makes it easier to find interesting issues addressed in the book.

The first part is entitled *Encouragés par la Parole* (Encouraged by God's Word). It is a collection of homilies (sermons), conferences, and Bible meditations delivered on various occasions. In this part he touches upon, among other things, the question of God's encounter with man, the question of authentic Christian life and the problem of hope. In this part, the conference delivered in 2012 during the international interfaith meeting is particularly interesting. The author stresses that the expression *Ecoute! Dieu nous parle* (p. 36) ('Listen. God is speaking to us') contains some important elements. First, it is the verb 'to listen' (*écouter*), which has a fundamental biblical meaning. It is the founding call of the chosen people (Hebrew *shema*). It also emphasises that in Protestantism the Church is understood as the fruit of the Word that is preached. It contains the celebration of the sacraments. The next expression is *Dieu parle* ('God speaks', p. 37). It points to God's speech in the past, present, and future. Finally, it emphasises the importance of the recipient of God's words. It is the human person. Not some chosen group of people, but rather every person without exception. Many Christian theologians wonder whether it is still possible to speak about God today, especially after Auschwitz, in a secularised European society, always in a rush without respite, drowned out by the noise of modern times. The author is of the opinion that today we should ask further questions: How can we listen to God today? (*Comment écouter Dieu aujourd'hui?*, p. 37); How to listen to His Word? At the same time, the author hones his conviction that God is present in the modern world and He speaks, but his voice is woven into silence. In searching and listening to God's Word there is an opportunity for man: to become more human.

The second part is entitled *Une Eglise qui fait signe* (The Church which makes a sign). It is primarily a collection of official speeches during the national synods of the Evangelical Reformed Church or the United Protestant Church in France. He touches upon the issues of the dynamism and renewal of the Church, the arrangements for the understanding and celebration of the sacraments, preparation for the unification of the Calvinist and Lutheran traditions, and finally the problem of difficulties and fears arising from the unification and hope for the future. As a source of inspiration, the author proposes the *Theological Declaration of Barmen*. The full text of this Declaration can be found in Annex 1 of the reviewed book. The author refers to an event that took place 80 years ago. On 29 May 1934, in one of the districts of the German city of Wuppertal, representatives of various Evangelical traditions in Germany met. The meeting took place in the context of Hitler's rise to power and Nazism gaining its momentum. Hitler decided to keep the German Catholic and Evangelical Church communities under strict control. The theological dec-

laration adopted at that time consisted of six points. Each of the points began with a biblical verse and the formulation and acceptance of the true and, at the same time, rejection of false doctrine. The Declaration is focused on Jesus Christ as the only Lord, while rejecting the idea of any other leader. The use of the German term *Führer* is a telling fact. The author also notes the total absence of any reference to the increasingly worse situation of Jews in Germany. In spite of this, the Declaration is of an enormous significance, which began to bear visible fruit after the end of the Second World War.

The author emphasises that the said declaration reminds us, first of all, of the vocation to be a witness of trust among the experiences of contemporary times. The Barmen Declaration is the result of a dialogue, sometimes very turbulent, between various Protestant traditions. Dialogue means taking up the issue of faith, the necessity of hermeneutics, it is a communitarian way, but also an institutional practice. Dialogue also means paying attention to ethical requirements. The context of the Barmen Synod, its conflict of interpretation, its interfaith character, is an excellent example and encouragement for the unifying communities of Protestant Churches in France. The author draws particular attention to the importance of trust, which is above all God's bounty. He takes up with due attention the problem of communion in the community of the Church. This also applies to the communion or unity of the whole Christianity, which is currently undergoing profound changes.

The third part of the book is dedicated to the issue of the courage of witnesses. These are conference speeches delivered at theological faculties or synod meetings. There are also speeches in honour of contemporary witnesses of faith or also funeral speeches. In the context of the question about the contemporary meaning of the Church, the author outlines the answer in the ecclesiological and sociological aspect. He also notes that contemporary man does not need the Church to have faith. Secularisation, ubiquitous pluralism, migration, globalisation, depopulated theological faculties, etc. are a clear sign of modern times. All this shows that we are living through the post-Christian era. In this situation the author sees an opportunity: the Church must become a community of witnesses, whose basic characteristic will be an authentic trust in Jesus Christ. This trust must be celebrated, worked on and preached by Christians, so that it becomes authentic and thus encouraging for others.

The final, fourth part, presents theology that is still developing (*Une théologie en mouvement*). Four speeches are presented here (addressed to the ecumenical community in Taizé, but also speeches at the Institute of Protestant Theology in Paris and Montpellier). During a symposium dedicated to Brother Roger, the founder of the Taizé community, the author

developed his reflection by formulating the question whether it is possible to be a Protestant and a monk at the same time? He noted that in the 16th century the Protestant reform rejected the religious vows and meant rather the abandonment of monasteries and the end of monastic life. Meanwhile, as the author emphasises, the form of monastic life is deeply in line with the intuitions and principles of the Protestant reform. The Protestantism of the 19th and 20th centuries discovered this form of Christian life. These two centuries have witnessed the emergence of many communities of the monastic type in Francophone Protestantism. The first sign was the foundation of the Deaconesses House of Reuilly in 1841 (*la communauté des Diaconesses de Reuilly*). The next phase of development of monasticism in French Protestantism took place in the first half of the 20th century. Three communities were established at that time: in Pomeyrol (1929), Grandchamp (1936), and Taizé (1940). The 1923 creation of the *tiers-ordre des Veilleurs* (p. 269) cannot be omitted in any way. It was a kind of “third order,” whose primary task was to watch over prayer. It was a prayer community, emphasising the value of spirituality and referring to the message of the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount. These groups were initiated by Théodore Monod, a member of the Evangelical Reformed Church in France, an academician, pacifist, and most renowned experts in the field of desert fauna and flora. This monastic spirituality was clearly acknowledged by the great Protestant theologians of the last century: Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. According to the author, the monastic way is a real possibility to live in unity with God.

Speaking at the Montpellier conference, the author recalls the deep and lasting evolution to which Christianity is currently a subject. All Christian Churches are going through some transformations. He notes that these changes lead to the so-called post-confessional Christianity (*un christianisme post-confessionnel*, p. 283). The author attempts to acquaint himself, describe, comprehend, and analyse the transformations taking place. He wonders about the role of the Church, which he leads in the whole process of evolution.

The reviewed publication is intriguing in its various dimensions. Not a trace of false triumphalism may be sensed in it. Instead, one must acknowledge its reliability in presenting inconvenient truths to us. The book formulates, above all, the basic question about the future of the Church, and consequently, about the future of Christianity in the changing world. The author does not address his words exclusively to the members of his ecclesial tradition, but rather to all Christians, and does so with respect for the principles of ecumenism. It is a call to the reconciliation of the whole human family and not only to ecumenical dialogue,

but above all to know each other in order to contribute to the growth and deepening of the Christian faith.

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