

CHURCH AS AN ORGANISM

On some consequences of the principle of inversion and withdrawal

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Introduction

This morning I would like to reflect on the *Ten Recommendations* of MOE-document. I was asked to indicate where the recommendations may need further elaboration. A quite difficult task, I am afraid. Every word reflects a theological thought. My lack of experience in this CPCE work gives me the feeling that I would pass by the burning issues. Moreover, the recommendations and the additional documents are fairly dense, written in an institutional and juridical style. That made me somewhat unhappy. Couldn't this style not be a symptom of a lack of care for what might be essential to the living reality and future of our churches? How to get grip on the material?

Recommendations are not laws or instructions. But I couldn't help to think of the density of the Old Testament *Ten Commandments*. A man, recently converted to Judaism, once approached once rabbi Hillel. He asked him to summarize the Thora while standing on one leg. This newcomer was luckier than me. Hillel, who was deeply involved in a theological and institutional debate with Shammai, the leader of a competing Jewish 'church', famously he answered him: "*What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn.*" The basic rule of the Ten Commandments is 'empathy' and 'study', 'love' and 'learning'. Happily, the first recommendation advises doing so:

Recommendation 1: "We recommend to have a new critical look at the ministries of the churches".

So, let's make a step back and reflect on a simple question, knowing that such questions are the most difficult to answer. Here it is: "What might we call the inner essence of Christian religion?" Let me try an answer:

"Christianity is the religious faith in God, the one and unique origin of life."

The Biblical family metaphor – Father, Son, Spirit – expresses clearly these dynamics of forthgoing life-giving-life. Life is a unity on the move. It lives by its inner self-differentiation. Life is a presence; we experience only *by the way*. Life manifests itself in a movement of *withdrawing presentation*. Is is fugitive. Its conceptualization can't be but paradoxical: moving stability, retreating presence, changing sameness, multiple unity. The most crucial theological concepts mirror this life-paradox: incarnation, trinity.

Consequently, this biblically based, living-life-origins of Christian faith motive resist to our human efforts to determine and define. Faith resists the claims of reason as far as reason implies the ability to define. Life is indefinable; the determination of it would put it to death. The living God can't be fixed, once and for all, in whatever cosmological or metaphysical concept. In that sense, Christianity has no foundation.

The gospel of John introduced the Word (**Logos**) as an metaphor for the divine, life-giving-living origine. Thereby he introduced a divine dependency: the signification of words depends on the way they are received and interpreted. Being Word, the God of Christianity makes Himself dependent of his human hearers. In the Hellenistic world that gave birth to Christianity, this idea of God must have been revolutionary. It did not fit into image of almighty deities that governed by blind destiny. The Christian Supreme Being submits Himself to the relativeness of humanity.

The paradox of the living and speaking Logos implies thus what I would call a **principle of inversion**. The inversion-trope is present everywhere in the gospel. The Messiah is like a **king** making himself **servant** to his servants. The **almighty** and **loving** God associates himself with **sinners**. **Death** is replaced by **life**. **Fallen creation** amounts to the **heavenly** bliss. This principle may guide our ecumenical search for church-unity. It may orientate discussions on how to live a shared life in honor of the living God. It prevents us to confuse ‘believing’ and ‘having faith’ with ‘knowing’ and ‘claiming’. It prompts us to abandon our natural eagerness to know and to claim foundational, theological knowledge. Our shared origine and destiny in the living and life-giving God will help us to dismantle blind spots, facile evidences that we take for granted. Or worse, because we have too less trust in the living God who prompts to courage and creativity.

In what follows, I would like to share with you some of maybe somewhat provocative reflections in the margin of the ten recommendations the keywords **paradox, inversion, self-withdrawal and self-relativization** in mind. I label my thoughts ‘-isms, signs of potential idolatry: (1) **mono-lingualism**, (2) **(theo)logo-centrism**, (3) **Institutionalism** (4) **ecclesiocentrism**, (5) **managerialism**, (5) **clericalism**, (6) **improvement-ism**, (7) **consensus-ism**

Ad 1. Mono-lingualism

I studied the MOE-document and the recommendation first in its English version. That appeared to me as a muddle of non-reflected concepts, disrespecting the poetry of the English syntax. After consultation of the German version, everything cleared up. As you know, language is more than just a vehicle for the transportation of meanings. Languages are embodiments of culture and in this case of a theological culture. My counter-recommendation would be here to invent ways of showing linguistic diversity in the texts we communicate amongst ourselves and to the broader public. Our European multi-linguism is not an instrumental problem to tackle, but a life-giving source to drink from. French philosopher, Barbara Cassin once said: **“the language of Europe is translation”**. Translation implies misunderstanding, misunderstanding

implies retardation, retardation opens the space for tentative communication. **Applying the inversion-principle: multi-linguism permits us the freedom not to understand - which is the condition for creative reflection and colorful faith experience.**

A concrete recommendation could be the routine of publishing only multilingual documents, for instance the ten recommendations in three of four columns next to each other. More important, we should have the courage to not only to transpose a text into the vocabulary of another language, but really to try to translate it, that means using the peculiar idiom that marks the identity of the various cultures. We shouldn't step into the pitfall of monolingual unification. The church will be the living body of Christ as far as she dares to communicate 'multi-linguistically' and thus 'multi-culturally'.

Ad 2. (Theo)logocentrism

Linked to this point is **logocentrism**, or more precisely '**theo-logo-centrism**'. Technically speaking, theology is the continuous reflection fostered by an insoluble tension between Gods Living Word and the words – or images, deeds, institutions, briefly the cultural forms -, by which man tries to do justice to this Word, acknowledging that such is impossible. The **third recommendation** states that the CPCE-churches **should respect** the correlation of public preaching and the administration of the sacrament. Why? Simply because there seems to be a broad theological consensus about this issue. The authors of the document refer to a **theology of ordination** to justify their recommendation to respect. The suggestion is that theology has the mandate to decide definitively. By so doing, the argumentation follows a much too classical path: **theory should dominate praxis**, theological doctrine should dominates ecclesial reality. But what happens when we apply **the principle of inversion**? Are we, theologians, unquestionable lawgivers? Or are we, like any other believer, coworkers in the vineyard of the Eternal? **A dogma or doctrine is not the gateway to heaven, but a steppingstone to Life.**

Ad. 3 Institutionalism

The life-giving-life-foundation of Christian faith implies **resistance to fixational thinking**. Our human reflexive (theology) and institutional (church) practices of faith aren't but a **provisorium. Theology should nurture the art of believing rather than the industry of institutionalization. The art of believing**, that means **the art of inventing forms** that invites audiences to re-engage with the Living Word. Even when we are called to solidify our theological uncertainties into ecclesio-juridical forms – and such is unavoidable -, even then this inventive naivety of theology should remain tangible.

We should apply the inversion-principle to the quasi-judicial discussion about ordination and/or commission. That demands our truthfulness to the rule that **‘the exception should be prior to the rule’**. Although paradoxical, this rule is nonetheless useful as an orientation-marker. By our institutional approach, we do run the risk that we justify the extinguishment of the living-life-giving Word by our human words. We risk it when rules, found in a process of theoretical reflection and discussion, get the chance to dominate living reality. **Institutionalism** may even result in violence against the non-reducible, singular uniqueness of each person, interpersonal relationship, ecclesial and societal situation. **The rule of exception** warns. It demands respect for the living character of reality.

What could this **rule of exception** mean in practice? Of course, it, because of its paradoxical character, never completely unrealizable. But it works as a light of orientation and a source for continuous reflexivity and self-critique. The Leuenberg-declaration gives an example. It proposes that in exceptional cases of urgency and crisis sacramental acts and public preaching could be allotted by non-ordained ‘lay’-persons. (45) It puts us on the way of an ongoing discussion on the question: ‘how to define a situation of urgency and crisis?’ Do we stick to individual circumstances? As for instance: “a ‘lay’ person has the right to serve the communion to a person on his or her deathbed asking for it.”

Now my recommendation: do we have the courage to open our definition of what is exceptional? In our time, now Christian faith and praxis find themselves socially and culturally marginalized, now that we have to learn how to adapt to what looks like the diaspora situation of early Christianity, our context is that of a crisis that should lenify our theologically imposed doctrines. That implies ... let’s give room for exceptions!

Ad 4. Ecclesio-centrism

The fact Christianity must learn to survive in diasporic and secularized circumstances brings us to the ecclesio-centralist tendency in the documents. The first recommendation advocates “that the churches of CPCE and all Christian traditions have a new critical look at their ministries.”. The church is automatically considered as being a main player in the societal field. We have a word for all other Christian traditions. It sounds a bit presumptuous. It suggests an inside-outside topography. From within one of the many sense-making organizations in the world, we still speak as if we are in the center.

The same one-way direction pops up in the easy use of the expression **public preaching**, the activity on which the ordination discussion is focused. From where stems this notion of **publicity**? What could be *private preaching*? On the background I suspect the historical

and political context in which the protestant churches in Germany and elsewhere had to affirm their existence. Public preaching should be controlled so that the political preferences of local authorities will not be offended. If such is the case, the argument in favor of **obliged ordination for public preachers is not purely theological** but mingled with **socio-political interests**. It is at least the outcome of a theo-political compromise.

Today's reality prompts us to dare to experiment with another view on our ecclesial realities. The model of 'we have a Word for the world'- doesn't work. The church is no longer the center of the universe. Neither does function the binary church-state model. Hence my recommendation to apply again the inversion-principle: we should develop an **outside-inside-look** on ourselves. Let's try to think our internal problems from the viewpoint of the secular society: are they still really urgent?

Ad 5. Managerial-ism

One example of theologo-centric 'inner-church' language is the use of the words like *diakonia*, *koinonia* and, central to the document, *episkopé*. The definition of the *episkopé*, how much inspired by biblical notions, seems to wrestle with the spirit of managerialism, typical for our time. Managerial-ism suggests that a any human community, like the church, should be considered as an organization, that requires "oversight, leadership and governance". Of course, the church is indeed **also** an organization that needs direction, procedural rules and habitual regularities. But the inversion-principle demands that we keep in mind that the church is at the same time **more than an organization**. Stemming from Christ, the life-giving-life origine, the church has the vocation to be body of Christ, to be a **living organism**. The question is hence **how to complete the organizational aspects of ecclesial organization with their organic vocation?**

In the praxis of church life this would imply that ministry is thought within a double perspective: that from within (priest, prophet, king) and that from without. Both perspectives should encounter, because the encounter between incompatible or heterogenous elements may kindle the flame of inventiveness and living faith. Who are the partners the Christian typology of ministry could meet? The Italian historian Benedetto Croce explained why our western civilization cannot wish not to be Christian. The Christian revolution still structures and orientates our secularized societies. We should take seriously the conflation of three cultural 'spirits from which Christianity has been born. From Israel, it inherited **the spirit of ethical reflection and continuous interpretation**; from Greek Hellenism it inherited **the spirit of culture and humanistic education (paideia)**; from Rome **the spirit of law, of political and**

institutional order. These three dimensions could inspire an **inversed** view on the *Episkopé* discussion. We should try to link our Christian tradition to the Hebrew, Greek and Roman spirits that still animate our modern societies.

Ad 6. Clericalism

This brings us to my sixth ‘-ism’: clericalism. In the **fourth recommendation** I met a somewhat disturbing distinction. Some ministries require ordination, some other could be practiced after being simply commissioned. The churches are challenged to reread their doctrines – which seems again an appeal to (theo-)logocentrism – but also, and that is positive, to their really existing practices and habits. The inventory of differences between the churches should make mutual recognition of ministries possible.

This raises the theological question of what we do understand under the concept of “ministry”. It is as if some **really ecclesial** activities deserve **ordination**, while for other engagements of a more common ‘professional’ kind, **simple nomination** (commission) will suffice. The distinction risks to separate the church in an upper-class of ordained church-servants, and a lower-class of commissioned deacons, lay-preachers, children-teachers or whatsoever. How to resist to this risk of clericalization? We should reconsider our definitions. “Being commissioned” can be defined as “having received a well-defined mission to fulfill”; “being ordained” as “having received a well-defined mission rooted in the Divine life-giving-life-origine”. We met however the **living Word** as a principle of “live-giving withdrawal”, of a space-making retreat (Zimzum, kenosis). This principle makes me to advocate the **abolishment of any job differentiation**. Each type of church ministry should be considered as an **Imitatio-Christi**. In business enterprises missions and jobs may be commissioned; in the living body of the Lord, the Church, whatever mission is worth of ordination.

This universalization of ordination corresponds to the protestant principle of priesthood of all believers and has further consequences. (1) Not only entitles ministries, but every church member is a servant to the living faith and hence a divine minister. We should strive for a serious strategy of **‘lay’-empowerment and ‘lay’-education!** (2) For the different jobs under the church-roof next to the classical pastor-mission, we should imagine **specified types of ordination**. (3) We should even think of a **genuine exchangeability of ministries**. Each ministry is a provisorium. Church ministry implies the invitation to be replaced. The call of the living God is not: ‘impose your ordained role over the other’, but: ‘yield your ordained place in favor of the other’. Such replacement-practices can only take place under practical conditions of educational or spiritual preparation and training, of moral sincerity, life-experience or

whatsoever. Interchangeability of the ordained ministries requires that **churches become centers for life-long learning**, not different from synagogues in diaspora-times.

I think this proposal fits in perfectly well with the sixth recommendation pleading for a horizontally shared and synodal form of episkopé. To realize this dream in the future, flexible and light organizational structures will have to be developed. Only then the ecclesial organization will be able to find out what it means to be a living organism.

Ad 7. Consensus-ism

As far as ‘consensus-ism’ is concerned, I have to be short. Very short. The second recommendation notes: “We recommend to work further on a common understanding of the concept of an order of ministries”. This communality has been defined in the document as “unity in reconciled difference”. It is a somewhat theological polished version of the banal definition of democracy: “the collective agreement to disagree collectively”. The challenge for a church that desires to communicate its life-giving-life-origin, is precisely not to focus on consensus, but only on this minimal consensus of “agreeing to disagree”. If we that seriously that the final unification and conciliation of God and man, in His life-giving-life still has to come, then I would like to propose you the following formular: let ‘s search for a “unity in reconcilable **dissensus**”. The church should be the place where we learn *not to agree* and still going on to love each other. Compromises nivelate. They endanger life and inventiveness.

Conclusion

Theology lives by what we might call pious skepticism and, unavoidably, has to deal with argumentative ambiguity. On the one hand she is called to articulate visions and decisions. On the other hand, she must respect the living Divine Spirit.

“The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8)

Each articulated standpoint will remain discussable and reinterpretable. That implies, especially when singular events or questions are at stake, the readiness to ‘apply’ the life-giving-life and the inversion principle; the willingness to assume that human decisions may be outdated. When we take the living Word as our faith-foundation, we should look for ways how to express constantly the provisional character of our theologies, conventions, interpretations or decisions. The life of our faith depends on our courage not to know.