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# **Evangelical Protestantism in France: An Example of Denominational Recomposition?**

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In describing Christianity in France, history and sociology have had lasting difficulties escaping from the “sect-church” dichotomy. The heavy dominance of Catholicism is one possible explanation. In contrast to the American situation, which may be characterized by a competitive religious market in which religions are structured in various “denominations,” the French religious economy seems to be defined as a religiously dry and very secularized context. Today, with the decline of churches, the dominant trend would be the disintegration of religion, instead of its revitalization. This process is said to take two forms: “religious bricolage” or narrow sectarian belonging. The experience of French evangelical Protestantism, however, invites us to question this interpretative scheme.

Beginning with a historical overview, we call into question the notion that evangelical Protestantism in its French context is solely indicative of religious decline. Further, we will ask: does the study of French

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evangelicalism suggest that a restructuring of French religion is at work on a denominational basis? And, if so, does such a conclusion invite us to relativize the gap—which has been quite considerable in the past—between both French and American religious cultures?

“The White House [has been] taken hostage by a fundamentalist sect” (Mercier 2003: 44). This kind of comment, found in the columns of a major weekly, Catholic friendly magazine is quite revealing of the French perception of religion. The president of the United States is not portrayed as a church member, because the word “church” is too positive a term for what the journalist wishes to say about the American President. Thus, he is shown as being under the influence of a “sect” (or “cult”), the kind of which is synonymous with bad religion. The “church-sect” dichotomy is characteristic of the French way of seeing religion. This might partly explain why Ernst Troeltsch’s approach of religion has only been discovered in the 1980s, decades after Max Weber’s sociology (Seguy, 1980). While Weber usually favoured a dual approach of religious structures (church/sect) familiar to the French, Ernst Troeltsch adopted a more nuanced view: he included the mystic type and the “Free church” model.

In France, historians and sociologists have long had difficulties escaping from this church/sect paradigm in their characterization of Christianity. The dominant weight of Catholicism, the quintessence of the church type, is probably not foreign to this phenomenon. While the American religious milieu may be described as a competitive market with a variety of products organized into denominations, the French landscape is characterized by a relative scarcity of religious products in a very secularized context (Hervieu-Léger 1999a). With churches fast losing ground, today’s dominant trend would not be “recomposition” but the “decomposition” of religion under two main shapes: religious “bricolage” (i.e., do-it-yourself religion) or sectarian withdrawal (Champion & Cohen 1999). In this scenario, evangelical churches fit the sectarian type of decomposition.

Studied with its history in mind, however, French evangelical Protestantism<sup>1</sup> leads us to question such an interpretation. This religious actor has developed its strategies and networks since the nineteenth century and at present totals approximately 350,000 members. This implantation did not slow down a general trend toward secularization. However, does it merely constitute a symptom of religious decomposition? These dynamics of religious restructuring might also relativize the long standing gap between American and French religious cultures.

## **A NEW RELIGIOUS ACTOR IN FRANCE? HISTORICAL SURVEY**

Evangelical Christianity, which required two centuries to take root in France, germinated as the context transitioned from a closed and hostile religious market to a much more open spiritual marketplace with a plurality of options. This scenario is quite similar to the pluralization of the “religious Economy” that took place much earlier in America described by Fink and Stark (1992) and Nathan Hatch (1989).

### *From 1802 to First World War: The Dawning of a New Culture*

In religious terms, the nineteenth century in France—or more precisely, the period from the Concordat (1801-1802) to First World War (1914-1918)—may be characterized as a slow learning process of religious pluralism in a controlled religious market where the state played a pivotal role. Until 1905 the state financed Catholicism, Lutheran and Reformed Protestantism, and Judaism to the exclusion of all other confessions. It is in this context and period that evangelical Protestantism developed and came to be typified by a notable feature:

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<sup>1</sup> By evangelical Protestantism we mean the brand of Christianity which emphasizes personal conversion, activism, biblical conservatism and the centrality of the Cross (cf. Bebbington 1989: 2-17; Bebbington, Noll, and Rawlyck 1994: 6).

it was an unrecognized ultra-minority group. Nonetheless, it succeeded in establishing plausibility structures that enabled it to express a new religious culture based on individual choice, voluntary militancy, and refusal of the state church system.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the European context was still one of religious confessions, where identities were linked to geographic territories and collective heritage. The State regulated the special relationships it intended to nurture with the main recognized religious confessions. In France, the “concordatary game” (Basdevant-Gaudemet 1988) regulated the “controlled pluralism” of the recognized religious confessions. The term “concordatary” refers to the the Concordat, a special law drawn up in 1801 between the Vatican and the French State, which gave new public privileges to the Catholic church (priests received State salaries). Later an extension of this system was applied to the Reformed and Lutheran Protestants (1802) and to the Jews (1808 ): according to this system, which points to a “first stage of laicization” (Baubérot:1990), Protestantism was officially “reintegrated” after over a century of persecution (Encrevé 1985). Until 1905, Protestant ministers were paid by the State (like Jewish and Catholic priests) and their social role was broadly recognized.

However, a wall of separation was built between the *established* (concordatary religion) and the *outsiders* (often described as “non-recognized” or “dissenters” cf. Fath 2001a:1043-1061). In the same way the “*established*” and the “*outsiders*” studied by Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson (1965) in the Winston Parva community, the concordatary Christians and the non-concordatary, or unrecognized religious groups, rapidly became distinct poles, affirming their distinctives on each side of a line of separation born by the “concordatary game.” It is among the non-concordatary and the non-recognized Protestants that the French proto-evangelical movement appears. At the beginning of the nineteenth century this tendency

gathered a few Quakers (Van Etten 1947), Moravians, Anabaptists (Séguy 1977); and after the Geneva Revival (1817-20), it was reinforced along with the whole of French Protestantism by reinstating personal conversion and the inspiration of the Bible as central beliefs of what became evangelical Christianity (Wemyss 1977). The growth of international Protestant mission work also encouraged the development of new churches such as Methodist and Baptist churches in France (Fath 2001a, 2002) during the first third of the nineteenth century. In spite of discrimination linked to their non-concordatary status (Baubérot 1966; Fath, 2001b), evangelical dissenters focused on conversion, and biblicism grew up gradually until the onset of the twentieth century. At this point, this movement enjoyed full religious freedom thanks to the establishment of the Third Republic (1875) and the separation of churches and state (1905). Warmly welcomed by evangelical Protestants (Baubérot:2004), this separation granted the same status to all confessions and cancelled the former system. Religion was no longer State funded, and the former distinction between “official religions” and “dissident religions” was no longer valid.

In spite of the long Catholic resistance, which cultivated an “obsession for unity” up until the 1870’s (Sacquin 1997), along with a certain reticence in “established” Protestant circles, the religious market had notably diversified at the opening of the twentieth century (cf. Deming and Hamilton 1993). The rare French evangelical Protestants—comprised mostly of Baptists, Methodists, Brethren Assemblies and Free Churches and reinforced by a large reformed current—succeeded during this period in affirming the traits of a new religious culture based on choice rather than tradition, on the community of believers (professing churches) rather than on a mass institution, on local democracy rather than on vertical authority. The success of the Salvation Army’s implantation from 1881 on (Allner 1994; Kirchleger 2003), something unimaginable fifty years before, illustrates this turning point.

Even an area like Brittany (Bretagne) characterized by an age old Catholic monopoly counted a dozen evangelical communities at the onset of the twentieth century (Carlier 1991, 1993).

#### *Networks Consolidated (1921-1965)*

After First World War, it is estimated that evangelical Protestants numbered over 25,000, as opposed to only 15,000 (*stricto sensu* professing churches) in 1848. This growth took place in a dispersed fashion. The deficit of institutions, a distinctive mark of “protestant precariousness” (Willaime 1992), is particularly obvious in these evangelical groups. Isolation and dispersion dominated in spite of different interdenominational works such as the MacAll Mission<sup>2</sup> (Morley 1993). The founding of an evangelical Protestant interdenominational Bible institute in 1921 at Nogent-Sur-Marne, was a direct reaction to the lack of an evangelical network. The creation of the Bible institute marked a new turning point attributable to Jeanne and Ruben Saillens (cf. Saillens 1948), a couple who played a considerable role in Protestant evangelism between the end of the nineteenth century and the Second World War. With this institute, French evangelical Protestants were equipped for the first time with a durable inter-evangelical institution. Tens of students each year received training there in order to enter pastoral, evangelistic, or missionary ministry; and the evangelical theology and professing ecclesiology acquired at Nogent Bible Institute had a considerable impact on further development of churches. From 1921 to 1965, the Nogent Institute was the main hub of the French evangelical movement. It is not surprising that most of the evangelical parachurch ministries that were created later established their headquarters and offices at Nogent.

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<sup>2</sup> This mission owes its name to Rev. Robert Whitaker MacAll (1821-1893), who opened several missionary posts in French towns beginning in 1872.

Whereas the first decades of the twentieth century were marked by the “end of parish civilization” (Hervieu-Léger and Champion 1986), as Yves Lambert (1985) has shown in the parish of Limerzel in Brittany, networks of converted evangelicals structured in “elective fraternities” (Hervieu-Léger 2000) began to branch out. In the span of forty years, the evangelical landscape became diversified, all the while developing its networks. Pentecostals entered the scene from the 1920s (e.g., the Apostolic Church) to the 1930s (e.g., the Assemblies of God; Stotts 1981; Jeter 1993; Pfister 1995), independent evangelical Reformed Churches came out from the unified Reformed Church of France in 1938 (Longeiret 2003), and American evangelical mission boards initiated works in France after 1945. A European Bible institute was founded in Chatou in 1952 and later moved to the Lamorlaye Castle, which was purchased by Greater Europe Mission. During forty years, the over a thousand students studied Bible and music there (cf. Lamorlaye 2000). In a different setting, the “Groupes Bibliques Universitaires” (University Bible Groups), founded in 1943 in France by the Swiss René Pache (1904-1979), gave voice to evangelical identity among students in concert with the existing Christian student outreach works. Many other networks were built during this period, weaving a net that connected the evangelical archipelago more and more. This networking went along with numerical growth which, by the early 1960s, totaled approximately 100,000 evangelicals in France and attracted new attention from observers (Chéry 1954; Séguy 1956).

### *The Last **Forty-five** Years: a New Visibility*

From 1960 to 2005, the French religious market has continued to diversify in the context of globalization and consumer society deployment. Religion in France is now lived out on the pilgrim and convert mode (Hervieu-Léger 1999): the consumer of religious goods intends to choose between different spiritual products and the appropriation of religion is

related to a personal decision (conversion) and no longer to the passive acceptance of a tradition. This period is marked by accelerated secularization, although evangelicals seem to escape partially this trend.<sup>3</sup> Over the last forty years, evangelicals have grown from 100,000 to nearly 350,000, with a large portion of the growth coming from Pentecostals (200,000), Baptists (40,000), Charismatics (Veldhuizen 1995), members of Brethren Assemblies, independent evangelicals, Mennonites, Methodists and many others should not be overlooked. Whereas the Catholic Church has had to close seminaries, evangelical Protestants on their part had to answer increased demand for training. The creation of the Free Faculty of Evangelical Theology in Vaux-sur-Seine (Faculté Libre de Théologie Evangélique), inaugurated in 1965, and the opening of the Free Reformed Theology Seminary at Aix-en-Provence in 1974 (Faculté Libre de Théologie Réformée) are the result of this increased demand.

Unfortunately, this period is still poorly documented, though one of its characteristics is a new visibility. In the second half of the twentieth century, French society has taken much more notice of evangelical networks and activity. Many had thought of this new culture as a something unique to the United States, but they are surprised to discover that, for instance, in

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<sup>3</sup> Today, 46% of the French population has been baptized in the first months of life, down from 83% in 1968. According to the Catholic National Service of Catechism (Service National du Caéchuménat), 2335 Catholic adults were baptized in 2002. There are no centralized statistics for evangelicals, but if we take into account the number of evangelical assemblies in France (around 1800), and the fact that 90% of French evangelicals practice only adult baptism, 3000 adult baptisms per year would be a low estimate. If conversion and adult baptism become mainstream, what will the long term consequences of these figures be on the French religious landscape?

a city like Montpellier<sup>4</sup> there are four times more evangelical assemblies than Reformed ones. And in dozens of French cities, the only French Protestant churches are evangelical.

Billy Graham's French campaign in 1986 (Baubérot 1988; Fath 2004b), strongly supported by the French historian and Sorbonne Professor Pierre Chaunu, was one of the large media events meant to publicize evangelical presence in France. The Evangelical Alliance has multiplied such spectacular events in the last 25 years: Charles Colson's visit in Paris in 1980, the "Fête de l'Évangile" (Gospel Celebration) in the arena of Nîmes in 1980, the astronaut James Irwin's visit in 1984 (Paris and province), the "Fête de la Jeunesse" (Youth Festival, in 1985 at the Parc Floral in Vincennes), "Mission France" with Billy Graham (1986, Paris and province), "Fêtons l'Évangile" ("Celebrate the Gospel;" 1996, Nîmes arena, with 10,000 participants), a seminar on prayer with Pablo Martinez (1997 province), "Mondial sport et foi" (a World Sports and Faith meeting, in Paris and province), "Pentecost 2000" (an interdenominational youth rally in Valence).

At the same time, evangelical representatives are taking a more active and prominent part in the French Protestant Federation (whose role is also increasing among French Protestant Churches). We can name in particular André Thobois and Louis Schweitzer who were respectively vice-president and secretary general of the FPF and more recently the pentecostal leader Christian Seytre, [still secretary general of the FPF in 2005](#). The "Legion of Honor" (Légion d'Honneur),<sup>5</sup> a State honorary distinction granted to André Thobois, a leading figure of evangelicalism in France after 1945 is another sign, on a symbolic level, that the Protestant Federation of France and the French society at large are taking into account the presence and input of evangelical Protestants. At a more general level, several publications,

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<sup>4</sup> During the XVIth Century, Montpellier was for a time dominated by the Huguenots.

<sup>5</sup> This honorary distinction was delivered at Massy (Baptist Pastoral School) by the Reformed pastor Jacques Maury, former FPF president, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of november, 2001.

such as two special issues of *L'unité des Chrétiens* (1984, 1994) or a generalist work by the Dominican Father Philippe Larère (1991) point out that the evangelical movement is being taken seriously at the end of the twentieth century. This visibility, or “actuality” of French speaking evangelical Protestantism (Sinclair 2002), has been translated into an exponential growth in academic studies of this field: three social sciences conferences were devoted to this subject during 2001 and 2002 in Lausanne, Paris and Strasbourg (cf. Campiche 2002; Fath 2004a; Bastian 2004).

## **A RESULT OF RELIGIOUS DECOMPOSITION?**

Development of evangelical Protestantism in France remains marginal. With a total of 350,000 people at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it represents about 0.5% of the French population. However, its new visibility fuels certain questions that touch the entire French religious field. One prevalent interpretation tends to understand this development as the result of the decomposition of traditional religious forms which come in three different modes: the sect, the unadapted graft (transplant) or the communitarian niche.

### *First Hypothesis: Sects Locked Up in a Refusal of Modernity*

As a voluntary association of religiously qualified individuals, the sect constitutes a type of religious socialization that is as old as religion. By itself it does not imply the decomposition of religion. Nevertheless, in a specific context of secularized modernity, research on sects, cults and new religious movements tends to examine the sect or cult hypothesis as an alteration of social forms inherited from the major churches. This perspective is addressed by Danièle Hervieu-Léger, who associated the notion of “religion in shreds” (i.e., decomposition) with the “issue of sects” (1999b). Without specifically mentioning evangelicals, Hervieu-Léger develops the idea that the “proliferation” of religious

products can induce “drift trends” in which individuals lose their autonomy, even in major religious traditions (1999b:173-178). This trend is especially observable in voluntary groups where the degree of involvement becomes too intense, or where the leader’s charismatic authority is too strong for the adherent to maintain “the sense of ordinary realities” (Hervieu-Léger:176).

With its emphasis on militant involvement, defiance of institutional regulations and the favorable welcome it offers to charismatic leaders, evangelical Protestantism is not exempt from certain sectarian drifts. In fact, the French social debate has sometimes singled out a specific evangelical community. Even though public actors have never identified evangelical Protestantism as a monolithic sectarian movement, the actors of the anti-sect movement have sometimes categorized certain evangelical assemblies as sectarian. This is true of the Pentecostal Church of Besançon (Amiotte-Suchet 1999), which has been listed on a government “sect list” made up of 173 groups indexed by a parliamentary committee (Assemblée Nationale 1996). In turn, this has led the church to carry out complex strategies of legitimization (Fath 2001c). In a general way, French pentecostalism holds certain specificities, which include the importance of pastoral charismatic authority, that sometimes seem favorable to certain sectarian drifts (Fath 2001d). The possibility of authoritarian excesses of the pastor and the classical counter-cultural aspects of pentecostalism (e.g., social strike thesis; cf. Lalive d’Epinay 1970, 1975; Corten 1995) fuel the anti-modern sect hypothesis. But the charismatic and pentecostal circles are not the only suspects. A fundamentalist institution that is very isolated from other actors in the French evangelical world has also been singled out: the Theological Institute in the city of Nîmes.<sup>6</sup> The Institute

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<sup>6</sup> Before being singled out as “sectarian”, this institute stayed away from all evangelical networks. It is interesting to note that it did not even establish relations with French

is mentioned in the same 1996 parliamentary report and took the opportunity to transform this very local affair into a broader campaign against religious politics in France, which was considered, against all evidence, to be intolerant. Strongly echoed in the United States, the loud complaints of pastor DeMeo<sup>7</sup> have not kept the large majority of French evangelical Protestants, even the most fundamentalist and isolated, from enjoying total freedom in their country, in spite of a French cultural difficulty to welcome religious diversity.<sup>8</sup> The very specific case of DeMeo's church, which could be correlated with some other cases, leads to the conclusion that the hypothesis interpreting certain aspects of evangelical growth as a form of sectarian refuge remains valid in part.

*Second Hypothesis: Culturally Unadapted Transplants*

Another hypothesis identifies evangelical growth as a culturally unadapted transplant. Here evangelicalism is seen as an exogenous disruption of the traditional French religious field. If this train of thought does not seem prevalent among sociologists and anthropologists, fundamentalist networks such as the CEBI (Communion d'Eglises Baptistes Indépendantes), which already was acculturated in France.

<sup>7</sup> In June, 1999, DeMeo spoke at an OSCE hearing on "Religious Freedom in Western Europe: Religious Minorities and Growing Government Intolerance." DeMeo's church is affiliated with the controversial, US-based Greater Grace World Outreach (GGWO). Greg Robertson, who is also associated with GGWO, is involved with Scientology's Cult Awareness Network.

<sup>8</sup> This aspect of French culture explains partly why the French parliament passed anti-sect legislation in early summer 2001. This controversial law raised many concerns within evangelical (and other Protestant) circles. [Four](#) years later, no localized forms of intolerance can be linked to this law; however, more time is needed to evaluate its impact.

it seems to be found more frequently among historians. Some of them, like Patrick Cabanel, consider the historical link between Lutheran and French Reformed Protestantism and the evangelical current to be problematic: “These last, who come into pentecostal churches through conversion and re-birth (sometimes celebrated by a new baptism), have perhaps nothing more in common with ‘historical’ Protestants than a label or a fluctuating Federation: the two groups share neither the same faith, nor the same history” (Cabanel 2000:29). In a more nuanced manner, André Encrevé underlines that the “majority of their publications in the areas of doctrine, church matters or spirituality find their origin in Anglo-Saxon publications. They naturally carry their mark and are not always adapted to the French situation of a minority Protestantism” (Encrevé 2001:219-220).

It is a fact that French evangelical Protestantism owes a great deal to the Anglo-Saxon world and especially the American world after 1945. The affirming of an evangelical *via media* on the American scene (Noll 2001) had as corollary an expansion of missionary enterprises in Europe, which directly influenced France. At the onset of the seventies, Robert Vajko offered the following statistics: forty-eight American missions (or societies) established themselves in France with a work force of 378 missionaries (Vajko 1970:233). The proportion becomes even stronger over the thirty following years. Never has the American evangelical imprint been as visible as it was in the sixties when dozens of American missions began works in France or took on works previously accomplished by European missions.<sup>9</sup>

Among the missions that received the best welcome, Allen V. Koop mentions the Gospel Missionary Union (welcomed by the Free Churches), the Alpine Mission (welcomed by the Brethren Assemblies), the Mennonite Alliance (welcomed by the French Mennonite

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<sup>9</sup> This is the case of the Alpine Mission (Reeves 2000).

assemblies) and the Southern Baptist Convention<sup>10</sup> (welcomed by the Federation of French Baptist Churches). In many of these initiatives efficient cooperation seems to have been established thereby satisfying both “the American and the French” (Koop 1986:176). In other cases, however, relationships between American missions and their “welcoming society” (including evangelical fields) were sometimes relatively problematic. In some instances, dependency habits developed, which were not seen in a positive light by some specialists of local “autonomous” church evangelism (Liechti 1997). Moreover, the considerable impact of parachurch organizations such as Youth for Christ, Operation Mobilization (OM), and Youth with a Mission or Campus for Christ<sup>11</sup> in France, as well as the financial support of American evangelical publishers whose products are massively translated into French, led to the hypothesis of a silent cultural crisis for French evangelical Protestantism at the beginning of the 1960s. This crisis is exemplified by the fact that many evangelicals at the end of the twentieth century did not choose to use the term “Protestant” when defining themselves in a sociological survey conducted by Solange Wydmush (1995). At the end of the nineteenth century, however, it would have been very rare for the Baptists, Methodists, Free Church members or Brethren to refuse the “Protestant” label. This difference is an unmistakable sign of a hiatus between the evangelical experience of the second half of the twentieth century, which puts forth “American style” references sometimes disconnected from the French context, and the objective historical and cultural insertion of the evangelical movement in French Protestantism.

### *Third Hypothesis: Communitarian Niches for Marginalized Populations*

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<sup>10</sup> This welcome happened before the SBC’s fundamentalist turn which started in 1979.

<sup>11</sup> This movement implanted in France in 1972. It has chosen Agape as name.

A final hypothesis that can lead to interpreting evangelical growth in France as a symptom of religious decomposition is to stress the function of evangelical assemblies as refuges of transitory communities. This hypothesis is close to the first one, but it softens the sectarian dimension by insisting on community dynamics. In this view, which is close to theories found in the American religious marketplace, evangelical churches appear as places of community for transitional populations that are on the margins of a society into which they intend (or not) to fit. Although it remains generally undocumented, the strong growth of ethnic churches invites support for this hypothesis. The multiplication of Caribbean churches in the Paris area (Girondin 2003), African churches and Korean churches (Kim 2002) indicates that religion in an evangelical mode works as an efficient means of building community for populations in immigration situation or in diaspora.

These communities cover evangelical militancy with ethnic cement. Ethnic and cultural homogeneity often seem to win out over mixity, much like what takes place in the United States (Dougherty 2003). Certain churches entertain institutional links with other Christian actors. This is the case of the Mission Evangelique Tzigane (MET or Evangelical Mission among Gypsies), a subgroup which is comprised of 70,000 believers. The MET is affiliated with the Fédération Protestante de France (French Protestant Federation). The Communauté des Eglises Africaines en France (CEAF, a Fellowship of African Churches in France) also answers this need. The CEAF intends to homogenize the procedures that regulate different member churches and seeks to stimulate a training dynamic (at the Faculté de Vaux-sur-Seine) with an insertion in the Protestant global reality (Bulangalire 2000). However, many ethnic communities, especially those founded after 1970, have little or no formal contacts with the rest of French Protestantism. This “community niche” phenomenon is classic in the US (Emerson and Smith 2000), but it is seen with suspicion in France because of France’s republican tradition which is hostile to intermediary communities. These niches

are considered religious vectors of social control and a potential threat to what is expected today of religious correctness: diversity, tolerance and openness. Many observers are perplexed, such as Xavier Ternisien of the daily paper *Le Monde*, who said “The Afro-Christian churches consider France as an evangelistic field.” While attending a service at a religious complex in La Plaine Saint Denis, where thousands of African believers meet together, he spoke of this phenomenon as a real “Harlem-sur-Seine” (Harlem-by-the-Seine; Ternisien 2001).

## **A DENOMINATIONAL RECOMPOSITION**

Whether it is in sectarian form, exogenous transplants or communitarian niches, some aspects of evangelical Protestantism do indeed appear as a symptom of decomposition of the French traditional religious framework. However, several broad traits of French evangelical culture also compel us to focus our attention on important dynamics of religious recomposition at work in French evangelicalism.

### *Structured Networks*

If it is evident that Max Weber’s and Ernst Troeltsch’s “sect” type does adequately describe the religious framework of evangelical assemblies, it is no less evident that most French evangelical groups are far from religious autarchy. The networks that have developed since the 1920s account for a major dimension of evangelical identity. The French section of the Evangelical Alliance (AEF), which plays an important coordinating role, was reinstated in 1953 under the leadership of the pastor Jean-Paul Benoît. The creation of the Fédération Evangélique de France (FEF-French Evangelical Federation) on March 22, 1969 also

participated in the networking dynamic.<sup>12</sup> Its starting position was clearly fundamentalist, counter-cultural and eager to build a rampart against “bad” influences. However, the federative logic (i.e., the necessity of integrating a certain amount of internal diversity) brought more flexibility to the official discourse. By evolving gradually toward more dialogue and more multilateral orientation, the FEF has strengthened its ties with the French Evangelical Alliance (AEF). Today these two main evangelical networks have defined a common platform.<sup>13</sup> This has led to the creation on January 7, 2002 of the “Conseil National des Evangéliques en France” (National Council of French Evangelicals; a temporary name).

Another important network that brings together evangelicals of all varieties (e.g., fundamentalists, open pietists, charismatics, and pentecostals) is the CEIA. The Centre Evangélique d’Information et d’Action (CEIA or the Evangelical Center for Information and Action) was founded after a meeting of 21 personalities of evangelical Protestantism—among them was Jacques Blocher (1909-1986) and Jules-Marcel Nicole (1907-1997)—in July 1948. Since its inception, this effort has aimed at making known, through a regular publication and annual meetings, the French evangelicalism to evangelicals and outsiders. After a timid start, the CEIA gradually revealed itself as the indispensable place of meeting for evangelicals. It also served a few years later as a matrix for the creation of an Association des Eglises de Professants (Association of Professing Churches) in Orthez, on March 19-20, 1957. For a sociologist, the annual CEIA meetings at Lognes (near Paris) are much like a fascinating

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<sup>12</sup> The FEF was originally called “L’union des Eglises et Assemblées Evangéliques Françaises.” It took its new title in November 1969; see *Notre position face à certains problèmes actuels*, Paris: FEF.

<sup>13</sup> As secretary general of the French Evangelical Alliance, Stéphane Lauzet initiated this idea at the CEIA in Lognes in November 2000. Several subsequent meetings have led to defining the objectives more precisely.

evangelical supermarket where all the churches, organizations, associations set up their stands, over several thousand square meters in large exhibition halls. Evangelical network activism, which can be observed internally in each denomination, points to an essential trait: the refusal of an institutional structure of church does not imply that religious socialization is narrowly situated in only one association or autarchic community, as Nancy Ammerman (1997), among others, has emphasized. The number and efficiency of supra-local networks is proof enough. Networks of lay people or associations may appear as structuring by default in other religious cultures (such as Catholicism) where religious decomposition has affected the central institution; in the case of evangelical Protestants, however, networking has been a valid organizational mode in operation since the beginning of their development. *In the French case, this emphasis corrects the sectarian tendencies in three ways: by providing external regulation (formalized or not) to the congregations, by encouraging diversity and circulation, and by strengthening the churches' ability to get involved in the global society's debates.*

#### *Militant Interaction with French Society*

Another obvious dimension of evangelical socialization is that it develops “groups and conviction networks of militant persons in interaction with global society” (Willaime 2001:76). If certain isolated groups and other culturally disconnected groups can be observed, most French evangelicals seem to be strongly engaged with their society and their own national culture. French evangelicals massively educate their children in the public school system contrary to American evangelicals who often choose to educate their children in private institutions or at home. *Even if they tend to favour solidary networks of transnational individuals instead of investing in the political or cultural dimension (Willaime, 2004), French evangelicals are nonetheless characterized by a growing involvement in ethical*

debates, mainly through an interdenominational pressure group, the CPDH<sup>14</sup>, created in 1999. Their public positions are not always aligned with those of the Protestant mainstream churches (Lutheran and Reformed). However, this gap, similar to what can be observed in the United States between Evangelical groups and mainline churches, comes less from an isolated disconnectedness than from the choice of affirming values other than those socially acceptable (e.g., the issue of abortion or homosexuality).

The alleged cultural isolation from their French evangelical heritage due to post-1945 American missionary impact can also be relativized. First, American influence is far from being the only one: Korean and African, German, Swedish, Swiss, Dutch, British, missionaries are also at work in France, creating a cultural circulation in which European dynamics are more and more present (Campiche 2002). Second, many evangelical groups, such as Baptists and Methodists, existed in France long before the wave of American missions: Baptist churches were planted in France (1820) earlier than Baptist churches started in Texas... Third, even if huge events like Billy Graham's crusades have been broadly publicized, it does not mean that French evangelicals owe most of their growth to American missionaries. Far from it. The main impact of Billy Graham's campaigns in France has been in the media, not in the number of "conversions" (Fath, 2004b). The major part of the Evangelical growth in France since 1945 has occurred in pentecostal circles (mostly in Assemblies of God): this pentecostal growth accounts for about 60% of the Evangelical total in France today. Significantly, almost 100% of this development can be credited to French lay preachers, with no US help.

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<sup>14</sup> *Comité Protestant Évangélique pour la Dignité Humaine*: Evangelical Protestant Committee for the Defence of Human Dignity (CPDH).

Due to their specific past and environment, it is also easy to notice that most of French Evangelicals have maintained cultural boundaries quite distinct from their counterparts across the Atlantic. On an anthropological level, there is a “French way” of being an evangelical: in almost all French evangelical churches there is a time for spontaneous collective prayer during the Sunday worship service, different from what is seen in the United States (or in Great Britain). The large majority of French evangelicals also drink alcohol and wine, considering it as “biblical”<sup>15</sup> but also as a positive French cultural practice, whereas traditionally American evangelicals refrain from wine and alcohol drinking, though not without exception. French Evangelicals also enthusiastically practice the “brotherly kiss” at the beginning or at the end of the church service, which would be seen as odd in US evangelical churches. Furthermore, refusal of normative tradition does not totally keep their religious identity from the support of a “chain of memory” (Hervieu-Léger 2000). While French Evangelicals are showing an increasing interest in their own history, through the creation of historical societies<sup>16</sup>, they are more and more involved in traditional huguenot celebrations like the annual Désert Assembly in the Mas Soubeyran (Cévennes), on every first Sunday of September. A close look to the French evangelical map confirms a direct link with reformed and Lutheran settlements: the highest concentration of evangelical churches (Alsace, South of France) correlates with a past of strong Protestant presence, which means that a large proportion of evangelical converts share a Huguenot heritage.

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<sup>15</sup> The Biblical reference they favor is usually the Cana wedding banquet, where Jesus is alleged to change water into wine, not the contrary (*Gospel of John, chapter 2*).

<sup>16</sup> The oldest one has been created by the French Mennonites (the AFHAM). It publishes a periodical since 1982, *Souvenance Anabaptiste*. More recently, a French Baptist historical society (SHDBF) has been created in 2000.

Far from being bubbles impermeable to cultural exchange, for the most part French evangelical churches are engaged in multiple interactions with their environment. One **typical mode** of interaction is seen in their strong willingness to witness. In the French Baptist case (Fath 2001a, 2002) it is not insignificant to note that in spite of their ultra minority status, several Baptists became involved in politics (whether it be on the right or left) as soon as the Third Republic was born. There were town mayors in their ranks in regions such as Picardie, Bretagne, Nord (Frizon, Goulet, Collobert) and one Baptist even became a member of the French Parliament between 1907 and 1914 (Jean-Philéma Lemaire). More recently, the example of the second American war in Iraq (2003) is quite revealing. French evangelicals did not stay silent, nor did they adopt the dominant American position. They are not attracted to the idea of America as the New Israel waging war and doing justice, as are a majority of their American coreligionists. Among the first to sign a petition calling for a peaceful settlement in Iraq led by the Protestant weekly *Réforme* (February 2003) were the Presidents of the Baptist Federation, the Union of Independent Evangelical Reformed Churches and the Union of Free Evangelical Churches (Michel Charles, Claude Baty, Antoine Schlutchter). Also, the French Evangelical Alliance issued a statement on February 13, 2003 which began with a quotation from the Gospel<sup>17</sup> and then went on to criticize “force . . . blinded by power” and expressed the hope that “peace, in accord with evangelical priorities, may be substituted to preventive war and disastrous consequences for populations.”

#### *A Diverse, Plural and Competitive Religious Marketplace*

Finally, evangelical networks involved in French society show an acute sense of competitiveness and diversity in their product. No single group pretends to have a monopoly on salvation, but each church, organization and confession promotes its assets in the public

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<sup>17</sup> “Blessed are the peace makers, for they will be called sons of God” (Matthew 5:9).

arena. French evangelical Protestantism constructs, maintains and markets its subcultural identity. Competition and emulation belong to the mindset of a large majority of French evangelical groups. All the doctoral theses on the subject of French evangelicals have examined this orientation to varying degrees.

From their inception French evangelicals suffered from an overly uniform religious market. For example, Baptist pastor Samuel Farelly (1864-1939) exclaimed, “The pity in our country is that people think of Catholicism and Christianity as the one and same thing” (Farelly 1907:1). With the gradual pluralization of the French religious market, churches and evangelical organizations have entered into religious competition to the point that evangelicals are not far from having a quasi monopoly among French Protestants in direct evangelistic efforts. The evangelical type of church is an *ecclesia militans*, where diffuse and fluctuating religion is not frequent, but where a structured religion is presented as an alternative model. All the converts interviewed by David Bjork (2003) set forward this dimension. Contrary to many contemporary European believers (Davie 1994), French evangelicals consider that “believing is belonging”.

This positioning induces *ad extra* consequences (e.g., evangelism, publicity) as well as *ad intra* ones. In order to specify the product, the content must be precisely differentiated from one group to the other. Even if internal circulation between Pentecostals, Baptists, Brethren, Methodists, Mennonites and Charismatics is important, the respective options are clearly distinct. Thus it is not surprising to notice how lasting the extraordinary internal diversity in the French evangelical world is. This variety, which is far greater at the start of the twenty-first century than 150 years before, is not perceived by the actors themselves as a problem; rather it is seen as desirable and necessary. Each group’s plausibility structures (Berger 1967) are upheld by various frameworks. We can mention the press (there are over a

hundred evangelical Francophone publications), biblical conferences and conventions, training centers, youth rallies but also flexible supra-local institutions (federative structures).

## CONCLUSION

In spite of the strong tendency in Europe to “withdraw from religion” (Willaime 1996:312-313), evangelical development in France leads us to relativize—at least at the margins—the important gap between American and European religious cultures. There is no doubt a European specificity, which we could even describe as a “European exception” (Davie 2002). It is inherited from a religious history marked by the weight of religious monopolies handed down by the Peace of Augsburg (“Cujus Regio, Ejus Religio;” 1555). Today, however, this specificity is influenced by a particularly high degree of secularization (Delumeau 1977) and a twofold dynamic. We can observe on one hand deregulation or decomposition at work on traditional religious forms. Even if it fits in part, however, this way of seeing the French evangelical field cannot be summed up by such a neat definition. The 350,000 French evangelicals do not solely constitute a symptom religious decomposition. Through their networks, involvement in social questions and militant religious products, they also shed light on the important recomposition dynamics of religion in a “transition society” (Cook and Davie 1999). This restructuring takes place on a voluntary mode, based on association with a degree of competitive spirit in which militant networks win out over institutions. Because this restructuring is something internal to Protestantism (Willaime 2001b) does not mean it is without meaning in a global religious sphere. Bypassed by surveys such as the European Values System Study Group (1981, 1990, 2000) which neglect religious minority phenomena, it is quite revealing.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> One evangelical convert out of ten interviewed by David Bjork (2003) never received any religious instruction in childhood. Also, 66.7% of evangelical converts interviewed by David

Evangelical growth in France suggests that contemporary religious recomposition in Europe does not uniquely lead to a binary alternative between major institutional churches having to accomplish their *aggiornamento* and a “religion in shreds” (Hervieu-Léger 1999a), whether it is dispersed due to sectarian logic or personal religious “bricolage” logic. Christian Smith suggests that in America (1998) religious communities like evangelicals strengthen themselves in two ways: when they avoid disappearing into secular mainstream, which Smith believes is the fate liberal Protestantism has; and when they keep away from isolating themselves in sheltered communities, as Protestant fundamentalism has done (or “sects” in the French context). Between the poles of institutional church and sect, an intermediary model of religious socialization has emerged since the beginning of the nineteenth century, “a coalescence of traits taken from both types” (Séguy 1980:120). It can be compared to the “Free Church” profile (Troeltsch 1961) or to what we call denominations (Mc Guire 2002).<sup>19</sup>

These evangelical denominations make up a possible figure—still somewhat understudied in France—of current religious recomposition along side other groups which share common traits.<sup>20</sup> The evangelical case feeds the hypothesis of a transition in Europe

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Bjork during his Ph.D research are under thirty which confirms the findings of W. C. Roof who has observed that conservative Protestant churches have greater success in attracting Baby Boomers than any major religious tradition (Roof 1999).

<sup>19</sup> A denomination shares an important interaction with society with the church type, but contrary to the church, it accepts and claims a diversity of religious products without pretending to have monopoly salvation goods.

<sup>20</sup> It seems to us that different orientations of Judaism, Islam and perhaps to a lesser degree Buddhism would fit relatively well into the hypothesis of religious recomposition in Europe, one that is neither centralized or institutional (“church model”) nor dispersed (sect model or “à la carte”) but rather denominational.

from a tightly structured religious market dominated by the unbalanced church-sect couple, to a more open and competitive market in which several denominations (among other types of religious organizations) coexist.

Thus, not only is it necessary to examine how the United States are coming closer to the European secularized society type (Bruce 2002); it is just as important to be attentive to the rise of internal European religious dynamics and narratives familiar to North America (Ammerman, 2004:233). From this stand point, the field of evangelical Protestantism could be a valuable research avenue for a socio-genesis of denominations in Europe.

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