

**A Mysticism for All.  
Conceptions of the Individual and Conditions of Neo-Evangelical Protestantism  
Emergence.**

**Convener : Virginie Vaté** (GSRL- CNRS, Program MYSTOU- France) & **Christophe Pons**  
(IDEMEC-CNRS, Program MYSTOU- France)

Christophe Pons

**Prestige and transgression: intimacy with Jesus and social religious changes in the Faroe Islands**

At the beginning of the 1980's, in the remote villages of the little North Atlantic archipelago of the Faroe Islands, some people started talking about Jesus in a different way. Those people said that Jesus was all the time with them, that he was their fellow, their best friend, that he opened their eyes and their hearts; that he saved them by offering freedom to every one. Somehow, they were doing some kind of evangelization in a proselyte and aggressive way. After a dramatic economic crisis that affected the country in the mid 90s, they built new churches – some of them were very huge -, and attracted more and more people to new types of Christians meetings. The young generations were the first to join them. Secular teenagers were curious to experiment the presence of Holy Ghost and its power of healing. Those who belonged to the traditional free-churches were may be more sceptics about this Holy Ghost action, but they enjoyed the charismatic style, the new liturgy, the lyrics, and the guest-preachers who were invited to the meetings, coming from all over the world.

This situation could easily be described somewhere else. In many diverse societies, this new type of Christians People arose after the 80s. In the Faroe Islands, those people – let me call them “Jesus’ friends” – were mostly considered with curiosity and fear at the beginning. Most of Faroese thought they were a bit crazy. But little by little, they took part to the religious landscape; they deeply entered into the society, and finally provoked some great changes in this little society, peripheral of Scandinavia.

Briefly, the Faroe islands are less than 50.000 inhabitants, self-governing within the kingdom of Denmark since 1948. Officially, about 85% of the inhabitants belong to the Lutheran State Church. Although registered in the state church, many Faroese attend other free churches. Indeed, apart from this state church, three main influences have shaped the religious landscape of the Faroe Islands. At first, the Calvinist influence of the Plymouth Brethren, first introduced in 1865 with a Scottish missionary, today reaches around 15% of the population with more than 30 free churches spread in different villages. A second influence, similar in proportion, is the grundtvigian pietism from Denmark. It divided the state church within 30 churches communities (called *Home Mission*), that are similarly settled as the Brethren, in the same amount of villages. Finally, Pentecostalism of Norwegian, Swedish and lately American influence progressed after 1920. But it remained in a small proportion until the 1980s, when started the growing interest in charismatic revivalism. Today, traditional Pentecostal are strongly influenced by neo-Pentecostals and Charismatic believers – so-called “Jesus’ friends” – and count altogether around 6% of the whole population with more than 10 free churches. But many free Pentecostals believers have no denomination, and attend private religious services at home.

I suggest considering the relationship between Jesus and the believer as an expression of the contemporary mysticism that occurs in many diverse societies as a characteristic of evangelical protestant churches. Indeed, today all over the world, millions of Christians call themselves “born again” and claim having a personal relation with Jesus, emphasising to the extreme the idea of a powerful intimacy between oneself and the Divine. Somehow, in many societies, social actors are experiencing a same mysticism which is drawn by a “theology of personal success”, a desire of entering into modernity, and a process of individuation.

Compared to the historical tradition of the mystics within Christianity, this contemporary mysticism is relatively new and innovating because it focuses on Jesus rather than God. Here Ego is not only absorbed by the powerfulness of God, but he discovers and nourishes another type of intimacy which is comparable to a partnership with a supernatural being, sometimes described as a friend, as a fellow or even as a lover.

In the Faroe Islands, Jesus friends have progressively provoked some great changes in the society and perturbations in the local balance between the churches-communities of Brethren and Lutherans. This paper examines how the intimacy with Jesus allows social transgressions, and builds up a new type of authority and prestige.

### **The local conception of the *god madr***

Let me first start with the local conception of the *good man (god madr)*.

Among traditional churches-communities, saying about someone that he is a *good man* means that he has a great morality, he is a trusty fellow and a good worker. The ideal-type of the *good man* is someone of mid-age, married, with 4 or 5 children, able to preach at church, honest and sincere in his life and testimonies. Though, the qualities of the *good man* are those of the shepherd, good-adviser, who knows how to lead and listen to its people, and takes the right decisions at the right moments for the right persons.

But the *good man* must not have any desire for power. He shouldn't look for any kind of prestige. He is not supposed to gain intentionally any form of authority and everything he does, says or thinks must be only motivate by a religious ethic of behaving according to the laws of the Lord. People who have such qualities are usually asked to become an elder. An important point to underline is that such an ethical pattern of behaviour doesn't refer to some features that the individual inherits from its lineage, its social class or its financial power. The status of *good man* – which is never officially declared but collectively accredited by the community – refers to a social prestige that Ego gains everyday according to its conformation to an idealize way of life.

Of course, this ethical conception of the *good man* is of high importance within the traditional churches-communities, both Darbyst and Lutheran. But it is worth noting that the conception is also an ideal-type within the whole Faoese society, which is traditionally organised as a collection of villages-communities where dwelling, fishery, hunting, harvesting and shepherding were collectively organised and practiced.

Consequently, I would like to underline that the concept of *good man* arise within communitarian organisation, without hereditary chieftains, and where the way of leadership is collectively organised, without any king in the village, or any pastor in the church, but with a board of elders self-elected according to their qualities of *good men*.

It is then tempting to compare the Faroese *good man* to the Melanesian *big man* who also possesses its power and prestige according to qualities he earns but does not inherit.

And as M.Godelier pointed out after M.Sahlins, the ideal-type of the *big man* arises within acephalic societies, without hereditary chieftains but organised with local groups that are politically equivalents.

This comparison between two ideal-types, the Faroese *good man* on the one hand, the Melanesian *big man* on the other hand, needs to be carefully considered since it necessitates abstraction and simplification.

Indeed, one problem is that the *big man* seeks to increase its social prestige – or its power – by distributing gifts and goods. The people around him have, of course, to give back according to the well-known principle of the *don contre-don*. But the individual power of the *big man* definitely depends on its distributive capacity: you earn prestige as much as you can give.

I hardly see something similar with the *good man*. For him, the only way for gaining some prestige is to be collectively considered according to its position within the church community: as an elder, as a missionary, as a regular preacher, and so on.

Curiously, in this perspective, the *Jesus' friend* is may be closer to the *big man* than the *good man*...

### ***The introduction of Jesus' friends***

Because of its alliance with Jesus, Ego is not anymore under the authority of its traditional religious congregation. The alliance means that through Jesus, God has a plan for him, and because of this plan he can get rid of the authority of its community. Therefore, on the one hand, Ego fully accepts its submission to the Lord; he puts himself under his possession because God knows better than anyone else what is good for him. But, on the other hand, because of its supernatural alliance, Ego is free from the temporal authority of the elders in the traditional churches. Becoming Jesus' bride, he belongs to God the father and not anymore to the congregation. Jesus helps him to understand the true value of things, to get rid of material things, and also to discover its "original self".

People who claims to be "born again", in the Faroe Islands or wherever else, usually refers to the conception of a deep true identity that Ego finds out through the alliance with Jesus. The expression "born again" is even referring to this idea: people are born again to their true identity. They are not only free to discover the eternal life, but they also get free from social oppression, from an identity given by the conventions of social life. This conception of the 'original self' clearly shows that this mystical alliance with Jesus is produced by late modernity and by the process of subjectivation that leads the individual to seek for the sources of the self. Often people say that with Jesus help, they finally discover who they are.

This new autonomy helps Ego to act in the world in a different way, and to do incredible things that were impossible to do when he had to behave as a *good man*. Now, thanks to its alliance with Jesus the son, and its possession by God the father, he has a status of immunity that allows him to behave in a dissident way.

For instance, an important dissidence was that those people started to be proselyte in the villages, knocking at the doors or talking loudly on public places about their love for Jesus, giving testimony of their relationship with Jesus. On Saturday evenings, they drive in the street with a large white bus supporting the inscription "Jesus loves you!" They offer coffee in the streets and start talking about their faith. Sometimes, they also have a seat in the pubs where they try to evangelize people, and to suggest them to stop drinking alcohol. Such behaviour is not only unexpected in the islands, but also highly disapproved. Evangelization and missionary is something that Faroese people are used to do overseas,

not at home. With the seculars, being proselyte is an offense that might turn into conflicts with those of the family who do not attend to the church. Between Christians of the diverse churches-communities, proselytism might be considered as a provocation for concurrence.

Another attitude considered as dissident and shocking is the way people claim their love for the others, and the way they talk about themselves during testimonies: without shame, they cry, laugh, shout, and give details of their private lives, pretending that they have nothing to hide, that they want to present themselves in the pureness of the nudity of emotions. This is very much opposite to the traditional self control of feelings that are highly considered according to the "classic" conception of the *good man*.

But if traditional Christian men of the local communities are even more upset with "born again people", it is because little by little, many young person start to adopt a nomadic way of attending to diverse services, according to the guests invited by Charismatic-Pentecostal churches. This nomadic attitude, which is completely opposed to the traditional fidelity to the mother-community-church, is also due to the mystical relationship with Jesus. People don't need anymore to be deeply rooted in a specific church: they have Jesus at home...

### ***Concluding remarks...***

Briefly, let me conclude by some general remarks.

Compared to the *good man*, the *Jesus' friend* has a similar Christian morality. But for him, the community-church is not anymore so highly respected as it used to be by the past when he was a *good man*. The church-community is not anymore sacred in itself, like it was since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when its building was considered as the only way to do the right thing on earth. At this time, the utopian constructions of the churches-communities were considered as pieces of the kingdom of God on earth, so-called "New Jerusalem". Now, every single Jesus' friend has its own autonomy, and is free to travel all around the world – or at least all around the free Pentecostal and Charismatic churches of the islands – as a lonely soldier of God. Its duty is not anymore to fulfil the future of the church-community, but to participate to the great battle for the conquest of Christianity. Jesus is often described as a captain, and the metaphor of warriors for Christians is sometimes used, as well as weapon for evangelisation. By the way, Ego is earning some prestige in a different way: By being free to talk to others, to tell his own intimacy with Jesus, he pretends to be the partner of a supernatural hero. But the stake of this intimacy is to be able to evangelize as much as possible, that is to say to distribute all around him the grace of God that he personally receives from the Holy Ghost. Indeed, the social prestige of the Jesus' friends depends on this distribution of grace. Such a distributive capacity makes the *Jesus' friend* much closer to the *big man* than the *good man*...

*Jesus' friends* have finally obliged the traditional churches-communities to re-evaluate themselves. The churches of the Brethren and of the Lutherans could not be anymore the same. Forced by the indirect effect of *Jesus' friends*, they have to reinvent themselves, to reconsider their position in the society, that is to say their organisation, their way of leadership, their liturgy, their style, the status they gave to women, and so on. Thus, they have to question themselves about their future and policy. This inevitably leads to conflicts, scissions and new competitions between the communities.

But another new aspect within the Faroese society, induced by the action of the *Jesus' friends*, is the progressive influence of a radical Christianity. Little by little, the Faroese society experiences a new division between the Christians and the Seculars, about new debates: the status of women, abortion, homosexuality and the rights for Gays and Lesbians, the teaching of creationism or Darwinism in public schools...

Christophe Pons  
IDEMEC