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**THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH:**

**CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ECUMENISM**

This paper will take a prospective look at the future of the Church, in the next 30-40 years, let us say at the horizon of 2050, and what it will entail for ecumenism. The aim is to help us prepare the future, as well as we can, together. We are celebrating 50 years, after all, and reflection on the past helps provide a base for looking forward.

It seems like a difficult or even an impossible task. In a way, though, I have the easiest one today, because I have taken a sufficiently extended length of time to make it improbable anyone comes back at me in 2050 to prove me mistaken: “Etienne, you were so wrong! And I’ve based all the pastoral planning of my diocese on your paper…”. Unverifiable assertions are the most confortable to make!

It will not be pure prophecy or guesswork, though, since I will start by laying out some aspects of what sociologists analyse as mega-trends for the Christian Churches and for society and the world. This will just be a quick *status quaestionis* with some comments on the implication for the Church. It will not be new to many of us so I will not enter into details and prove what I expound. Then, in a second part, I will sketch out the theological questionsthat these mega-trends will confront us with. Many of these are common challenges to all our denominations: in particular how to confront theologically a more “charismatic” or “pentecostolised” Christianity. Finally, I will concentrate on the ecumenical challenges these trends bring about and specifically on the problem of how to move forward in the divisive field of gender-related questions.

The nature and theme of this paper means I have chosen to open the field quite widely, to brush a panorama rather than single out one theme. This implies that, though I will reflect more deeply on some topics, I will mostly set out questions – quite a few questions actually -, and open avenues for reflection rather than provide answers.

**I - “Megatrends”: the Church in the World of 2050**

Let us start with what is specific to the Churches, although it is also related to global geopolitical trends: the rise of the Global South and of a more multipolar world[[1]](#footnote-1): “The centres of the Church’s universality are no longer in Geneva, Rome, Athens, Paris, London, New York, but Kinshasa, Buenos Aires, Addis Ababa and Manila”.[[2]](#footnote-2) We will be and are already in presence of what Walter Buhlmann calls a “Third Church”[[3]](#footnote-3): a new Tradition, comparable to Eastern and Western Churches in importance. This “Tradition” is especially composed of Evangelical, Pentecostal and Independent Churches, but touches the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion as well. The projection for this type of Christianity, which now covers c. 20% of Christians, is that it may grow by 2050 to 50%, more than Catholics and Anglicans together. This “Tradition” entails a experiential and emotional spirituality, a strong supernatural orientation – both as a vivid faith in the working and guidance of the Holy Spirit, also through charisms and miracles, and as a strong belief in the power of demons and of the need for spiritual warfare. Less institutional, it proposes warmer and more closely knit communities, adapted to our globalized and urban millennium. It is also a more “morally conservative”, at least in the field of personal ethics.

This “Tradition” is not and will be ever less restricted to the Global South: it is spreading in the Global North because of immigration, but also because it corresponds to many dimensions of post-modern culture: experience, emotions, local community, fluid non-institutional social-media-style grouping – and perhaps through the work of the Holy Spirit, but that is much more difficult to determine for social sciences!

Despite this, in the Global North, the decline of belief, Church attendance, vocations is projected to continue and accelerate. We will be ever more minority Churches. This is not the end of Christianity in the West, since it entails the survival of belief among smaller, often very committed, groups of believers. This means a form of Church-life that will be dynamic, that tends to reach out and evangelise rather than to expect people to come. However, to some degree, it may also be more unabashed about its Christian identity and tradition in teaching and liturgy.

Societal and world trends will of course have a strong impact. I will list six of what are generally considered the major ones. The first two concern the situation of the world. We will still be confronted by inequality and failed states, and ever more with climate change. One of the major consequences of these are population migrations. A second issue will be the relation to other religions through the greater importance of Christianity in Asia, where this is a central question. Worldwide this is in particularly manifested through the rise of Islam, perhaps in numbers, certainly in social clout and in the radicalization of some groups. I will not discuss these trends because they will be addressed by other speakers.

Two other concerns pertain to the field of ethics. On the one hand, the “bio-tech revolution”, which gives mankind the capacity to act on itself in dimensions that once belonged to nature and chance, through cloning or genetic enhancement. On the other hand, the so-called gender revolution. This encompasses diverse aspects, such as equality for women, with its implications on a new place for women in society and in the Church but also brings about some uncertainty about what is masculine and feminine identity. In a more radical form there is a trend towards a recomposition of these gendered identities with a fluidification and shifting of the borders, or the refusal of differences or of fixed differences. Of course, the same phenomena is to be found with sexual orientation. I will try to address this fourth question in the third part of the paper.

The last two issues concern shifts in modes of thinking. For instance, the new means of communication will change our definition both of communication and community and ask for a major adaptation by the Churches in the field of teaching, evangelization and community building. Free access to a huge amount of instant information and worldwide communication in which all participate as sources of information transforms the classical model of a giver in position of authority and a passive receiver. Thinking patterns are also changing because of multimedia towards less linear, less language orientated processes. Community and relations may be virtual as much as “physically real”, with multiple and rapidly evolving affiliation to virtual communities. All this is a revolution parallel in scope to the invention of the written press by Guttenberg. A second question concerns new polarisations in politics and religion: instead of right/left or progressive/conservative, the polarisations become open or closed (for or against open borders, an economy open to the world…), populist or “institutionalist” (rejection or trust of traditional elites and political institutions, with calls either mainly to emotions or to reason), extremist or moderate (an exclusive nationalist or religious higher ideal or truth needs to be imposed, often from outside of the system, sometimes violently - or one accepts a plurality of opinions and works from within the system to convince others).

**II – Common theological challenges: the example of the “Third Church”**

Many of these trends call for foresight and preparation that do not imply ecumenical dialogue, or bring up any ecumenical difficulty. Actually the splits and tensions – on charismatic spirituality, ethical questions, political and religious polarisations – run inside our Churches. In a way, both the Anglican Communion and the Catholic Church need to work for inner unity and we could put to use our ecumenical knowhow for some “intra-denominational ecumenism”! However, these questions *can* have - and that is precisely what is at stake here – strong ecumenical implications. To put it simply: we can either let each denomination handle it for itself or work on these together.

I will concentrate on the example of the “Third Church”. On a pastoral level it calls for discernment – and we can learn from each other, by putting together the rich Roman Catholic tradition of Ignatian discernment and the Anglican “three legged stool” (Scripture, tradition and reason - to which some add experience), inspired by Richard Hooker.[[4]](#footnote-4) It also calls for genuine support and promotion of these expressions of faith. It also raises fundamental theological issues , however, and the following reflection will single out four of these.

The first theological question is ecclesiological, because it means assessing the true pneumatological dimension of the Church. To put it short: who is the main actor in the Church? Are we the actors or is the Holy Spirit? Or in a more nuanced way: are we acting with the help, guidance and support of the Spirit or is the Spirit at work in and through us? Y. Congar or J.-M. Tillard offer theologies that work in the second direction. When Augustine asserts: “When the priest baptizes, Christ baptizes”, Congar explains that this should not be understood in the sense that Christ enters in as a support, but that Christ is the main actor and the one bringing about change: “For Augustine, God (Christ, the Holy Spirit), is the primary actor of sanctifying action […] The true subject/actor is divine.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

This has quite concrete implications. Leading the Church does not mean planning and organising and then asking for God to bless our work, but to listen first: listen in prayer, listen to others, listen and see what the Spirit is in effect creating in the Church – and then find the best way to accompany the movement. It changes our way of handling pastoral workers too: the question is not how to fit people, whatever their talents, in our plan and structures, but to start with what people feel called to - their vocation - and what gifts they have - their charisms -, and build the plan and structures accordingly.

By the way, I am not saying that the Holy Spirit is at work only in this “Tradition”, but that it is more explicitly taken into consideration, and thus sets us squarely in front of this issue for all traditions.

A second theological question the “Third Church” calls us to reflect on is what it means more generally, not only for the Church, that God - or the Holy Spirit - is at work in our lives and in the world. Fundamentally speaking, concrete belief in providence is the main defining factors of the “charismatic” tradition, more than charisms and miracles. There is definitely a blind spot in relation to God’s intervention in contemporary theology, by fear of seeming too naïve, and because the complex problems it gives raise too: how to explain the massive presence of evil in a world where God is active, of course, but also how to balance divine action and human autonomy, as well as with the laws of nature as expressed in different sciences, and how to balance providence at the level of the whole of history of salvation and in the lives of individuals? An Irishman once told me a joke that perfectly illustrates these questions. An Irish priest is late for an appointment with his bishop, and cannot find a place to park his car. Desperate he cries out: “God, if you find me a space, I will not have another glass of whiskey in my life”. Immediately, he sees the perfect space just in front of the Bishops office. His instant reaction is: “Lord, don’t bother, I’ve just found one myself”! Should we not replace the notion of divine intervention with the idea that God inspires us a renewed comprehension of events? On the other hand, how to explain salvation and the history of salvation, and maybe even sacraments, without some form of divine intervention? What does it mean to be in a covenant with a partner that does nothing or whose actions we cannot be discerned from ours?

There has been some theological work on this in the past two decades, which gives us some directions for reflection.[[6]](#footnote-6) One needs to rethink the very notion of intervention and action, by moving from a purely metaphysical model of causality to more biblical notions such as vocation, promise, commitment, visit, consolation, judgment - all ordered not primordially to the government of the world but to salvation. One also needs to balance omnipotence with kenosis: the Pascal Mystery is the best paradigm of God’s action. Finally, one should allow for a “messier” view of the whole process, with room for contingency, for different forms of action, for some events to be “provoked” but also “used” by God.

The third issue are, of course, spiritual gifts, singing in tongues and miracles. There is an old tradition about these questions that we could base our thinking on. Aquinas has over 50 dense pages in the *Summa* on this[[7]](#footnote-7): what are these *gratiae gratis daty*? - they are a development of grace touching our intelligence at the service of others Why do we need them? - because we are not fully adapted yet to the supernatural and eschatological life we are living as Christians and we need God’s more direct intervention. He shows how the Spirit and the prophet’s intelligence work together to produce prophecies using the person’s experiences and ideas. Closer to us, an excellent document from the COE Doctrinal Commission, produced in particular with help from S. Coakely, stresses that “charismatic spirituality” understands prayer as a “‘two-way relationship’: not just talking at God, but God (the Holy Spirit) already cooperating in one’s prayer, energizing it from within, and no less also responding in it, alluring one again, inviting one into a continuing adventure.”[[8]](#footnote-8) It also analyses the experiential and emotional dimensions as a way of reclaiming affective life in spirituality, against the tearing apart of intellect and emotions in prayer introduced during the XII-XIVth centuries in the West.

Finally, the “Third Church” also implies an important place given to demonic activity and spiritual warfare. It is urgent to develop our reflection on this question. We are confronted by two extremes: denial or overreaction, no devil or an extremely powerful one. I believe Biblical teaching, the tradition of the Church and of her prayer (which includes an exorcism in the Baptismal preparation and rite) and the experience of spiritual masters do not allow us to ignore the reality of these forces and their activity. The periods in history in which theology has not taken this into account have been the ones with the greatest explosion of witchcraft and superstition. On the other hand, it is necessary to articulate the different factors that can influence us: sin, trauma and mental illness, as well as obscure forces. It is essential also to forcefully affirm the true freedom of the human being. Finally, all must be set in the context of the full victory of Christ over all evil. Actually, addressing these questions will enrich our theological anthropology and soteriology to make them more complete. For your information, the International Catholic Charismatic Renewal Service (I.C.C.R.S.) is preparing a theological and pastoral document on this question, and more specifically on Deliverance, which should be published in 2017.

Once again, strictly speaking, these questions are not ecumenical in nature, but they do offer a beautiful opportunity for a shared theological endeavour, so that we may face together the common challenges of these next decades.

**III – ecumenical challenges and opportunities: the example of Gender-related questions**

Some issues pose more direct ecumenical challenges. I will concentrate on the general question of “gender”, i.e. the role and identity of men and women and sexual orientation. Actually it is definitely an intra-ecclesial difficulty, both in the Anglican Communion and in the Roman Catholic Church, especially due to North-South differences. However, there are inter-confessional disparities also, and these may grow in the future. This debate for both denominations will be an extended, sometimes painful process and we need to settle down for the long run and arm ourselves with patience. Two questions can help us at the present point: how can we analyse our differences better, to improve the quality of dialogue? What kind of unity is now possible while we disagree?

To analyse the differences the divide us I will find inspiration in the remarkable document produced by *Faith and Order*: *Moral Discernment in the Churches*.[[9]](#footnote-9) It recognizes that we are far from being in the conditions for an agreement, not the least because ethical questions tend to provoke stronger reactions and tensions than doctrinal ones: they touch our vision of salvation and of the human being, but also our cultural and personal identity, and thus our emotions. For this reason, very cautiously, it proposes to start by understanding the dissimilarities at the first, basic, level of the processes that underpin our moral convictions and teachings. This is not a way of relativizing the teachings of the Churches and ecclesial communities, but of reaching the sources of our differences for the dialogue to proceed at the right level in search of truth.

One needs to understand the different ways in which we relate to the sources of our moral stances. We all refer to the Scriptures, of course. But reading the Scriptures is always interpreting it: for instance, do the condemnations of “lying with a man as with a women” in Leviticus (18:22; 20:13) or “lust for another man” in Romans (1:26-27; see also 1 Co 6:9) really refer to the forms of global sexual identities experienced today? More important still, should the Bible be understood as a literal source of intemporal moral rules – with difficult questions about it supporting stoning or slavery - or as offering guiding principles for moral discernment, such as the creation of man and women in and as the image of God, the commandment of love and the gift of freedom. The relation to other sources provided by human reason is also different: do new insights offered by philosophy, social sciences and biology stem from a God-given, intrinsically good faculty, which may even have its autonomy, or from one that is so marked by sin that it should be viewed with suspicion? In all these cases, though, the first priority is to recognise that we all respect the Bible with the same intensity and honesty, though we understand it and its role differently.

Another type of difference concerns how we recur to moral principles and reasoning. There can be conflicting principles: should we stress gender differences as God given or stress the personal freedom and capacity of choice given by the same God? Even the same principles can be understood differently: does following the “identity we are born with” refer to our physiology or our psychology? Moral reasoning also differs, according to the importance given to intention, to the objective morality of the act, to its consequences: should we put more weight on one’s love for one’s partner, on what we believe to be the intrinsic moral value of the acts, or on the consequences for the children and society? In each of these cases, it is an utmost priority to recognize that, though we may believe the others to be wrong, they are not immoral or depraved, but are acting from as strong a moral conscience as we are.

Finally, the document stresses the conditions of personal history and experience and of culture in which we discern and act ethically. Culture is a complex issue: if we consider diversity of cultures to be the immense good it is, we need to be coherent and accept a plurality of stances. We need to respect the other and accept to learn from the other. What then are the limits in possible differences?

All this leads us in effect to the second question: how much ecclesial unity can we have in this present situation of disagreement? Or how much disagreement can be accepted in what degree of unity? The question is relevant at both intra- and inter-ecclesial levels: what level of differences can be accepted in the Anglican Communion or in the Roman Catholic Church? To what extent should we consider these questions as an (new) obstacle for unity between us?

In a classical ecumenical perspective, agreed disagreement is possible under the form of “differentiated consensus”, as found, for instance, in the historical *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* of 1999.[[10]](#footnote-10) Because we have reached “consensus in basic truths of the doctrine”, we can accept “differences of language, theological elaboration, and emphasis” (*JDDJ*, 40). Unfortunately it seems to me that our differences in regards to gender-related questions are on some central points not only of language, theology or emphasis.

Another type of agreed disagreement distinguishes what is held necessarily and what is up to choice, a firm central nucleus and a more flexible periphery. This periphery can be Church discipline or structures, for instance, or cultural differences. For example, if we do at some point agree that men and women are created different in an essential, God-given manner, this does not mean that we could or even should necessarily define these differences, or the roles they may imply. These may well be to a vast extent cultural and personal. Of course, all things multicultural are not acceptable: a culture always needs to be evangelised and purified. Slavery and polygamy are typical examples of realities that have been progressively “burnt” out of cultures by the Gospel.[[11]](#footnote-11) And in this process, it is always easier to look at the speck in the other’s eye than the log in our own (Mt 7:5). Still in this category are doctrinal and ethical questions that are not related directly enough to faith and salvation for a clear universal choice to be made. Traditionally these are called *adiaphora*: “things indifferent”, “neutral” for faith and salvation. This allows for true differences of opinions in ethics: is there such a thing as “just war”? Is death penalty sometimes permitted? Is neo-liberalism an opportunity or is it sinful? We can probably admit full ecclesial unity with people who disagree with us on these questions. Now, for some, gender-related questions could fall into these categories. But I agree with many, on both sides of the debate, who affirm that there are questions of essential identity and salvation at stake. For this reason, even if we could – and probably should - develop some degree of cultural, disciplinary and maybe doctrinal differences, I do not think that this second category solves all difficulties.

The third option then, is, if I may borrow en expression from Archbishop Justin Welby, to “agree to disagree well”. Now what is this “well” that allows for agreement? On the one hand it means recognizing good reasons not to wait before going towards more ecclesial unity or maintaining unity. For instance, acknowledging the centrality of unity for the Church: what can justify the incredibly serious decision to break the unity of the Church? It also means hoping - in the sense of the theological virtue, not simply as a vague wish - that unity produces unity, that intense bonds of friendship and common prayer open the way for understanding and intensify the desire for unity. On the other hand, disagreeing “well” also means not accepting full unity without the prospect of complete consensus on the central core of these questions. It means agreein*g* – explicitly - not to give up on this, and setting up concrete processes and incentives to move forward. We can certainly help each other in this path: the Anglican Communion’s culture of plurality may help Roman Catholics welcome the first points; the Catholic commitment to unity, and in particular unity of doctrine, may help Anglicans welcome the last.

**IV - A dream and an appointment**

Allow me one last reflection, which is actually a dream more than a prospective look. But the future is also for dreaming. The last megatrend identified was the change of polarity in politics and religion, opposing in particular extremists and moderates, with very much at stake in terms of peace in the world and in our societies. Interreligious dialogue is one of the ways of confronting the matter. Religions are one of the ferments of extremism and at the same time the most powerful vector of unity, communion and reconciliation we have. “Moderates” from all religions, and in our case, in particular the three monotheisms, certainly have the common task and calling to work for peace, to give witness to the fact that God’s name is not war but peace.

I also believe that, more specifically in our relation to Judaism, this also represents an “ecumenical” challenge. It may be time to move towards a more radical vision of our relation to Judaism. Should we not move from dialogue to the pursuit of intense spiritual collaboration? On an ethical level may we not even speak, to some extent, of consensus and the possibility of true partnership – and thus for a form of ecumenism, in the sense of the search for unity in word and deed? After all, we were supposed to be the same religion in God’s design, and historians are discovering that the process of our separation was messier and longer than we imagined – so that in some regions of the Roman Empire we were the same religion for a substantial period of time. Moreover, the impact on ecumenism in the classical sense may be immense. We sometimes have the impression of a certain standstill in ecumenical dialogue: indeed, unity between Christians will most probably not avail if the first, paradigmatic rift is not bridged. Is it not time to heal the original wound that has touched the unity of the people of God? Of course, differences of faith and the past history of rejection and persecution seem like insuperable obstacles, as did our differences between Anglicans and Catholics 50 years ago, but no obstacles should stop a dream if it is true and good.

As it is, all this offers many more questions than answers. What could be more normal for a prospective look at the future? I give all those who wish an appointment on October 5, 2056, in exactly 40 years, to check if anything I have said was actually correct!

1. Most of the material for this section come from J. L. Allens, *The Future Church, How Ten Trends are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church*, Doubleday, New York-London-Toronto-Sydney-Auckland, 2009; Ph. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom, The Coming of Global Christianity*, Revised and Expanded Edition, Oxford University Press, 2007; reports from the *Pew Research Center*: *Global Christianity,* *A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Christian Population* (December 2011); *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010- 2050* (April 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. J. Mbiti, quoted by Ph. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Ph. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See P. Avis, *In Search of Authority, Anglican Theological Method* from *the Reformation* to *the Enlightment*, Bloomsbury, London-New Dehli-New York-Sydney, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Y. Congar, *L'Église, de Saint Augustin à l'époque moderne*, Cerf, Paris, 1970. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See for example I. Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Sciences*, SCM Press, London, 1990; R. J. Russell, N. Murphy, W. R. Stoeger, *Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action: Twenty Years of Challenges and Progress*, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Th. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.51 a.4 ; q. 68 ; III, q. 171-178. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Church of England Doctrine Commission, “Charismatic Experience”, in E. F. Rogers (ed), *The Holy Spirit, Classical and Contemporary Readings*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2009, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Moral Discernment in the Churches, A Study Document*, Faith and Order Paper No. 215, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See also for example: H. Meyer *et al.*, H. Wagner (hrsg), *Einheit - aber wie?: zur Tragfähigkeit der ökumenischen Formel vom „differenzierten Konsens“*, Herder, Freiburg-Basel-Wien, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Some theologians will beg to differ, however: “The Church’s strictures against polygamy […] are the product of a western mind-set, and unbiblical”, says J. C. Okoye (quoted by J. L. Allens, *The Future Church*, 34). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)