

Billy Graham's global impact on western continental Europe

The example of France

(preliminary paper)

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Billy Graham is without a doubt the most global American evangelist of the twentieth century. Supported by the BGEA, an evangelism multinational, he travelled the five continents for over half a century. It is no surprise that Continental Europe has been one of the main targets of his outreach. Isn't Europe the world's most secular continent ? For an evangelist who has always stressed the priority of reaching unbelievers, Europe was the ideal destination, and one of the most challenging. Among western European countries, France is not only the largest, but also the most secularized. This is why the French example is particularly revealing of the main issues Billy Graham faced in western Europe¹. Billy Graham visited France several times, and conducted three important crusades. This article will overview Billy Graham's impact in the country of Victor Hugo and Voltaire, and outline a few global hypothesis which could be valid for the whole of continental Europe.

A large panel of sources has been used for this research: a vast selection of articles from all the French press, available on microfilm for the 1954 -1986 period, was studied *in extenso* at the Billy Graham Center. This study was verified and confronted with press surveys conducted in France and the works pertaining to Billy Graham's French campaigns. Lastly this documentation was completed by some unpublished testimonies as well as by the few published studies on Billy Graham's campaigns in France. From this documentation Billy Graham's campaigns in France will be described as a strategic European target (I), which fueled revealing reactions from the French public (II). Last but not least, this French case might lead to broader conclusions regarding the religious and cultural evolutions of European society in the second half of the twentieth century (III).

I. One country, three big crusades: France, a strategic European target

Since the beginning of the XIXth Century, France has always appeared as an important strategic target for American Evangelicals involved in missionary work. "An evangelised France would stimulate all intelligent classes in Europe"² wrote Adoniram Judson in 1832, pleading for the start of a new Baptist outreach in the country of Voltaire and

¹ Eastern Europe, especially the soviet Bloc, in which Billy Graham penetrated for the first time in Hungary in 1977 (see Edward E. Plowman, « Graham and the Gospel : Welcome in Hungary », *Christianity Today*, vol 21, n°24, september 23, 1977, p.44-45) would be another subject (Before Hungary, Graham addressed rallies in Yugoslavia as early as 1967, but Yugoslavia was not considered Eastern Europe within the bloc).

² Adoniram Judson's letter to the American Missionary Committee (Howard Malcom), quoted in « Baptist Churches in France » (from a correspondent), *The Baptist Quarterly*, vol 14, 1951-52, p.184.

Lafayette. More than a century later, this quote could easily sound like something Billy Graham has said.

However, Billy Graham gives very few details about France in his autobiography. Not a word about his big 1955, 1963 and 1986 campaigns. But this does not mean that evangelizing France was not an important issue for the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. The fact is that in spite of its reputation of paganism and atheism, France has been specifically targeted, contrarily to many European countries which Graham never visited for a crusade. Among Billy Graham's European destinations, France's situation could be best described as "middle of the road". France obviously does not belong to the most favoured destinations. Two European countries share this status : no surprise if they are the two European Protestant giants, England (which Billy Graham visited ten different years) and Western Germany (which Billy Graham visited eight different years)³. But France neither belong to the less favoured European countries : Graham has never crusaded in Spain, Greece, Portugal, Ireland (Eire), Luxembourg or Austria. He has only crusaded once in Belgium (1954), Northern Ireland (1961) and in Italy (1967), and twice in Finland (1954, 1987), Switzerland (1955, 1960), Norway (1955, 1978), or Holland (1954, 1955).

Compared to most western European countries, France appears relatively privileged in terms of missionary interest, with four main visits, in 1954 (teaching visit), in 1955, 1963 and 1986 (crusades)⁴. Catholic France has been more visited than a hugely Protestant nation like Scotland⁵.

These four main visits were preceded by a few others as early as 1946 and 1947. Due to his early relationship with French Baptist pastor Jacques Blocher (1909-1986), Graham visited France as soon as December 1946, at the age of 28. He was then working as an evangelist for *Youth for Christ*, an organization created by Torrey Johnson in order to evangelize the younger post-World War generation. On the 17th of December, 1946, the meeting in the *Foyer de Belleville* gathered about 40 people. A few days later, the audience in Nîmes was quite similar. Difficult to imagine that 40 years later, the cumulated audience of his 1986 Crusade in France would amount to 100,000 people... However, the very first Graham's visit in France meant far more than small audiences. Even if Billy Graham knew almost nothing about France⁶, he used this time to start a networking effort which helped to create the conditions of further evangelistic outreach. Pastor Jacques Blocher, who was there at the start of Billy Graham's visits in France, was a major Evangelical figure, and the grandson of the most prominent pastor of French Evangelical history, Reuben Saillens (1855-1942). He was himself a very efficient promoter of Evangelical networks in France, having

³ According to the memorial book commissioned by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, Russ Bugsby, Billy Graham, God's ambassador, Alexandria, Time Life Books, 1999, « Crusades across Europe », Graham has crusaded in England in 1948, 1954, 1955, 1961, 1966, 1967, 1980, 1984, 1985, 1989. He also crusaded in West Germany in

⁴ In terms of visits, France shares a similar status as Sweden, with also four visits, in 1954, 1955, 1977, 1978.

⁵ Graham led crusades in Scotland in 1955, 1961, and 1991.

⁶ In his autobiography, Billy Graham candidly admits that he was very surprised to realize that the Bastille had been destroyed, because he intended to visit it with his wife ! (Billy Graham, *Just As I Am*, in the French version : *Tel que je suis. L'autobiographie de Billy Graham*, Avesne sur Helpe, Eternity Publishing House, 1997, p.122.

created or impulsed many organizations like the CEIA -Evangelical Center for Information and Action-⁷.

The fact that Graham and Blocher met at an early stage helped to create and stimulate intense networking activities between French Evangelicals and US Evangelicals. The Birmingham Conference is an example of this new dynamic. When the first Youth for Christ European conference in Europe was held in Birmingham (from March, the 26th to March the 28th, 1947), Billy Graham invited Jacques Blocher to assist. Jacques Blocher accepted, and joined the 250 delegates from many European countries. When pastor Blocher came back from this conference, he was convinced that a new evangelistic wave was coming to Europe, and that his generation had to play a major role in it. This background explains why, a few years later, many French Evangelical leaders, including Jacques Blocher in the first place, decided to invite Billy Graham as their guest for a major crusade in Paris.

With the aim of organizing this event, a meeting of preparation and teaching took place on the 30th of June, 1954, in the Palais de Chaillot (Paris). 2700 French-speaking pastors and leaders came together from France, Belgium and Switzerland, in order to get to know the personality, the message and the methods of the famous American evangelist.

The first major campaign led by Graham in France took place the next year, in 1955. It was held from the 5th of June to the 9th of June 1955 in the famous “Vel d’Hiv.” a very popular cycle racing track in Paris. An average of 8000 French spectators came every evening and 2000 decisions⁸ were made at the Vel d’Hiv. This campaign was characterized by its spectacular dimension, meticulous organization and rather tumultuous media coverage. “The preacher boy”, as the French press called him, created a sensation in the City of Light.

Seven years later, the second big campaign followed a similar logic. It took place from May 12 to May 26, 1963 in different cities in the country (Montauban, Douai, Paris, Nancy, Toulouse, Lyon, Mulhouse). In Paris, Billy Graham’s preaching and meetings took place under a large tent at the “Porte de Clignancourt”. It is estimated that about 45.000 persons gathered there to hear the evangelist and that 1200 commitments were made, with name and address given by the persons having gone forward at the evangelists’ call. The meetings in the rest of the country gathered large numbers as well, in spite of irregular attendance, the Graham committee estimated that about 60 000 people were reached by the campaigns.

Finally the third and last large campaign by Graham in France took place in September 1986 from the 20th to the 27th, at a grandiose venue, the “Palais Omnisport “at Bercy. Prepared for at least three years, since the June 1983 meeting at the temple de l’Étoile

⁷ The CEIA 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 French evangelicals.

⁸ This term is used to define the « decision » to follow Jesus expressed by a Billy Graham’s listener, when he comes to the altar after the call made by the evangelist, in order to testify that he is willing to convert. The BGEA evangelistic journal’s title is *Decision Magazine*.

(L'Etoile Chapel) in Paris⁹, it was organized by the committee Mission France, led by the honorary president Pierre Chaunu (a famous French reformed historian, Sorbonne University professor) and the executive president André Thobois (president of the French Baptist Federation and vice president of the French Protestant Federation). Previous to the crusade, a survey was conducted on the behalf of Mission France. Based on a panel of 1009 French individuals over 18 years old, it revealed that if 52% of the respondents declared themselves as believers, only 11% did practice regularly¹⁰. For French Evangelicals as well as for the BGEA, these results left a large margin of improvement. A total of over 100.000 came to listen to the American evangelist in Paris whereas in the 31 locations in the rest of the country 200.000 people are estimated to have listened to Billy Graham's message (with the help of the TELECOM 1 satellite). Among this number (in cumulated assistance), 7000 came forward, according to Graham's statistics, a very small proportion (inferior to one per thousand). In absolute numbers however, this is the evangelist's most important impact, even if in proportion, the ratio is inferior to the ratio reached in 1963 or 1955.

The Bercy campaign was the last crusade during which Billy Graham was physically present in France. However, a few initiatives afterwards prolonged Billy Graham's impact in France, especially the "Mission World Europe", an ambitious evangelistic outreach through satellite TV, and the "Global Mission" in 1995 (also through satellite TV), which reached a total of around one billion of people worldwide, according to the BGEA. From the first missions to France through *Youth with a Mission* in 1946 to Global Mission in 1995, Billy Graham's initiatives have directly influenced the French religious landscape for almost 50 years.

II. "Buffalo Billy Circus" in France : reactions in the land of Voltaire

On the French side the irruption of the famous American evangelist created a true sensation. For Protestants as for Catholics, for believers as for agnostics and atheists, what an event ! Like in all other European countries, the national media reacted strongly to the crusades. It is difficult to discern significant evolution in the themes and accents of the reactions to Graham's campaigns. A chronological approach, mostly attentive to changes in discourse would thus be inappropriate here. However from one group to another a rather coherent profile of reactions appears. Three groups can be singled out: the secular reaction, important media in particular, the catholic reactions and the protestant reactions.

The secular press oscillates between curiosity and mockery. "The angel Gabriel in an overcoat" is scorned¹¹, Graham is seen as the "Gospel's Pin-up Boy"¹², the "evangelical mission's Stakhanov", "conversion's Barnum"¹³, "the fisher of dough"¹⁴, the "atomic

⁹ Seventy pastors and lay leaders met on the occasion and decided to create the Mission France committee, which was officially launched on June, 1984. Source : *Mission France, Une nuée de témoins*, World Wide Publications, Fontenay-sous-bois, 1985, p.5

¹⁰ See *Mission France's letter*, « *L'évangile à Bercy* », september 11, 1986, p.2.

¹¹ Christiane Château, *France Soir*, June 4, 1955.

¹² "Billy Graham, le "pin up boy" de l'évangile », *L'Aurore-Paris*, June 30, 1954.

¹³ *Samedi Soir*, June 24, 1954.

¹⁴ Edgar Schneider, *France Soir*, June 7, 1955.

evangelist", "Charm's preacher", "Buffalo Billy circus"¹⁵, "exportation's fundamentalist"¹⁶. In the communist daily *L'Humanité*, André Wurmser noticed :

"Here is a foreign enterprise which does not hide its political agenda. Led with billions (of dollars) by a successor of Barnum (Billy Graham) who intends to manipulate the feelings of some of our compatriots in order to guarantee the security of American capitalists: isn't that enough to make want to kick ?"¹⁷

This kind of harsh political judgment was not isolated. In 1957, famous literary critic Roland Barthes made similar comments, explaining that Billy Graham's campaign in France was just a "maccarthyst episode"¹⁸ encouraged by US president Eisenhower. Almost thirty years later, the tone was slightly more moderate in *L'Humanité*, but surprisingly, *Le Monde*, the main French daily, gave quite a cold welcome to Billy Graham, in the midst of terrorist bombings in Paris. journalist Henri Tincq wrote : « My advice is this : Go Back to America and forget about your plans for France »¹⁹.

At the same time the evangelists' visits bring about much thought, interest and even moderate sympathy. "With John Paul II, he's one of the greatest preachers in the world today." exclaims *France Soir* on September 22, 1986. As early as 1954, French journalist Marcel Chaminade noticed that Billy Graham was a true "American idol", the "number one star", far more popular than Rudolph Valentino or Frank Sinatra²⁰. One year later, Henri Fesquet, in the daily *Le Monde*, emphasized Billy Graham's "spirit of adaptation": "it would be unfair to castigate the American style of this religious event. French organizers reduced it to the minimum." In inviting Billy Graham, "French protestants (...) were not wrong"²¹, he concluded.

On the protestant side reactions are globally much more positive than in the secular press but the internal debate is quite strong and hostility sometimes comes out in the open. After World War 2, French protestants remained a tiny religious minority (less than 3% of the French population). However, this minority is characterized (as it is usually the case with Protestants) by a great diversity, which expressed itself through the reactions to Billy Graham. No wonder if Evangelical protestants globally favour Billy Graham's crusades²². They shared the same belief in the absolute need of a straight christian conversion through a direct presentation of the Gospel. A majority of them has been involved in one way or another in the organization of the Billy Graham's events. Among others, French Evangelical pastors like Jacques Blocher, Henri Vincent, André Thobois or Robert Somerville have played a major role.

¹⁵ Valentine de Coincoin, "Barnum-Christ", *Le Canard Enchaîné*, May 29, 1963.

¹⁶ *L'Humanité*, September 18, 1986.

¹⁷ André Wurmser, "Le prédicateur du monde libre", *L'Humanité*, June 4, 1955.

¹⁸ See all his account on Billy Graham's crusade at the Vel d'Hiv : Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris, Seuil, 1957, p.92-95.

¹⁹ Robert P. Evans, « Media Opposition and Bombings Fail to Damage Granham's Paris Crusade », *Christianity Today*, September 11, 1986, p.58.

²⁰ Marcel Chaminade, "Malgré un accueil tiède à Paris, Billy Graham, le commis voyageur en religion, n'a pas renoncé à évangéliser l'Europe", *Nice-Matin*, July 17, 1954.

²¹ Henri Fesquet, "En écoutant Billy Graham au Vel d'Hiv. Le prédicateur a commencé sa campagne d'évangélisation devant 10.000 personnes", *Le Monde*, June 7, 1955.

²² There are a few exception though, some French-speaking Evangelicals (like Jean-Marc Berthoud) criticizing Billy Graham's increasing Ecumenical tendencies, or the alleged superficial dimension of his evangelistic work.

In other Protestant circles however, the reactions were more mixed. The basic line is the more Evangelical they are, the more supportive they appear, and the more liberal they stand, the more critical they are. These debates translated into the 1963 French reformed synod, entitled : « Evangelism or prozelitising ? » By prozelitising, some French reformed meant bad advertising practises, which might compromise the Gospel' integrity. Theologian Georges Cazalis and Raoul Crespin, a figure of French Social Gospel, were among those who thought that Billy Graham might be a bad example of « cheap Gospel » sold through abusive advertising. In the periodical *Cité nouvelle*, an article summarizes their critics, highlighting that Graham might be blinded by success and statistics, and might use fear as a tool to convert²³. In *Christianity Today's* columns, here is how Jacques Blocher summarized the Protestant reactions towards Billy Graham's second crusade in France :

« Some Protestant Christians were enthusiastic, but other kept aloof and even gave the coming crusade the cold shoulder. The main objections were theological : neo-universalists, believing that all men are reconciled with God in Christ with or without their consent, deemed it wrong to require a personal decision. Sacramentalists (particularly numerous among lutherans) could not accept to hear that a man can receive the grace of God outside the sacraments. Others thought that Graham's methods were not adapted to the French mind »²⁴.

Obviously, pastor Blocher highlights the theological aspect, in order to emphasize the spiritual dimension of the fight conducted by Graham. However, cultural aspects played also an important role in protestant reactions, and the same can be said about catholic appreciation on Billy Graham.

On the catholic side, reactions are more measured and surprisingly open: Billy Graham is globally seen with real sympathy, even if many catholic objections arose in the course of 40 years. Commenting on the 1963 Billy Graham's crusade, Jacques Blocher highlights that “the Roman Catholic Church forbade the meetings to its members, underscoring the truth of the statistics which show that half of the audience had no church affiliation, Catholic or Protestant”²⁵. This statement is partly misleading. If it is true that on the institutional level, the French Catholic church did nothing to help Billy Graham's crusades in France, on the people's and media's level, many catholics expressed some sympathy towards the American evangelist. One could even say that although less familiar to catholics than to protestants, Billy Graham seems sometimes more popular within catholic circles than within reformed or lutheran circles. In *Carrefour Paris*, the very famous catholic Historian Daniel Rops did not hesitate to express his admiration : “The success is unquestionable and admirable, even if we consider the enormity of the sums involved (...) No contest that the man is sincere, totally sincere; he deeply believes in Christ and his message. All the people who have heard him admit they have been shaken by his strength of conviction”. Although he criticizes Billy Graham's “extremely rudimentary” doctrine, he concludes : “it is not vain that a man moves crowds in remembering them their oed of God”²⁶.

²³ Autour de Billy Graham”. , *Cité Nouvelle*, May 23, 1963.

²⁴ Jacques Blocher, « Billy Graham in France », *Christianity Today*, vol 7, n°19, June 21, 1963, p.31.

²⁵ Jacques Blocher, « Billy Graham in France », op. cit.

²⁶ Daniel Rops “Billy Graham est-il vraiment le deuxième leader spirituel du monde?” *Carrefour Paris*, March 20, 1957.

However, all French catholic observers are not as positive as Daniel Rops. In 1963, André Vimeux regrets the too “individualistic” character of Billy Graham’s calls to conversion.²⁷ And famous French catholic writer François Mauriac, author of many awarded best-sellers, does not hide his doubts:

“We see him in action in a provincial French town. I would love to question these hallucinated women who go to the altar : this is a catholic country. Surely they must have attended catechism. How can they prefer this illuminism to the old Mother Church ? It is no surprise if they have lost faith. But what is extraordinary for old French catholics is that they may rediscover faith through Billy Graham. As a matter of fact, too much doctrine, hierarchy, 2000 years of accumulated rites has pushed away some spirits. Theology has opened too many abysses for two thousand years... The enormous might of islam is also related to its nudity, to a faith sustained on a few words, a few gestures. What remains in souls after the preacher boy has left ? Investigating this question would be fascinating”²⁸.

However, the catholic reaction as a whole remained open, and the 1986 crusade even reveals some surprising parallels in the catholic media between Graham and John Paul the second, who visited France almost at the same time. In the catholic daily *La Croix*, Jean Laisney reflects on the ways through which it is possible to reach contemporary « crowds like John Paul the second and Billy Graham »²⁹, In *Le Figaro*, Baudouin Bollaert describes Billy Graham as « American evangelists’ pope » and as « God’s voice »³⁰, while the famous catholic Jesuit periodical *Esprit* devotes a special issue entitled : « two preachers, John Paul the second and Billy Graham »³¹.

III. Analysis: Billy Graham in France, an example of a new European pluralism

Unlike the United States, where the dominant model is religious identity through conversion, Europe has long been characterized by a landscape of “religious confessions” where identities are linked to territories and tradition. For centuries the State, with many *nuances*, regulated the special relationship it intended to nurture with the main “recognized” religious confessions. This heritage has faded since the nineteenth century, but culturally, it has remained partially valid until today. The Christian model promoted by Billy Graham seems to be a perfect opposite of this main European tradition. His Evangelical identity highlights a kind of Christianity not linked to territory and tradition, but to individual choice and personal conversion. At the end of Billy Graham’s career, what analysis can be made of the confrontation of these two christian models ? The French example reveals five major traits wich could be partally, or totally translated into the global European context.

a/ The first important element highlighted by Billy Graham’s crusades is the growing ability of French (and European) evangelical Protestantism to produce a major religious event on the national scene. In organizing the events, French evangelicals revealed that they had grown.

²⁷ André Vimeux, “Billy Graham en France”, *Témoignage Chrétien*, June 17, 1963.

²⁸ François Mauriac, “Pasteur de charme”, Billy Graham”. *Figaro Littéraire*, June 1, 1963.

²⁹ Jean Laisney, “Toucher le grand nombre comme Jean-Paul II et Billy Graham”, *La Croix*, October 22, 1986.

³⁰ Baudouin Bollaert, “Billy Graham, la “voix” de Dieu”, *Le Figaro*, September 19, 1986.

³¹ « Deux prédicateurs, Jean-Paul II et Billy Graham », *Esprit*, janvier 1987.

They also benefited from the crusades, finding new militant energy. In terms of conversions however, the overall impact has been very limited. Unlike the British case, where the numerous and repeated Billy Graham's crusades seem to have had a considerable impact, the French Evangelical churches do not owe much to Billy Graham in purely statistical terms. If French Evangelicals developed from 50,000 around 1945 to almost 400,000 sixty years later³², it is mostly due to day-to-day evangelism prompted primarily by ordinary lay members of small and active Evangelical churches³³.

However, Billy Graham's crusades seem to have really boosted French Evangelical networks and their militant confidence. As French pastor Jacques Blocher highlighted it : "The crusade has been a tremendous inventive to the few evangelical Christians of France, belonging to all Protestant denominations, who believe that the spiritual awakening their country needs could be the fruit of evangelistic effort of this kind."³⁴ Apart in Britain and maybe Germany, European evangelicals would have been unable to set up such huge evangelism events before World War 2. In the last 60 years, they have grown both in terms of numbers, networks, and impact, and the three big French Billy Graham's crusades in France bears witness to that growth.

b/ The second element highlighted by Billy Graham's crusades in France is that catholicism is no longer a real cultural "adversary" to evangelical penetration in France. With some *nuances*, the same conclusion could probably be drawn in many other European countries. Since the second Vatican Council, European catholicism as very considerably soften its tone towards Protestants, and the global respect showned by French catholics towards Billy Graham is a striking example of this cultural and Ecumenical mutation. The fact that Billy Graham himself never attacked catholicism surely played a role: if catholicism has evolved, so did Evangelicalism too. Since the 1960s, the long Evangelical tradition of hostility towards catholicism has largely become a thing of the past, and Billy Graham crusades in Europe have revealed this to a broad public, drawing the attention of the catholic clergy and media.

c/ A third element should be noticed : Billy Graham's campaigns in France seem to draw a new religious frontier. The main frontier is no longer between Catholicism and Protestantism, but between advocates and opponents of a conversionist appeal in the public sphere. This phenomenon is obviously not an isolated French trend, but can be observed elsewhere in Europe. Graham obviously stimulated a conversionist culture. Commenting on the 1993 ProChrist crusade in Essen (Germany), Robert P. Evans, founder of Greater Europe Mission and its director for 36 years, notices that "German leaders did not do evangelism like this until Graham came along. Their usual way was not to give public invitations; they did not even want any hands raised. At first they criticized Graham for calling people forward, but then they saw that it worked, and some German evangelists began doing it as well", encouraging "the pietistic wing of the church".

In Germany as in France and in many other European countries, it is the very idea of a privatized and inherited religion which has been challenged by the public appeal to conversion. Speaking about the defenders of inherited religion, Evans notices that "they

³² For an overview of French Evangelical history, see Sebastien Fath "Evangelical Protestantism in France : an example of Denominational Recomposition?", *Sociology of Religion*, 2005, vol.66/4, p.399-418, and Id., *Du ghetto au réseau. Les protestants évangéliques en France, 1800-2005*, Geneva, Labor & Fides, 2005 (426 pages).

³³ According to David Bjork, private modes of evangelism amount to

³⁴ Jacques Blocher, « Billy Graham in France », op. cit., p.32.

believe religion is supposed to be a private thing. That makes it difficult to call people out when they are all supposed to be baptized Christians already”³⁵. This polarity between a discreet religion through heritage and a public religion through conversion can be seen all throughout Europe, and Billy Graham’s crusades contributed to highlight it.

d/ Another conclusion which could be drawn from Billy Graham’s crusades in France is that European contemporary society as a whole shows an unprecedented openness to highly mediated evangelism. European history is full of horrendous religious wars. Even in the middle of XIXth Century, some Protestants pastors and evangelists were still put in jail in France for religious reasons, when they did not have the chance to be officially recognized through the concordatary system. It can be considered that from the reign of Louis the 18th to the reign of Napoleon the third, French Evangelicals were submitted to a global discrimination policy³⁶. From the 1950s to the present, in spite of controversy and some verbal hostility, Billy Graham had the opportunity to give a strong and public Evangelical testimony and appeal without ever being threatened or legally attacked. In the long run, as many other European countries, France seems not only to become more secular. In the span of 60 years, it has become also more open to new ideas, more open to religious and ideological pluralism. This historical trend should put into perspective some alarmists reports sometimes published in America about the current European religious landscape³⁷ : yes France and many parts of Europe display cautious tendencies towards religious pluralism and public display of evangelism: but no, this tendency is not strengthening, all the contrary, if one compares with the situation 50, 100 or 150 years ago.

e/ Stubborn resistances remain however. They can be noticed on two levels: a political and cultural anti-Americanism, and a refusal of religious militancy in the public sphere. These two traits expressed itself not only in France, but in many western European countries as well: in Scandinavia for example, the Skandia 78 campaign met with harsh criticism. In Norway, a coalition of groups and individuals even formed “Action Billy Graham 78” to oppose him. Members included scientists, writers, psychologists, actors, and a radical group known as the “Heathen Society”³⁸. In Sweden, many accused him of “spiritual rape”, in describing the response to Billy Graham’s invitations to “receive Christ”. The Swedish daily *Aftonbladet* belated, “Children can be hurt”, fearing that Swedish children might be manipulated by Billy Graham’s emotional appeals³⁹. Thirteen years before, stench bombs were tossed throughout

³⁵ « Evangelism in the Land of Luther », interview with Robert P. Evans, *Christianity Today*, April 26, 1993, vol 37, n°5, p.48.

³⁶ During these six decades about fifteen French Baptists (all the cases are documented) were put into prison for religious reasons. See Sebastien Fath, *Une autre manière d’être chrétien en France. L’implantation baptiste (1810-1950)*, Geneva: Labor & Fides, 2001.

³⁷ See « A New War of Religion ? Pluralism and evangelicalism collide in contemporary France », *Christian History*, n°71, 2001, 43-44. Under a picture illustrating Billy Graham’s 1986 campaign in France, the commentary mentions terrorist threats, without explaining that these terrorist threats had nothing to do with Billy Graham, but all to do with French policies towards Algeria.... évoque une menace terroriste, mais sans préciser que celle-ci, initiée par un réseau proche-oriental, n’avait rien à voir avec Billy Graham, mais tout à voir avec la For an American reader, this kind of might lead to the wrong conclusion that Billy Graham himself was threatened by terrorists during his stay in France, which is completely false.

³⁸ Edward E. Plowman, « The Scandinavians : no neutrality on Graham », *Christianity Today*, vol 23, n °2, october 20, 1978, p.52.

³⁹ Edward E. Plowman, « The Scandinavians : no neutrality on Graham », *op. cit.*, p.55.

the forum in which Billy Graham preached in Copenhagen (Denmark), and people screamed at Graham : “Yank, go home!”⁴⁰ (a kind of address the French never expressed to Graham).

The example of Billy Graham's campaigns in France revealed both the progress of religious pluralism in Europe and the areas of resistance that show up, on one hand, distinct European “ways” of dealing with religion in the public arena, and on the other hand, a certain European ambivalence towards evangelism. Persistent verbal violence in certain reactions towards Graham seem to indicate the ongoing shift between the affirmation of republican and democratic principles, open to all religions, and the manner in which these principles are translated culturally. The French case seems obviously to suggest that within European religious traditions, open evangelism, based upon massive publicity and spectacular gatherings, does not fit very well with a secular minded. Religious “traditions”, heritage, old cathedrals open to tourists are favoured, conversionist religion is not.

However, at the end of the day, secular France appears more welcoming than defiant towards Billy Graham. In the span of five decades, the American evangelist was able to rent the most prestigious places (the Vel d'Hiv, the Bercy arena), meet a French socialist president, François Mitterrand, gather hundred of thousands of people, be interviewed on national TV by top French journalists like Patrick Poivre d'Arvor (the French Larry King), and stimulate Evangelical networks between both sides of the Atlantic. At the beginning of the XXIth century, France often appears in the media as a European country resisting to change. If secular and traditional France displayed such an openness to such a typical north-american Evangelist, one cannot help but think that it could be a symptom of a larger western European openness towards a kind of religion based upon choice rather than tradition, conversion rather than heritage, and voluntary association rather than traditional community.

⁴⁰ W. Stanley Mooneyham, « Copenhagen Crusade : Violence to Victory », *Christianity Today*, June 4, 1965, vol 9, n°18, p.42.