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Thierry Wanegffelen

► To cite this version:

Thierry Wanegffelen. The Clericalism of French Protestantism (XVIth-XVIIth centuries). Reformation Studies Colloquium, Apr 2004, Birmingham, United Kingdom. hal-00285080

HAL Id: hal-00285080

<https://hal.science/hal-00285080>

Submitted on 4 Jun 2008

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The Clericalism of French Protestantism

(XVIth-XVIIth centuries)

My paper will react against those French Reformation scholars who seem to me unable to study religious history without denominational prejudices and thus to realise, for instance, there was in French Protestantism a real gap between one of the most popular doctrines of the Reformation, I mean Martin Luther's 1520 priesthood of all believers, and the actual way Reformed Churches had been led by their pastors. Everybody knows that, especially in France, the Reformation had been a kind of anticlerical revolution. But it has to be said that in 1535, in *Institutio christianae religionis*, John Calvin dealt with that very protestant doctrine only twice, very briefly, and in strict relation to the question of the Eucharist and consequent so-called "papist superstitions", among whose the worst was, according to Calvin, the submission of the laity to a caste of priests seen as sacrifice-makers during the Lord's Supper.

In 1542, the Reformer wrote *The Catechism of the Church of Geneva* : "Is it necessary", asks insistently the minister to the child he is catechising, "that there are pastors ?" And the child has to answer : "Yes, and that one listens to them, receiving with humility from their mouths the Lord's doctrine." This shows how well Calvin analysed what was the actual tension in every protestant congregation. Everybody is a priest, alright, that's an orthodox protestant principle, but in real life there can be effectively no Church without pastors — that is ministers of God's Word by a specific divine calling that distinguishes them from the mass of the faithful. Yes, all Churches, even Reformed ones, need clergy. Yet, strictly doctrinally, a protestant clergyman has no particular status, he has "only", as Luther pointed out, to carry out what in Latin Luther called a *ministerium*, a service : to preach God's Word and to supply sacraments, but Luther wrote explicitly, "only in the name of all members of the Church".

This is theology, ecclesiology. But in historical, sociological and anthropological terms, was it possible for such a clergy not to become a new clerical caste? Some French scholars have written that French Early-Modern Protestantism was "a non-clerical religion" : isn't it such an assertion only denominationalist repetition of the Sixteenth-Century ecclesiastical Reformed point of view, under an historical guise ? In some other studies by French Roman Catholic scholars, this may also be just a

misunderstanding of the reality of Protestantism, that it is not like Roman Catholicism. This morning, I'd like to stress the evolution from an anticlerical religious movement towards a clerical religion.

While according to Luther the Church was the invisible one, of all saints known only to God, Calvin, whose theology's core was indeed the Church, had both in mind this invisible one and the visible Church that exists in local communities of the faithful, because of ecclesiastical discipline. In Calvin's words, discipline is "the nerves of the body of the Church, as faith is the soul of it". Every believer had to keep his "place and order". According to Calvin, "to maintain discipline" was one of the pastoral duties : "The Church — to Calvin's mind obviously through the pastors — *édifie* [that means in French both edifies and builds] the body of Christ." What a responsibility for the pastors !

French Reformed pastors have to be "elected", and Calvin added "with the consent and approbation of *le peuple*, the people, moreover the pastors have to preside over the election, so that *le populaire*, the popular, doesn't proceed rashly, or with intrigue or clamour". Understand that if one really wants *le peuple*, the people, meaning of God, to be more than a *populaire*, a mob prone to the worst, the pastors have to be watchful and directive. They have to preside over all the life of the Church.

When a minister had been elected, pastors of neighbouring Churches were told as early as 1559 to place their hands on their new colleague. Calvin had remarked : "although there is no express commandment about the imposition of the hands", that is to say that such a ceremony is not scripturally attested. According to the protestant principle of *Sola Scriptura*, it must be suppressed. But Calvin explained : "It is a useful way to magnify to the people the dignity of the ministry, and by such a ceremony the new pastor is advised that he belongs no more to himself but has been dedicated to the service of God and of his Church." We find here Reformed clericalism's two bases: first, the self-consciousness of the pastors that they are a specific group, a better one, inside the Church, with a special duty and responsibility. And, second, the ecclesiastical purpose to make the faithful admire their pastors.

The French discipline of 1559 was only written by pastors, for the gathering in may at Paris had been wrongly called the first national synod of the French Reformed Churches. But as early as 1561, pastors and now also "lay" people, elders and deacons from consistories, added to the article regarding the imposition of the hands : "without however scruple nor superstition". And in 1565 then '71, the fifth then the seventh national synods of the French Reformed Churches stressed that such a ceremony is not "necessary" and "not of necessity, although the use is holy and good". What makes

superstition in Reformed minds is the belief that salvation comes from a particular practice — and thus is “necessary”.

Calvin’s close friend and also disciple, Pierre Viret, wrote : “The ecclesiastical ministry has been settled by God because of the weaknesses of men who have to be led to the knowledge of the truths of salvation. All must feel concerned with the salvation of mankind [we find here the priesthood of all believers] but no one can preach nor supply sacraments but those who have been called but God’s special election.” Calvin had added that “from the mouths of men, [the ministers] speak to us as if from Heaven”. This latter word has to be heart as it was in Sixteenth-Century French Protestantism. For, according to the dogma of Ascension, stressed by Reformed tradition since the very beginning, the religious thought of Guillaume Farel, Jesus-Christ is sitting at the right hand of the Almighty Father till the end of time. So, using that word, Calvin wanted certainly to make clear that Christ can speak to his faithful from Heaven only through ministers and pastors, who were just as prophets. And since as early as the 1520^s in Zurich, then in France, and later in England, Biblical exposition in public had been called “prophecy”. I know only one example of a true sacerdotalist view in Reformed Protestantism, in the XVIIth century. In a sermon, it was explained that the faithful were like the Elected People staying “at the foot of Mount Sinai”, and the pastors were like Moses conversing with God and “set apart to announce God’s Gospel”. We don’t find in this sermon the priesthood of all believers, and such a radical position is very unusual. This is certainly why the sermon had never been published by its author. Most often French Reformed pastors were still antisacerdotalist. Even if by the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, in 1685, an evolution could be seen.

In 1542, Pierre Viret, as the main pastor in Lausanne, in this time under the political control of the City of Berne, had to explain to his Protestant but lay and German-speaking Lords that they ought not to be so suspicious about the Genevan religious movement: the Calvinian Church of Lausanne, it was possible to understand implicitly from his treatise, was not to initiate a kind of neo-clerical revolution. By all means, he wrote explicitly, the ministry of God’s Word has to be praised and magnified but the ministers have to be seen by the faithful as what they are in fact: nothing but men. Viret invited his readers to see them *also* as men.

A century later, in 1657, Raymond Gaches placed his hands on a new minister of a Reformed Church near Paris. In his sermon, he explained to the faithful that their new pastor, even if in time he proves himself a man like anybody else, with the same weaknesses and failings, will nevertheless be more, a lot more than lay Reformed people, because of his eminent office. Viret felt the duty to prompt the faithful to feel

more respect for their pastors: so it is obvious that Reformed Protestantism wasn't at this time quite a clericalism. But one hundred years later, it had turned into real clericalism. And Pastor Gaches had to remind lay people that all kinds of donatism are nothing but heresy. Christian people have not to be troubled by a bad or even just an ordinary minister, who can't put into question the excellence of the ministry, that receives its dignity from the Lord, not from men — even ministers. Such an assertion is clearly a response to potential or effective Reformed anticlericalism against pastors, and it seems to prove us that Reformed Protestantism had really become, at least in a way and among a part of the French Reformed, a sort of clericalism.

In the early years of the Reformation, the movement had been against bad priests, not able to preach correctly nor to supply sacraments properly, or absent from their cures. The true minister that Reformers expected was consequently first a good one : good preacher, good shepherd, present and paying attention to his flock, mindful of his pastoral duties. For in Protestantism the Bible above all at the human level is the source of salvation, such a good Reformed minister had to be especially learned. But being learned in a mostly non-literate society favoured clericalization because it put the pastors apart from the mass of the faithful and made clear that despite the now dead-letter principle of the priesthood of all believers, only learned people, that is only the pastors, could do the *ministerium Dei et Ecclesiae*. John Calvin said in a sermon that the faithful could not eat by themselves “the bread of God's Word”: like a father, the pastor has to put that bread piece by piece directly in their mouths. And Calvin went further: the pastor even had to chew that bread, like a bird with its chicks !

Pastoral monopoly of religious matters had grown and grown: the choice of new ministers, preaching, catechising (that was at the very first years of the French Reformed Churches one of the deacons' duties) publishing religious treatises (a French Reformed censorship had been very soon set up) and all kinds of liturgical acts. Even public exposition of the Bible was reserved to the pastors. And that happened from the beginning of the Reformed Churches. In 1563, the French Discipline forbade in every settled (“dressée”) Reformed Church the continuation of local biblical gatherings. Once they had a pastor, Reformed men and women were no longer allowed to read freely together and to explain the Bible to each other. From then on, they only had to listen to pastoral expositions. And even though national synods wanted the faithful to read the Bible at home, in household settings, in fact the father and master of the house was the only one authorised to preside over them. And I do not even know of any evidence for such a familial cult presided over by a widow, whilst in all civil matters a widow acted exactly like her late husband. If it was really so, no doubt it was because Calvin thought there could be no Divine calling of women, daughters of Eve.

And if we move from synodal decisions to pastoral books, we see that fathers were urged not to read the Bible directly but pastoral commentaries or sermons, or even to remember what they had heard from their pastors at Sunday services or “prêches”. Pastors were becoming the sole mediators between the faithful and God’s Word. That was actually clericalism because in Protestantism only Scripture, at the human level, offers a real access to salvation.

But this was in no way a kind of sacerdotalism. Because nobody said that ministers were unlike other men, except for the fact that they were more competent to do a pastor’s job.

And this is my point: too many scholars, in France, create a confusion between sacerdotalism (that supposes a distinction based on clerical ordination and imposition of the hands between the faithful and a caste of set-apart and sacred priests) and clericalism (that gives to ministers power in the Church and even a monopoly over religious matters). So that antisacerdotalism is to such scholars a proof of non-clericalism, contrary to the evidence. For it was not so. Because Protestantism is not Roman Catholicism: to the Protestants the sacred is not sacramental nor ritualistic. Its only focus is God’s Word. Not only Scripture, but Scripture read as living Word for today. A daily bread. So in each congregation somebody has to be able to read Scripture correctly in that sense. This is the reason why Protestant Clericalism was based on the necessity for specific abilities to practice the ecclesiastical ministry as God wants it to be. Reformed pastors had to be experts in religion, liturgy and especially preaching. If they weren’t they could simply not be ministers. And this was no kind of donatism.

In order to give the least possible attention to the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, in the name of which the faithful might claim to do their part in their Church’s life and service, Reformed theologians had to stress the calling to the ecclesiastical ministry as a “special election” above the election of all believers. This worked like a religious justification of the pastoral monopoly. And that is certainly why this doctrine had become more and more important in Reformed theology.

That story of French Reformed clericalism’s development had had a manner of conclusion. Peter Du Moulin the Older was with no doubt the smartest and the most competent French Reformed pastor of the beginning of the XVIIth century. He published in 1618 a treatise *On the Calling of pastors* and he explained that French presbyterianism and English episcopatism had been nothing else than the results of two different histories of the beginning of the Reformation. Such a question of ecclesiology was “not a point of doctrine nor a thing necessary for salvation”. Three

years before, in march 1615, he had gone to England and tried vainly to obtain the bishopric of Gloucester. Finally, King James had given to him a benefice of canon of Canterbury.

Ten years later, from march 1624 to june 1625 (King James died in march 1625), Du Moulin was again in England, whose episcopal ecclesiology and royal absolutism he defended with all his authority and theological knowledge.

One may wonder whether Du Moulin, although he never wrote the slightest sentence in that sense, thought in fact he had “a special election” better than that of his less competent colleagues, a kind of “third” election which should have given to him more authority in the Church and made him a bishop. This is only an hypothesis. But it has to be said that Peter Du Moulin never agreed with the tenants of the bishops’ divine right. According to him, bishops were just more competent and more “elected” ministers, with authority over the pastors and thus ordained for the Church’s sake. Such a position is definitively not sacerdotalist but seems the radical development of Reformed specific clericalism. Even if Du Moulin’s French colleagues were surely not episcopalian, he was nevertheless elected moderator of the national synod of Alès, in 1620 and was until his death considered as a great Reformed theologian and pastor. Some may see this fact as a proof of a now quite deep French Reformed clericalism.

Thierry Wanegffelen

Professeur d’Histoire de la Première Modernité

Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail
(Toulouse 2)

Laboratoire FRAMESPA – Diasporas
(UMR 5136, CNRS et Toulouse)