

# The continuing struggle of the churches

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# THE CONTINUING STRUGGLE OF THE CHURCHES

*On Tuesday, 27th March the Reverend A. Nicod, Minister of the French-speaking Swiss Church, the Reverend D. Muller, Youth Minister of the Church, and your Editor, a none too regular parishioner, were invited to speak on the situation past and present of the Swiss Churches at Hinde Street Methodist Church, London. Pastor Nicod outlined the theology of John Calvin and its impact on Swiss Protestantism. Dennis Muller spoke on Churches in Switzerland and I spoke on the Swiss Church in London. The following is the Reverend Denis Muller's expose. (Editor).*

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Swiss Protestantism was brought about by the merging of two theological schools springing from the Reformation: that of Zwingli (1484-1531) and Calvin (1509-1564). Zwingli brought the Reformation to Zurich and other German-speaking cantons whereas Calvin launched the Reformation in Geneva, Vaud and Neuchatel with the help of Guillaume Farel, another, Swiss, Reformer. The unity of thought between Calvin and Zwingli was clearly defined by the Zurich theologian Heinrich Bullinger by an important work entitled the "Later Helevetic Confession" published in 1566. This work established the differences between the Calvinist and Lutheran doctrines. Calvin had supported Zwingli in his arguments against Luther over the meaning of Holy Communion. As a result of this community of thought between Calvin and Zwingli, Swiss Protestantism became Calvinist in outlook. There are hardly any Lutherians in Switzerland today, and one notes a remarkable difference in the religious attitudes of French-speaking Swiss Protestants and, say, Alsations, many of whom are Lutherians.

After the Napoleonic wars and the Treaty of Venice, Catholicism won new ground in Switzerland. But the Confessional peace which had been signed at the Treaty of Vilmergen in 1712 was broken by the Sonderbund War of 1847, in which Catholic and Protestant cantons were pitted against one another for a short struggle which was won with minimal loss of human life thanks to the wisdom of General Dufour. A Peace Treaty was signed and the Catholic Alliance dissolved. In the first federal constitution, which was drafted the following year, the Jesuits were prohibited from active life in the country. This issue is again topical today with a Referendum due the coming month.

Under the influence of various schools of theological thought, the Swiss Protestant Churches splintered into several new Churches. Thus the theologian Alexandre Vinet promoted the creation of a Free Church of Vaud

independent from the Cantonal State. Similar Churches were created in Geneva and Neuchatel, and were only reunited with the mother cantonal Churches during the past twenty to thirty years.

The Swiss Protestant Churches became very active in the missionary field overseas. The Churches attempted to get closer together during the present century. In 1920, they assembled in the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches. The Swiss Council of missionary societies was founded in 1945. The Missionary Department and the Bossey Ecumenical Institute played an important role in the foundation in Geneva of the World Council of Churches. A Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, was to have a radical influence on the thinking of the Church during the second quarter of this Century. His influence is presently declining and giving way to somewhat less orthodox theological thinking.

## FRAGMENTED STRUCTURE

The organisation of Protestant Churches closely follows the federal structure of Switzerland, where there are 22 mini-states called cantons, each with their own parliament and autonomy in fairly wide fields of legislation. Likewise, the Protestant Church is divided in as many cantonal Churches. Every cantonal Church has its own rules, customs and relationships with the Cantonal State. Thus in some cantons ministers are very well paid by the State because Church tax is obligatory whereas in others they will have poor salaries because the Church is independent from the State and short of means. Among the more shocking differences can be found in the varying status of women: in some cantons they are entitled to become active ministers, and in some others the ministry is refused to them.

There is therefore a flagrant lack of unity in the organisation of the Protestant Church contrasting sharply with the strength and efficiency of the Catholic machinery, which in Switzerland is organised in eight dioceses each governed by a bishop. The Swiss Catholic Church has only one voice — that of its bishops, who in turn refer their declarations to Rome. Swiss Protestantism has a great many, and sometimes conflicting, voices.

This situation was however felt inadequate and conducive to wasted energy. The Churches found a remedy in creating the *Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches*. This is not a new Church but a body devoted to the service of individual cantonal Churches, each of which subsidises its work. In turn, the Federation helps to organise the task of the Churches, collects funds in aid of parishes in Catholic cantons or abroad (such as the Swiss Church in London). Its

task is important and difficult. It is to develop ties between the different Churches, to achieve unanimous decision and to be the spokesman for Swiss Protestantism as a whole.

The Federation's Theological Committee publishes clarifications on topical subjects such as inter-confessional marriages, inter-communion, baptism, political commitment, euthanasia, and so forth. None of these publications are binding. They serve to counsel laymen and Churches alike. The Federation occasionally issues common statements with the Catholic Church.

The Federation has furthermore set up an Institute of Sociology with the purpose of assessing the situation of the Church in Switzerland, and of supplying information on the major problems of the country, such as foreign labour and housing shortage. Despite its very progressive work, the Institute must restrict its ambitions owing to its limited means. It is run at present by three specialists: a sociologist, a theologian and a politician.

## THE LIFE OF THE PARISHES

Cantonal Churches are subdivided into parishes. Some of them are very large and embrace towns or groups of villages. As many as ten ministers may be attached to one parish. Decisions are taken by a Council of Elders in close co-operation with these ministers. The latter are elected in principle by their future parishioners for a renewable period of six years. But they are free to find another parish before the expiry of their term of office. They can count on the help of the cantonal Church, which will in general attempt to co-ordinate new nominations within the framework of a cantonal pastoral policy.

The supreme authority of the cantonal Church is its Synod. It meets for regular sessions throughout the year. Each parish delegates ministers and laymen in equal number. The Synod is responsible for policy decisions and accepting new candidatures to the ministry. It elects a Synodal Council whose President is considered as the leader of the Church. In many cantons, he is considered as the bishop and acts as a counsellor and friend to his flock of ministers.

## SERIOUS FALL IN CHURCH ATTENDANCE

As elsewhere in the west, Church attendances is declining and many ministers see their Churches emptying gradually. Elderly parish priests try to hold on as best they can on their faithful, while young theology students come out of University in a sceptical frame of mind, and often refuse to take charge of a parish.

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Parishioners attached to tradition are usually passive and satisfied with having a minister who can deliver a weekly sermon and be there when he is required for baptisms or burials. But there are some highly active parishes. A revival and growing sense of awareness can be felt in several, mainly missionary circles. There is, for example, a growing concern for third-world and home political matters. New life is burgeoning outside the established Church. In Lausanne young Christians have built *La Paroisse oecumenique des jeunes* or *Eglise en fete* with a threefold aim: (a) to promote participation and sharing, (b) to develop political and social consciousness and (c) to speed up the renewal of Church liturgy and hymns (by introducing modern music).

Many ministers find it hard to go along with this movement. One example of this was the abortive attempt to introduce a new hymn book. Following youth discontent with the *Psautier Romand* whose hymns often dated from the Reformation and contained antiquated verses, a Commission was entrusted with the preparation of a new hymn book. It came out with a highly unpopular hymn book as it had hardly taken account of the experience and wishes of the young in music.

Many Christians are more interested with far-reaching European or world problems than by those of their local parish, for which they often have no time. Various discussions and reflection

groups have sprung up but their effect is generally to enhance the divisions of the Church.

The minister must still carry a ready-made image. When 32 priests and clergymen announced last year that they would not pay their military exemption-tax, an indignant outcry was heard from every quarter. It was felt inadmissible that men of the Church should tread on such a subversive path and cantonal Churches commented on the event with statements that were sometimes very hostile to the 32 churchmen. To my knowledge, the Church of Neuchatel was the only one not to condemn them.

#### NEW IDEAS FOR THE FUTURE

An encouraging new development is, to me, the setting-up in most cantons of centres where men of every walk of life can meet, talk of business, children, politics, the Bible, road traffic, medicine and psychology. Those in charge of these centres organise outings for young and old people. Anyone with a problem can find guidance.

Many young people seek in the Protestant Church of *Taize*, in France, the spiritual guidance lacking in their parishes. I know of many such men who have learnt to live by their faith in an international community. One cannot forget the real impact of *Taize* on the life of the Swiss Church, many of whose ministers are members of the *Taize* community.

However, far from all the theology students who leave University seek to strengthen their faith at *Taize*, or in a traditional parish for that matter. Many criticise the Church and reject the idea of running a parish. This breeds grudge and deception among older clerics who are troubled by this undoubted spiritual crisis. What do these would-be ministers do? They opt for an ordinary life in society and seek to live and to preach, the Gospel in a new way. Others are attracted by the communalist ideal and by a life of sharing food, money and thoughts.

Traditional parishioners balk at some of the ideas of the young and even those of the intellectual leadership of the Church. The literature distributed by the World Council of Churches is little read and even the various religious weeklies inspire mistrust among parishioners.

The Church of Geneva is perhaps a model for the future. It has created new specialised ministries in every compartment of society: hospitals, prisons, industry, youth, university, medical circles and tramps.

In conclusion, I will say that the Swiss Protestant Churches are undergoing rapid change. After several centuries of strife and splintering, they were on the road to unification when the pressures of events, ecumenism, inter-marriage, dissent and the crisis of faith has brought about a new diversion that the supporters of change and those for the status quo. Nobody can say what the outcome of this situation will be.

# SWISS ABBEYS

## HAUTERIVE IN FRIBOURG

The ancient and celebrated abbey of the Order of Citeaux was founded in 1137 by Guillaume de Glane, who in 1142 took the habit of lay-brother and settled there until his death. His tomb can still be seen near the high altar.

Several noblemen have enriched this Cistercian abbey, among them the counts of Gruyeres, Neuchatel, Geneva and Savoy. Others took the abbey under their special protection, as did the dukes of Zahringen, the bishops of Lausanne and the sovereign pontiffs. Several popes issued particular bills on the status of Hauterive, which was granted privileges concerning the election of priests and the ordination of monks.

Thanks to reclamations and a good administration, the abbey acquired considerable wealth and became a centre of culture spreading its blessings to the neighbouring country: agricultural institutions, mills, and factories developed along the banks of the river Sarine. The abbey proved at all times benevolent and generous.

In 1848, the abbey was closed and its assets became public property. In

1859, an agreement between the religious and civil authorities allowed a distribution of the convent's fortune between the bishopric of Fribourg, in order to increase its resources, and the State, which was to devote the proceeds to charitable institutions.

Following their secularisation, the convent buildings sheltered an agricultural school which existed for only a few years, it was replaced in 1858 by a training college for school teachers.

The church and cloister of Hauterive, with their particular mixture of Gothic and Roman styles, are remarkable architectural achievements. The chancel stalls, which date from the

second half of the 15th Century, are reckoned to be among the most beautiful in Switzerland.

Five pillars separate the nave from the aisles. The capitals are joined with original arcades; the principal nave and the chancel are surmounted by an equally pointed vault.

The cloister is of Roman, but transitional style. Its arched arcades are supported by coupled columns. The windows are richly ornamented. The magnificent stain glass windows of the chancel were removed in 1848 and placed in St. Nicholas Cathedral in Fribourg.

With the financial support of the Confederation the church of Hauterive has been extensively restored. This has reinstated the famous fresco-paintings of the 14th and 15th Century into their full beauty. They well deserve a visit.

*Pierre Savoie*



HAUTERIVE  
Chapel of the Abbey.