

French megachurches : a specific social framework ?

Between melting pot and gated communities¹

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Sebastien Fath, GSRL (Paris, France, EPHE, CNRS)

Cultural and religious pluralism has become the hot topic of our globalized world. In a market-oriented global society in which goods and people circulate at a higher speed than ever before, many different social frameworks, old and new, coexist (and sometimes compete) to address the challenge of pluralism.

In the protestant world, megachurches have become an impressive new field of experimentation in terms of regulating diversity and pluralism. Megachurches are commonly defined by at least two features : a large attendance (from 2,000 to 40,000 regular attenders, usually coming by car, which requires a mega-parkinglot) and a great variety of activities. In Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano (Texas), you will find a youth center so elaborate that some Church members have called it Prestonworld : 15 ball fields, a 1950's style diner and a fitness center, as well as classrooms and a 7,000-seat sanctuary. This campus is adding a large school, coffee shop, food court, student ministry center, youth building center, and so on. Another feature that usually defines megachurches is an emphasis on local autonomy. Even when megachurches belong to denominations, they usually largely retain their autonomy.

These churches are growing at a very high speed : they number more than 1,300 in the USA. According to a 2005 study, megachurches together have the same number of attendees at weekly services (4,5million) as the smallest 35% of US churches². But South America, South-East Asia, Africa and Europe, including France, are also a fertile field for megachurches³. They mostly refer to Evangelical identity, with an emphasis on conversion, moral conservatism and a strong Bible-centered spirituality.

Mainline Protestant churches also provide some megachurches, while the Catholic Church is sometimes not very far from adopting this new way of "doing church" (cf. the Los Angeles Cathedral). Why are such new churches developing so fast ? In a globalized world marked by conflicting identities but also by religious and cultural

¹ A preliminary version of this draft paper was first presented at a workshop organized by Prof. John Bown and held in Washington University, St Louis (Missouri), "The Social Frameworks for Cultural and Religious Pluralism" (May the 3rd, 2008).

² See Scott Thumma, Scott L. & Travis, Dave, *Beyond Megachurch Myths. What We Can Learn From America's Largest Churches*, San Francisco, ed. John Wiley & Sons, 2007.

³ See Sébastien Fath, *Dieu XXL. La révolution des mégachurches*, Paris, Autrement, 2008.

pluralism, megachurches define specific social frameworks. This paper will try to analyze these frameworks from a particular field: four French charismatic and pentecostal megachurches.

The religious identity of these French communities must be briefly addressed. First, these megachurches have developed in the Protestant minority, which amounts to less than 2 millions of French people. Second, they emphasize a very distinctive Evangelical flavour, characterized by the central role of conversion and a strict "biblical" worldview. More than Evangelical, they can also be described as Charismatic or Pentecostal, which means that they refer to the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit, at the heart of their spirituality and social practices. Such strong belief systems based upon conversion could appear as strange in secular France. However, they seem to prosper. How could this growth be interpreted ?

Do these megachurches work as a melting-pot, contributing to a more cohesive society ? Would it be more accurate to compare them to « soft » gated communities, separated from a pluralistic society rejected for its « wordliness » ?

This question will be treated from three perspectives. First, we will try to briefly summarize the American debate on the social effects of megachurches. Second, we will describe the French field, and its four new Charismatic and Pentecostal megachurches. Third, we will try to see, from a French perspective, if the comparison between gated community and melting pot works or not.

I. Gated communities versus melting-pot : the US background

Many US observers of the megachurch phenomenon are concerned by the expansion of huge 24/7 churches. They sometimes appear to work like “minitowns”, according to Patricia Leigh Brown: a small town within a town⁴. Scott Thumma, the main US specialist of the field, sociologist of religion at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, emphasizes the fact that these churches are becoming a “parallel universe that’s christianized”, a kind of strong subculture. Professor of religion and society at Santa Barbara (University of California), Wade Clark Roof fears that megachurches might become a “religious version of the gated-community”. Based upon the idea that everything must be customized according the needs of a specific category of people, megachurches would create a world where worshippers only deal with like-minded people. Instead of being involved in various communities, the average attender of a US megachurch would tend to do everything in the same community : practicing sport, dining at a fancy restaurant, watching the last new movie on a giant screen, having a rest, dancing, singing, and even shopping (to a limited extent)... In terms of pluralism, megachurches could appear as a threat, with large communities shying away from dialogue with the larger culture.

⁴ Patricia Leigh Brown, “Megachurches as minitowns”, *New York Times*, May 9, 2002.

On the other end, one can't help but notice that US megachurches are also working as melting pots, uniting people from different backgrounds. Far from being isolated, most megachurches are deeply involved in community service, social programs. Highly connected (all megachurches are enjoying the benefits of the Digital Revolution), they actively try to build bridges with their neighbourhood, in order to welcome the widest range of customers.

If some megachurches can appear as clubs of conservative and traditional Christians, 30% percent US of megachurches deliberately emphasize their priority on seekers. They strongly embrace an unconventional approach to Christianity: they do not necessarily worship on Sundays, they refuse old-fashioned liturgy, reframe their vocabulary, make an extensive use of contemporary music, and display a wide cultural openness. They tend to have a focused mission statement aimed at the “unreached”, the “seekers”, those who do not necessarily have any previous connection with Christianity.

Compared with other forms of churches, megachurches certainly do not appear to be more segregated. Around 60% of US megachurches attract mainly Caucasian attendees (WASP). Roughly 10 to 12 percent of US megachurches are predominantly African American, 2% have mostly Asian attendees, and 2 percent are primarily Hispanic. Last but not least, 31 percent of megachurches claim to have a 20% or more minority presence in their congregations. And the average megachurch has 14 percent of the congregation not representing the majority race. Another interesting feature from the 2005 survey is that 55 percent of the churches stated that their communities were making specific efforts to become intentionally multiethnic. Compared with the data from other churches, megachurches appear to do slightly better than others in terms of ethnic diversity. Robert Putnam noticed this in his 2006 lecture : “Historically, Americans worshipped in such a complete racial segregation that it was proverbial among sociologists of religion that ’11:00 am Sunday is the most segregated hour in the week. In recent years, however, many churches, especially evangelical megachurches, have become substantially more integrated in racial terms (...) In many large evangelical congregations, the participants constituted the largest thoroughly integrated gatherings we have ever witnessed.”⁵

II. Megachurches in France : describing a new face of French Christianity

In far away France, a European country often described as a fortress of secularism, many observers would not expect to find megachurches, US style. However, things are changing. In an article posted in *Slate* in 2005, Elisabeth Eaves asked the question : “is France getting religion?”⁶ Observing the vibrant new churches growing everywhere in the Parisian suburbs, she noticed : “Unlike most of the 64,3 percent of French citizens who still identify with Catholicism, the new Protestants are vigorous worshippers”.

⁵ Robert Putnam, « *E Pluribus Unum : Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century. The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture* », *Scandinavian Political Studies*, vol 30, n°2, 2007, p.161.

⁶ Elisabeth Eaves, « Is France getting religion ? » *Slate online*, February 1, 2005.

This is particularly obvious when looking into the new French wave of megachurches. Using the word “wave” might be exaggerated, especially if we compare the four current French megachurches to the more than 1300 US megachurches. However, remembering that French Protestants only amount to 2 percent of the over-18 French population (larger than the Jewish community, but smaller than the Muslim community), four megachurches in continental France are really significant in the land of Voltaire, often self-described as a stronghold of secularism.

Three French megachurches are located in the Parisian area. The megachurches Rencontre Espérance (Meeting Hope), Paris Centre Chrétien (Paris Christian Center) and Charisma Église Chrétienne (Charisma Christian Church). Another one is located in Mulhouse (Alsace, East of France) : its name is the Porte Ouverte Chrétienne (Christian Open Door). To these four French megachurches, one can add the church of the Mission du Plein Évangile (Full Gospel Mission) in French Guyana, led by pastor Dominique and Annic Roellinger⁷ (3000 followers in 2008, organized in 250 cells).

Apart from these four genuine megachurches (or at least five, if including France overseas) around thirty new Protestant communities, all of them Evangelical, are currently facing a fast growth: some of them are approaching 1000 regular worshippers. Most of these new churches are located in the Paris suburbs. Among them are the Evangelical Church of Sarcelles (Parisian suburbs), led by pastor Jean-Claude Boutinon, the Evangelical Center Philadelphia in Paris, led by the Assembly of God (ADD) Paul Etori, the Communauté Amour et Vérité (Love and Truth, located near Charisma), or the Pentecostal Evangelical Church in Lyon (rue Robert, Assemblies of God).

At a smaller scale, several young churches, founded in the 1990s or the 2000s, regroup hundred of followers each week. They are based upon a recipe of growth directly inspired by the megachurch example. This is the case of the Baptist church of Honfleur (Normandy), led by the very charismatic pastor Freddy de Coster⁸, the Centre du Réveil Chrétien (Center for Christian Revival) led by David Goma in Paris, the multi-ethnic Evangelical congregation of La Défense (Paris), the Impact Centre Chrétien (Christian Impact Center) in Ivry-sur-Seine, or the new Hillsong community in Paris, a kind of franchise which is rooted in an Charismatic gigachurch located in Sydney, Australia.

Last but not least, let’s remember that these churches are usually involved in active networks, particularly with the francophone world. Several huge African megachurches, but also two from Quebec, maintain close links with their French counterparts, with the example of Mamadou Karambiri, a very prominent pastor of a megachurch in Ouagadougou, who is regularly invited to France.

These new big churches providing a wide range of activities for their followers share a similar normative background, rooted in Evangelical protestantism⁹, mainly in its most charismatic form. Lutheran or Reformed protestant churches in France do not fit with the current description of megachurches, even a very few parishes, like the reformed parish

⁷ “Pourquoi je crois au G12”, entretien avec Dominique Roelliger par Paul Ohlott, *Christianisme Aujourd’hui*, janvier 2008, p.22-23.

⁸ In both senses of the word.

⁹ For an overview in English, see: Sebastien Fath, “Evangelical Protestantism in France : an example of Denominational Recomposition?”, *Sociology of Religion*, 2005, vol.66/4, p.399-418.

of Belleville (20th 'arrondissement' in Paris), are slightly influenced both by Evangelical theology and by megachurch social forms.

What about the Catholics ? No survey of the French religious new trends can be sustained without a look at Catholicism, which remains by far the major religious identity of the French. Heavily weakened by the impact of secularization, 1968 and the rise of a consumer society in which individuals reject the very idea of a normative and sacred authority, Catholicism did not only suffer from a "crisis". It also restructured, as French sociologist Céline Béraud highlighted while describing a "silent revolution" in the Catholic clergy¹⁰. French Catholicism modified its relationship to territory, encouraged the controlled spread of new Charismatic communities, promoted lay leadership, and developed new social forms marked by a new emphasis on visibility. The Catholic God of the 1970s had to be discreet, humble and even buried (the theological emphasis on "enfouissement"). Today French Catholic's God is more and more open to XXL size. This new focus on visibility can be observed through the spread of the Chartres pilgrimages, le huge success of the World Youth Day in 1997 (which attracted 300.000 more attenders than the 1993 US World Youth Day: 1,200.000 against 900.000). No wonder if some French Catholics pay attention to the megachurch phenomenon. This is particularly the case of Bishop Dominique Rey (diocese of Fréjus-Toulon), who commissioned a visit to US megachurches in 2006. He was echoed by the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity led by Cardinal Walter Kasper, who devoted a large part of its annual plenary 2006 session to the "megachurches wave"¹¹.

In the southern suburbs of Paris, the new Evry Cathedral, inaugurated in 1996¹², is a clear sign that French Catholicism now embraces the idea that contemporary Christianity has to be visible, up-to date, XXL-sized. Benefiting from high technology, the commitment of a wide range of lay believers, the Evry cathedral is not unique. The Ozanam Church in Cergy-le-Haut, completed in 2003, reveals a similar trend, along with the St Thomas church in Sarcelles, where 10.000 eastern Catholics (Chaldean rite) celebrate each week (the church provides 700 seats, and seven masses a week-end). These new catholic churches are not megachurches, but they are not so far from the megachurch pattern, with their emphasis on large attendance, modern equipment, multiple activities and a relatively high level of commitment from lay leaders and ordinary worshippers.

The fact that Catholic France gets hooked by the megachurch phenomenon is a strong indication that this trend is not purely American, far from that. In Africa, Eastern Asia, South America, Oceania and Europe, including France, these churches are spreading. In Kiev, the biggest European megachurch, with a pastor coming from Nigeria, attracts 20.000 attenders each week¹³. Studying religious pluralism today can't bypass the new megachurch pattern.

¹⁰ Céline Béraud, *Prêtres, diacres, laïcs. Révolution silencieuse dans le catholicisme français*, Paris, PUF, 2007.

¹¹ Isabelle de Gaulmyn, "Le Vatican se penche sur le phénomène des *megachurches*", *La Croix*, 22 novembre 2006.

¹² Claire de Galembert, « Cathédrale d'État ? Cathédrale catholique ? Cathédrale de la ville nouvelle ? Les équivoques de la cathédrale d'Évry », *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, n°107, juillet-septembre 1999, p.109 à 137.

¹³ See Catherine Wanner, *Communities of the Converted : Ukrainians and Global Evangelism*, Ithaca (NY), Cornell University Press, 2007.

III. Analyzing the social frameworks provided by French megachurches

How do these emerging French megachurches address the challenge of diversity and Pluralism? There is not ONE answer to the question. A quick analytic survey of the four current megachurches in continental France reveals some common trends, but also differences.

The Rencontre Espérance megachurch is the oldest French megachurch. Created at the beginning of the 1970s, this Parisian megachurch (12th arrondissement) has been heavily influenced by its historic leaders, Archange, a Gipsy evangelist, and Vladimir Barma, a Pentecostal pastor with a Russian background. This megachurch could be described as **an open community tempted by a ghetto rhetoric**. It is an open community in a sense that everybody is welcomed, even if the community is mostly coming from Africa and the Carribean. It is also a quite open community in the sense that the God displayed in this Pentecostal church is not an exclusive God, who would work only in this particular community. The Rencontre Espérance megachurch is connected to some other churches, especially in the Caribbean, and does not encourage parallel institutions like Christian schools. On the other hand, this megachurch is clearly characterized by a kind of ghetto rhetoric: it is “we” against “us”, the “World” is demonized and the worshipers are encouraged to fight Evil from a very dualist perspective¹⁴. But this megachurch can't really afford to be a ghetto. It lacks of leaders and infrastructures, and is unable to sustain a strong subculture, apart from the Sunday services, attended by an average 1500 to 2000 followers.

Located in La Courneuve, **the Paris Centre Chrétien megachurch (PCC)** is different. Created in 1985 by the indian pastor Sevaraj Rajiah, this neo-charismatic megachurch boasts an attendance of nearly 5000 followers every week. While it is not a gated community, it is a very strong and integrating community, providing far more activities than Rencontre Espérance. Couples, singles, youth ministry, prayer groups... This ambitious church seems to be quite isolated from the other French Protestant churches¹⁵. Ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, network of churches are not part of the vocabulary here. PCC appears like an island of hope in the Parisian sea. But an island is sometimes close to a prison, to a ghetto. The religious rhetoric, quite close to the one heard at Rencontre Espérance, re-inforce the cultural isolation of the megachurch. It is not a ghetto however, in a sense that there is a clear emphasis on multi-ethnicity: among the three Parisian megachurches, this one is the more diverse in terms of ethnic origins. The level of turn-over is also quite high. The entrance door is large, but the Exit door is large as well. Last but not least, PCC is deeply involved in international charismatic networks, particularly Third Wave Charismatics. When Benny Hinn, a highly controversial TV-evangelist healer, decided to

¹⁴ Jean-Claude Girondin, *Ethnicité et religion parmi les protestants antillais de région parisienne*, thèse de doctorat, EPHE (Sorbonne), 2003, p.581.

¹⁵ However, things seem to slowly change since 2009 : in mid-2010, PCC was involved in an intense discussions with the CEAF (a network of churches with an African background). The CEAF itself belongs to the French Protestant Federation (FPF), the main French protestant body. If PCC entered the CEAF, it would therefor belong to the FPF.

organize a Crusade in France in Autumn 2007, PCC played a pivotal role in advertising the event.

The combination of a high level of internal integration (much higher than in Rencontre Espérance) and a narrow rhetoric makes this megachurch look like **an ambiguous haven** : many people find here hope and a sense of trust, but in a exclusive frame which does not help much to build bridges.

Charisma Église Chrétienne is the newest of Parisian megachurches. It is also the most successful in terms of following, with an attendance comprised between 5000 and 6000 worshippers each week. Located near the huge Stade de France (France's stadium) in Saint-Denis (Northern Parisian suburbs), it appears quite similar to the PCC model: a strong emphasis on Charismatic spirituality, prosperity, healing, and a strong integrating community, with a wide range of activities. Compared to PCC, Charisma seems to be far more committed to social work, including alphabetization through an ambitious program involving dozens of volunteers. This might be related to the fact that Charisma's constituency is almost 100% African or Caribbean, with a lot of new migrants, often quite poor, who meet various difficulties to adapt to the realities of French society. Many of these immigrants find in Charisma a shelter, but also a springboard for integration, learning French, learning to write, learning to get papers and to find jobs. Self-described as a "church for champions", Charisma is led by a portuguese pastor, Nuno Pedro, who does not seem to be open to other French protestant leaders. Charisma has no relationship whatsoever with any other Protestant church in Paris, and does not belong to the French Protestant Federation. Charisma is not a completely isolated ghetto however, as many charismatic stars from the other side of the Atlantic come regularly to visit, reproducing a pattern already seen at PCC. Believers can come and leave, and are encouraged to find a place –and a job- in the global French society.

One could say that this afro-caribbean French megachurch is typical of what US scholars describe as a "**community niche**" **phenomenon**, in which a particular ethnic minority creates its own shelter, its own subculture, its own social frame. Extensively studied by Michael Emerson and Christian Smith in the Evangelical context¹⁶, this community niche phenomenon is seen with suspicion in France. The main reason is 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, pluralism and openness. Is this suspicion a consequence of Charisma's isolation, or is Charisma's isolation a consequence of this suspicion ? Let's leave the question open.

The **Porte Ouverte Chrétienne (POC) megachurch** is the only non-Parisian megachurch. Located in Mulhouse, it is also the only dominantly white megachurch in France, attracting a majority of French attenders from caucasian origins. Last but not least,

¹⁶ M.O. Emerson and C. Smith *Divided by faith. Evangelical religion and the problem of race in America*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

this is the only French megachurch which comes pretty close to an average white Evangelical US megachurch.

The religious customer will find here many small groups and various activities, like in PCC and in Charisma, but also a particularly high level of commitment in media work, especially satellite TV. Among the four French current megachurches, the POC is also the most transparent (there is an open access to the finances), the most open to its neighbourhood, but also to other French religious actors. Jean-Paul Willaime and Laurent Amiotte-Suchet studied this megachurch during several months in 2003-2004. They highlighted the fact that several French Evangelical pastors are regularly invited at the POC, and many teaching seminars are regularly organized for the French, which is not the case at Charisma, PCC or Rencontre Espérance¹⁷.

This megachurch is also charismatic, with a Pentecostal background, but it is the least influenced by the Health and Wealth Gospel, although you can perceive, in the pastor's preaching, some similarities with the Prosperity Gospel : give to God, and God will bless you. Although this megachurch seems is more open than the others to French society, it has also been the most controversial (and this is a paradox). Because of controversial healings, and competition with the local French Reformed and Lutheran Protestants, the POC has been openly suspected in the media to be a cult.

IV. Marginalized communities with an integrating role

Do French current megachurches provide a specific social framework to deal with Pluralism and diversity ? After examining each case, it is not possible to give a global answer to this question. Some common features are shared by all these communities : the emphasis on size and visibility, multiple activity, a strong religious identity based upon conversion, the extensive use of digital technology, and the possibility to experiment every possible type of religious commitment (from the less intense to the most). These elements lead Robert Putnam to define megachurches as the most interesting social invention of the end of the XXth Century¹⁸.

But these features do not induce a unique way of dealing with diversity. However, three global trends can be made, according to the French case.

The first one is : even if they wanted it, **French megachurches cannot afford to work like sophisticated ghettos**, or cultural islands. Unlike the American situation, the French protestant landscape is too weak to be able to offer a very strong subculture, more or less separated from the global culture, with religious schools, religious shops, religious hospitals, religious TV networks and so on. With various success, the four French megachurches are trying to enlarge their own cultural and social perimeter, but none of them really work as a minitown, US style.

¹⁷ Laurent Amiotte-Suchet and Jean-Paul Willaime, *'La pluie de l'Esprit', étude sociologique d'une assemblée pentecôtiste mulhousienne, Mission du Plein Évangile, la Porte Ouverte Chrétienne*, Paris, octobre 2004.

¹⁸ Robert Putnam interviewed by Madeleine Bunting, "Capital ideas", *The Guardian*, 18th of July, 2007.

Another conclusion is that none of French megachurches do belong to the main French protestant networks. They neither belong to the Protestant Federation, nor to the CNEF (the main Evangelical network). None of them is actively involved in an interfaith activity, or an Ecumenical social work, none of them emphasize pluralism or tolerance as a core value. They are not gated communities however, but they appear as **quite marginalized communities** in terms of institutional links with other social and religious actors of the French field. All of them are, however, involved in networks, open to the wider francophone world but also to the English-speaking charismatic transnational milieu.

A last lesson can be drawn from these French megachurches: they create social links, they encourage local solidarity, and they answer to clear social needs from populations often neglected by official structures. They offer to marginalized populations the hope to belong “a church of champions”¹⁹, the hope to improve, to be successfully under the hand of God. In that respect, they highlight an alternative identity based upon a strong sense of religious community, and related to a kind of transnational identity, which could be compared with the Islamic transnational public space studied by John Bowen²⁰. At the heart of French society, at the heart of the French religious landscape, these strong and proud communities add empirical diversity, **and give the opportunity to marginalized people to have a voice.**

Conclusion

Analyzing French megachurches' social frameworks leads to an interesting paradox: although often isolated, and sometimes intolerant to internal diversity, especially if this diversity could challenge the narrow and strict religious identity defended by the church, these new megachurches nevertheless provide new creative ways for marginalized communities to express their needs, a part of their culture, their pride. In other words, they do not encourage much cultural and religious diversity within their ranks, but they stimulate, even without expressing it, more diversity in the global society, by displaying a strong visible identity and refusing to submit to the French trend towards privatization of religion.

While communities with a strong emphasis on internal pluralism do not necessarily add diversity and pluralism in global society, it seems that some contemporary megachurches could do exactly the opposite : while restricting internal pluralism (which might raise some concern in terms of sectarian drift), actively contributing to a more pluralistic society through their visibility and their distinctive voice.

A French specialist in the study of Evangelical Protestantism, Sebastien Fath (faths@wanadoo.fr) is currently a full-time researcher at the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS). He is a statutory member of the French GSRL team (Groupe Société Religions Laïcités). He is in charge of a scientific research program on contemporary mutations of religion in Western societies. He is the author of ten books and has recently completed a new study on megachurches (*Dieu XXL, la révolution des megachurches*, Paris: Autrement, 2008).

¹⁹ This is Charisma's motto.

²⁰ John Bowen, « Beyond Migration : islam as a transnational Public Space », *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Volume 30, Number 5, 2004 , pp. 879-894.