

Chapter 25. Marcel Légaut - "The Unthinkable Convergence"

While working on *La Clef des Songes*, Grothendieck became acquainted with the works of the Christian philosopher Marcel Légaut. He was profoundly inspired by them, and they gave his own thoughts and the writing of *La Clef des Songes* a new direction. The books he read were *L'homme à la recherche de son humanité* and *Introduction à l'intelligence du passé et de l'avenir du christianisme*. Grothendieck first wrote about Légaut, whom he had apparently just "discovered", in May or June and also early July 1987. He calls Légaut a "true spiritual elder brother" and speaks of his "exceptional clarity", "spiritual autonomy" and "prophetic message". He recognizes a kindred spirit in Légaut and writes (*La Clef des Songes*, section 37) under the heading "The Unthinkable Convergence":

What struck me the most when reading Légaut, right from the first book, and with mind-blowing power (the word is not too strong) when beginning thesecond, is the extraordinary convergence of two life experiences and two worlds of thought, which to all appearances knew nothing of each other, and had never crossed paths. [...] The convergence of paths strikes me all the more because it is a truly unusual event, almost miraculous, *providential*. This feeling of "providence" was gripping as soon as I began to read "*L'Intelligence du christianisme*" [...].

These words might lead us to believe that Grothendieck at first knew nothing about Légaut's life, but focused above all on the "spiritual convergence". In fact, however, the "convergence" goes much further: Légaut had also originally been a mathematician, and during his lifetime had put into practice many of the things to which Grothendieck aspired.

Marcel Légaut (1900-1990) attended the elite university *École Normale Supérieure*, and after completing his studies he was a mathematics professor at the Universities of Nancy, Rennes and Lyon. Shaken by World War II, he gave up his secure career as a university professor at the age of forty in order to live on a lonely farm as a mountain farmer and sheep breeder in Haut-Diois in the Alpine foothills. He married, had six children, meditated on his Christian faith and his calling, and led a "spiritual" life.

After more than twenty years of reflection, he decided to write down his thoughts, meditations and message in the books mentioned above and several more. They show him to be neither a theologian nor a philosopher in the actual sense, but rather someone who penetrated deeply into human nature and man's position in the world from his own personal perspective. A "Christian thinker" is probably the most accurate way to describe him in a couple of words. In spite of his criticism of the church he did not turn away from it: loyalty to the (often questionable and contestable) institution of the church is an essential part of his message. His books were translated into many languages. Although he did not become truly famous, he attracted a large following, a "community" that formed itself around him. There can be no doubt that through his writings and the example of his life he led the way for many people.

It seems to the author that even people who are distant from the church, indifferent to religion and even dedicated nonbelievers and atheists can absorb, understand, accept,

and embrace parts of Légaut's message to a certain degree. This is linked to the fact that he addresses human nature and destiny in a very thorough, clear, and direct manner, and in a language that everyone can comprehend. It is also because both Légaut's life and his works appear unusually coherent - "cast from a single mold" - and are therefore extraordinarily convincing. With him one may find certainty and repose, and one is inclined to trust his words.

In contrast, in Grothendieck's life we see agitation, fractures and contradictions, and instability in regard to very simple human issues and relationships, which make it difficult - perhaps even sometimes impossible - to penetrate his world of thought. Légaut leads to consensus, Grothendieck to contradiction.

In any case, Grothendieck was so impressed by Légaut that *La Clef des Songes* developed in the direction of an analysis of religion, of belief, of spiritual life, and the workings of God in individual human beings. Let us quote a few of his remarks on Légaut:

19.6.87: In the last few days I have had the joy of discovering the book *L'homme à la recherche de son humanité* by Marcel Légaut, and I believe that in the author I recognize a true spiritual "elder brother"¹. Led by Christian inspiration, this book testifies to a remarkable inner freedom, exceptional clarity and at the same time the experience of a spiritual life and a depth of religious vision, which I am very far from reaching.

29./30.6.87: Légaut himself, with visionary clarity, but also with extreme rigor and humility, shows the path to renewal - not the path of a herd of the "faithful" to a dead message, but the one to which every believer in Jesus must sooner or later come in the course of their life, in the secrecy of their heart and in being true to him or herself.

18.7.87: I have had plenty of opportunity in the last weeks to return to the message of Marcel Légaut, which is of unique importance for the world of today in the throes of its spiritual downfall.

After reading his books, Grothendieck wanted to meet Légaut in person. Légaut did not live far off, and on November 6, 1987 Grothendieck visited him for two hours. A footnote on this subject can be found in *Notes pour la Clef des Songes*. They did not develop a closer acquaintance however; Légaut was already 87 at this time.

Pierre Cartier believes² that Grothendieck and Légaut had already met in the fifties, on the occasion of a Bourbaki meeting which took place in the Alps in Pelvoux-le-Poët. Légaut, who lived at no great distance, was acquainted with Henri Cartan, André Weil and other members of Bourbaki. Cartier remembers that he himself visited Légaut at the time, and recalls Légaut actually attending the Bourbaki meeting.

¹ In the original *ainé*, a key word in the Grothendieckian world.

² Oral communication



Caption: “Légaut, a professor of mathematics who became a sheep-herder! A man who, through his passionate belief, meditated for thirty years, has now broken his silence. A book of the kind that appears only once in a generation.” Paris Match, on the French bestseller.