



"2017: the Geneva Awakening is 200 years old!" by Luc-Olivier Décoppet



Churches

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In the 1810s in Geneva, the Awakening was not only a return to an orthodox Christian faith, but it was also the discovery of the work of the Spirit in the human heart. A work which begins with conversion and which is nourished by a face to face with Christ. A look back at these beginnings which mark a new impetus for a reawakened Protestantism in French-speaking Switzerland and in France.

500 years since the Reformation, 10 years since the creation of the FREE. Between the two, the Church has had time to evolve. Several movements were born and followed one another. This year, we are celebrating the 200th anniversary of one of them: the Geneva Revival which is the basis of the FREE Churches.

A time turned upside down

At the turn of the 19th century, the Western world experienced profound changes. Politically, with the French Revolution, Europe will move from monarchy to "democracy" (it will still take an alternation of revolutions and flashbacks spread throughout the 19th century before

achieving this...). Philosophically, Enlightenment ideas about politics, freedoms and human rights are put into practice; we move from collective to individualism. Technologically, we are moving from a rural society to an industrial society.

Geneva will also undergo these changes. In 1798, it will be attached to Napoleonic France: "Protestant Rome" will be integrated into a Catholic state... At the fall of Napoleon, it will join the Swiss cantons. In 1815, to enter the Swiss Confederation, it would have to attach Sardinian and French communes with a Catholic majority [1] . Geneva will become one of the rare confessionally mixed regions in Europe.

Preparing for Awakening

The ideas of the Enlightenment strongly influenced the theology of the Genevan Church. They made it a moral religion. The Trinity, the divinity of Christ or the way in which grace works have been put aside. This state of affairs will make an ironic Rousseau say: "Your pastors are curious people: we do not know what they believe, nor what they do not believe. We don't even know what they're pretending to believe. »

This rational, dry religion did not suit everyone and when Count Zinzendorf came to Geneva in 1741, between 600 and 700 people joined the Moravian communities [2] . The craze petered out and, in 1800, there were only a handful left. It was at this time that several young people began to attend the meetings led by Ami Bost's father. In addition to Ami Bost, we find there other names who will be at the basis of this Awakening: Henri-Louis Empeytaz, Emile Guers, Henri Pyt... Some will experience a conversion in this Moravian environment and will engage in studies of theology.

In Geneva, the Masonic lodge "Union of Hearts" is another place where one has access to a less rational Christianity. It brings together authentic Christians who aspire to a more personal experience of faith and who believe in the divinity of Christ and the Trinity. We find Ami Bost and César Malan there. Several Genevan pastors also frequent this lodge, including Charles-Etienne-François Moulinié. The latter gives private lessons to theology students, in order to fill in the gaps in the teaching they receive at the faculty.

One of this pastor's preachings will enthuse Empeytaz, Guers and Pyt who will create the "Society of Friends", first to support the poor, but also with the aim, Guers tells us, of "renouncing the world and its lusts, to watch over one another, to reprove one another in love, and to have no other Master than Him whose blood has washed us." The Venerable Company of Pastors asks them to cease these activities.

They then meet Baroness Krudener, a pietist mystic who will encourage these young people with her flame. With his help, they will organize prayer meetings at Empeytaz. A decree from the Consistory [3] will prohibit theology students from attending religious assemblies. Guers and Empeytaz follow the advice of Moulinié who encourages them to keep their heads down while waiting for their consecration. The ecclesiastical authority refused the consecration to Empeytaz who left to join the baroness in Alsace, where they collaborated with Pastor Henri Oberlin.

A succession of British will then come to Geneva. They will have a great influence on young theologians, notably by strengthening their faith and helping them lay firmer doctrinal foundations. The best known of these Britons is Robert Haldane, a landowner who spent several years in the navy and who, after his conversion, evangelized in Scotland. Under his

wing, they studied the Epistle to the Romans. This meeting will transform them and this will worry the Venerable Company. She asks all pastors and students to sign a regulation which commits them not to preach on: the divinity of Christ, original sin, the way in which grace operates, predestination... Most of the "awakened" refuse to sign. Guers is excluded, Pyt leaves studies.

Independent churches

This small group will form itself into a Church: on September 21, 1817, its members take communion together, outside the official Church. However, it is César Malan, who was consecrated pastor, who officiates. They will meet in various premises, before finding a room large enough to accommodate them, in Bourg-de-Four.

The population, taking a negative view of these "sectarians", begins to become agitated, insults fly, then it's the turn of stones... The police must intervene. A young sergeant of the guard, Félix Neff, receives a treatise which he is going to read. This will upset him. He leaves the guard and becomes a preacher-evangelist. First in French-speaking Switzerland, then in France, in the Hautes-Alpes.

Not everyone is comfortable with separation. César Malan would rather like to change the national Church from the inside, to make it rediscover the faith of the Reformation. He will build a wooden chapel [4] in his garden to preach there. His preaching was successful and he practically became an independent pastor. The Council of State dismissed him from his functions in 1823 and Malan found himself outside the national Church...

Pastor Louis Gaussen would also like to stay in the State Church. With others, he founded the "Evangelical Society" in 1831. Very quickly, they celebrated worship, taught catechism and opened a School of Evangelical Theology. This will cause the Council of State to react, which dismisses Gaussen. Excluded from the Geneva Church, these awakened people will buy land to build the Oratory.

What remains of this Awakening?

These young theologians rediscovered Calvin's faith. They contextualized it for their time and made it a living and personal faith. Then they knew how to transmit their momentum. The Church of La Péglise (FREE) and the Free Church of Geneva are the direct fruit of this Awakening. What's more, these theologians brought this momentum to French-speaking Switzerland and France. On a social level, the Red Cross, the Blue Cross, and many other works are also the fruits of this Awakening.

The Spirit strikes in the right place and at the right time. Today, we can only remain attentive to his action, encourage those who thirst for God, who engage in church planting, evangelization...

Luc-Olivier Décoppet

[1] [See the map published by the Tribune de Genève .](#)

[2] Pietist communities resulting from the reform of the Czech Jean Hus (15th century). Persecuted, the movement was welcomed by Count Zinzendorf. These communities will have strong missionary activity. They emphasize personal conversion, reading the Bible in small groups, etc. Its members continue to attend official worship services.

[3] At the time, a sort of tribunal composed of pastors and lay people judging matters of morality. Today, within the framework of the Protestant Church of Geneva, what is elsewhere called the synod.

[4] He wanted something ephemeral to show that he was not creating an independent Church.

For further

Piguet Anne-Catherine, "What ecclesiology for the FREE? » in Cédric Chanson, Valentin Cruchet... *Churches and ministries. A challenge for the evangelical churches of French-speaking Switzerland resulting from the Geneva Awakening (1817-2017)* , Dossier Vivre no 39, Saint-Prex, Je Sème, 2016, p. 9-20.

Lüthi Marc, *At the historical sources of the evangelical Churches: the evolution in French-speaking Switzerland of their ministries and their ecclesiologies* , Geneva, Je Sème, Dossier Vivre special edition, 2003, p. 9-62.

Mützenber Gabriel, *Listening to the Awakening: from Calvin to the Evangelical Alliance* , Saint-Légier, Emmaüs, 1989, 270 p.

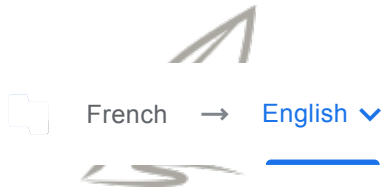
[The program A vue d'esprit, "Religious awakenings of the 19th century in French-speaking Switzerland: Geneva wakes up" with Valérie Lathion.](#)

Organic express

Luc-Olivier Décoppet has just submitted a thesis to the Free Faculty of Evangelical Theology of Vaux-sur-Seine (F) on the history of the Church in the canton of Vaud in the 19th century. After an internship at the Evangelical Church of Bourguillon in Fribourg, he has been pastor in the Evangelical Church of Uttins in Yverdon-les-Bains since the beginning of the year. A teacher by training, he was a member of the Eglises de la Passerelle in Vevey and the Evangelical Church of Lonay (FREE).



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