

## European citizenship - A Protestant theological approach

*"How could this approach help CSC-KEK dialogue with and contribute to the European Institutions on the current challenges related to European citizenship?"*

The concept of citizenship refers to the life of men and women in a specific social and legal framework. In this framework, a national state or a supranational administration, such as the European Union, what is at stake when we talk about citizenship is the relationship of a person with the civil authorities. But a state or a supranational space represents a group of citizens. Thus, the issue of citizenship is related to the relationships between a citizen and the other citizens of this state or supranational space.

I therefore propose to reflect how Protestants view their relationships with the authorities and their contribution to society. Please, note that I am not an expert on the subject and I am not a professional theologian. I am a reformed Protestant with a pastoral experience. I am working with international networks of churches, and I come from a country where Protestants are a minority (about 2% of the population). I come from a country where Protestants have a special relationship with the state and with Europe. With the state, it is a story that combines resistance to oppression and cooperation for democracy. With Europe, it is a story of solidarity and alliance, when French Protestants were seeking refuge in neighboring countries to escape persecution in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. What I will share with you will be a point of view of a reformed Protestant, not **the** Protestant point of view in general. I do not pretend to speak for all Protestants.

My presentation will have two parts : a reflection on the relationship between Christians and the civil authorities, the role of Christians in society.

### 1. The relationships between Christians and authorities

#### 1.1 The two kingdoms

Two main lines are going across the Bible regarding the civil authorities. Mistrust ("*Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's*" Mark 12.17), which can go up to condemnation (the prophets). Recognition of the legitimacy of human authorities (Romans 13,1; Peter 2,11).

Since the first century, Christians were going back and forth between several positions vis-à-vis the state. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Martin Luther develops the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms, which seeks to articulate the relationship between the Church and civil authorities. Luther believes that there should be no confusion, no separation between the spiritual realm and the temporal reign. Challenging the Catholic model and then the model of radical Reform, he thinks the link dialectically. The believer still lives in both realms simultaneously. Under the reign of Christ, he receives everything he needs. But because he remains sinful, he has to be submitted to the rules of civil authority that keeps the world running in good conditions. The Christian is working within society in order to implement the divine law, good and justice. He/she doesn't have to establish a Christian society. "Before governing the world in a Christian manner, try first to fill it with Christians" (Luther).

The Swiss theologian Pierre Buhler stresses that, far from establishing a separation between the public and the private area, "*this doctrine allows Luther to upgrade the secular functions and to assume the secularization of society and the world under the sign of a critical and serene loyalty*"<sup>1</sup>. The Christian who lives in these two realms is called to perform a critical function. It is his duty to ask questions. Doing so prevents the political system to legitimize itself, to be absolute, that is to say to take the place of God. This Protestant way of thinking the relationships with the civil authorities leads to three consequences.

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Böhler, Article « Règnes (doctrine des deux) », Encyclopédie du protestantisme, Cerf/Labor et Fides, 1995, p.1291

## 1.2 Relationships with civil authorities

From a Protestant perspective, the Christian cannot in any way legitimize any authority or power whatsoever. His/her attitude vis-à-vis the authorities will be at best cooperation, and if necessary challenge and resistance. Both attitudes are present in Europe.

- There is a *Christianity of cooperation*, like in Germany where churches manage a number of social services and medical institutions on behalf of the State.

- *Christianity of resistance* is more common in countries where Protestants are a minority. For example, during World War 2, French Protestantism opposed the state in order to defend the Jews. In the 2000s, the Reformed Church in France criticized the government's policy on immigration. It is also the model of Italian Protestantism.

## 1.3 Churches and society

Since Christians cannot escape the world, because they themselves live in the tension between God's world and this world, the Protestant churches will refuse the following options.

- To consider themselves as a fortress against a sinful world, with values and morals to defend.
- To crusade in order to establish or to restore Christianity.

Christians do not stand in front of the world, they are not next to the world, but there are in the world as interpreters of human History in the light of Christian faith.

## 1.4 Secularization is an opportunity

In this perspective, the phenomenon of secularization, far from appearing as a threat, is perceived by Protestant churches rather as an opportunity. They understand this phenomenon as a process of emancipation from dogmatism. Secularization leads to a painful but necessary questioning. It allows Christians and Churches to discover again Evangelism and the importance of personal witness. It encourages a reformulation of Christian beliefs in a language more understandable by our contemporaries.

# 2. The role of Christians in society

From above, we can deduce some criteria concerning the role and the attitude of Christian citizens in society, whether national or European.

## 2.1 Asking the question of meaning

One of the roles of Christians is to ask the question of meaning. It is a way to perform the critical function. The question of meaning means to encourage each one individually and collectively to reflect on his/her way of being, on the way he or she understands the way of living together. It means to raise the question "how to live"? Raising the question means also to be prepared to listen to the answer: the one of our fellow human beings, the one given by the biblical writings. It means to stand at the crossroads of these writings and contemporary issues. As the Swiss theologian Karl Barth said : "A Christian should live with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other". About the question "how to live?" the Bible gives many answers. Regarding the issue of citizenship, I keep one element : pluralism.

## 2.2 Europe is pluralist

Early Christian communities bring together people from diverse backgrounds, from different social classes and cultures: rich people, slaves, Greeks, Jews, etc. They build an open and pluralistic society. The Protestant theologian François Vouga believes that the pluralist universalism of early Christianity provides the basis for the Western democracies<sup>2</sup>.

In fact, many Protestants believe that Europe must be based on the pluralism of traditions and beliefs. They argue that Europe has been built through many conflicts and has learned

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<sup>2</sup> F. Vouga, *Querelles fondatrices, Eglises des premiers temps et d'aujourd'hui* ; Labor et Fides, Genève 2003, p. 13.

the necessity of compromise (see the Edict of Nantes in France). European citizens are the result of multiple influences, multiple streams. We share the heritage of Christianity as well as the one of Greek democracy, Roman law, Arabic poetry or Byzantine art. Europe is like a vault that needs these pillars to be built. According to the French theologian Olivier Abel, the strength of our continent, "is the weight and the reciprocal pressure exerted by the plurality of faiths"<sup>3</sup>

Protestants willingly insist on pluralist legacies that have made Europe and the diversity of religious and philosophical traditions that characterize our continent today. In this plurality, Christians certainly have a voice to bring in order to build Europe, but one voice among many. Their main contribution is to defend the pluralism of cultures, religions and beliefs.

### 2.3 Being Citizen with others

Therefore, a protestant citizen will participate with other Protestant and non-Protestant to develop common values in order to live together in peace. The Protestant citizens will not seek to build a Christian society or a Christian Europe but will go into discussion with other citizens to build together the society they want. This attitude is underpinned by the conviction that Christians do not have **THE** truth. They have no special expertise, not even specific values, i.e. values that are not found in other religions or philosophies of life. The only mark of a Christian is the trust he/she put in a crucified God. The Truth is a man on a cross, nothing else.

I therefore believe that a Christian believer doesn't have Christian values to defend. He /she has to share convictions in a framework that allows the expression of other beliefs, a framework that allows to develop and live common values. Here, key words are "partnership", "cooperation", "dialogue". Of course, this dialogue assumes that everyone can express his/her beliefs. This is why Protestants are so attentive to the freedom of consciousness, freedom of worship, human rights in general. The Christian vocation is to work in the public space to set up a world of peace and justice. For this, debating is essential.

### 2.4 Debating

What are the conditions of a pluralistic and constructive debate ? I see three of them.

- *Giving up hegemony.* Recognize that no religion, no philosophy, no ideology, no State can pretend to possess the truth. Therefore, admit that no one can impose to the entire human community his values, his morals standards, his vision of the world. Admit that the other has the right to be different and to remain different. Finally, it means give up the dream of all people having the same God or the same religion or the same opinion, as if that would guarantee a peaceful and reconciled life.
- *Deepening his own convictions.* Recently, I heard this formula from Matthew Harrison, rector of the St Georges Anglican Church in Paris: "We must have faith in the public debate and bring our faith in the debate." To enter into debate, it is indeed necessary to have ideas to share! If the pillars of the arch were without strength, the vault would fall down, according to the image quoted above. In Protestant regime, these convictions are not the expression of a Magisterium, but rather elements of reflections.
- *Believing in a common future.* In colloquial language, we would say that to experiment a fruitful dialogue, we must have the conviction that we are all in the same boat. We must share the belief that the fate of every inhabitant of Europe is linked to that of his neighbor, close or far. We share a common destiny. I think it is this conviction that led the French Protestants to save Jews during the World War 2. They felt concerned because they were convinced that they shared the same humanity, the same fate. They felt concerned because if they did nothing, they would have abandoned a part of themselves.

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<sup>3</sup> O. Abel «Le conflit religieux, fondateur de l'Europe » actes du colloque de Rome, coll. L'Europe et le fait religieux, Paris, Parole et Silence, 2004.

## 2.5 Proclaiming the Gospel

As I said earlier, quoting an Anglican colleague: "We must have faith in the public debate and bring our faith in the debate." It means first of all proclaiming the Gospel, preaching the Good News. This is the very first and specific vocation of Christians. Being a citizen, the Christian is led to announce the Good News in the public arena, in the places where he/she lives. I do not mean here a crusade, or a noisy evangelism, but a respectful one. I do not mean ethics either. Christians and churches are often involved into ethical debates, and this is important and necessary. But according to me, their speech cannot be limited only to the field of social morals. Christians must also speak about foundations. This is what I call "preaching" the Gospel. This "preaching" has several components. Here are some.

- Sharing the blessing from God, that is to say etymologically "share a good word". God is a caring God. God wants happiness for human beings: we must tell them.
- Opening space for encountering God. This involves questioning the false images of God that are in the minds of our fellow citizens. That means also a personal commitment of every Christian citizen to bear witness.
- Renewing our language. When translating the Bible into German, Martin Luther wanted to make the Good News accessible to the greatest number. John Calvin, writing in French with simple words and images, used language as a tool to communicate his beliefs. So today we must make the same effort in order to make our faith and belief understandable to those who have never heard of Jesus Christ. How could we say in everyday language "sin," "salvation", "eternal life", etc.? How could we speak of resurrection to an MEP? When CEC publishes a statement on economy, how to translate the idea of "grace"?

This is a real theological work to be done with our Church members. It is not a job to be done by experts. It needs to be a collective approach with grass root people in order to allow every Christian citizen to express and share his/her faith.

- Showing an example of reconciled diversity. Which is very meaningful is the ability of Christians to live in communion, yet not having the same opinion. In Sweden, when the issue of same sex marriage was discussed, the Lutheran Church had set the following basis: it must be possible in the Church to acknowledge different views on an ethical issue and to accept them. In society, Christians could show an example of a reconciled community in diversity.

## Conclusion

If I had to summarize my presentation with one formula, I would say that the Christian citizen is basically a co-citizen, a fellow citizen, that is to say a citizen with others. As such, his/her main task is to build bridges. When you look at the Euro notes, you do not see a famous character as usual. You see bridges. Why? The answer have been given more than 40 years by Ivo Andric, writer, Literature Nobel Prize in 1961, diplomat, politician from Yugoslavia, a Croatian who became a Bosnian patriot. He wrote:

*"Among all that a man should build in his life, nothing seems more beautiful or more precious than a bridge. Bridges are more important than houses, more sacred, because they connect more than places of worship. They are used by all. (...) They are built always at the best place, where the greatest number of human needs to meet. They must support more than any other building and they serve no secret or bad intention ... All that gives expression to our lives - thoughts, eyes, smile, words, sighs - everything indicates another bank as its true purpose and there only, the bridge receives its true meaning."*

Buiding bridges, this is what Christians are meant to do as European citizens.