

Summary

Université de Strasbourg

ÉCOLE DOCTORALE de Théologie et de Sciences Religieuses

EA 4378

Richard Alexander Neff

Titre en français : Évangéliques en réseau, trajectoires identitaires entre la France et les États-Unis

Titre en anglais : Evangelical networks, American influence and French identity

The expansion of evangelical Protestantism in France is a laboratory of analysis of the effects of globalization on religious identities. French evangelicals retrace their roots to the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century and the Geneva Revival of the 19th century. However, the movement is often considered to be an anomaly in France, where Catholic tradition and *laïcité* condition the perception of religious groups. Is evangelicalism yet another example of an American cultural invasion? The exuberance of worshipers, the ethical rigor and the spectacular aspects of worship services seem to characterize American churches much more than French ones. Indeed, evangelicals make up over one quarter of the population of the United States. The American evangelicals Billy Graham and Rick Warren are much better known in France than any French evangelical leader.

These observations give rise to a number of questions. What is the extent of contact between French and American evangelicals? If we can talk of a certain American influence, by what means is it conveyed in French churches? Is American influence perceived differently from one evangelical church to another? What is at stake for French churches which choose to associate with their American co-religionists?

The existing research on French evangelicalism falls short of providing answers. A certain number of studies approach evangelicalism as a social movement. Understood in this way, the “evangelical movement” is assumed to have a high level of internal coherence and the ability to articulate a specific platform of demands. Several authors have posited that there is an alignment between evangelicalism and American political and economic interests which has facilitated the movements worldwide expansion. Even though a certain number of studies have called this approach into question, the case of France has not yet been the object of study.

Other sociologists have examined evangelicalism as a religious minority. Their studies reveal the dynamics of majority/minority relations which impact group behavior. Although this approach has yielded interesting results, it can nonetheless neglect the importance of international networks in the power play between majority and minority religious groups.

The present dissertation is divided into three main parts. In the first section, we construct the object of research: French evangelicalism in the context of globalization. We examine two *problématiques* closely related to the globalization of religious groups: religious minorities and social networks. Next, we present an approach to evangelical churches as a social milieu, an approach which allows us to identify distinct types of churches within the group, each with its own identity. We elaborate a quadripartite typology of French evangelical churches according to their modes of authority regulation, their historical identity and their practices of association.

The first section ends with an articulation of the primary thesis. We submit that the United States does indeed exert influence on French evangelical churches, both directly (through personal contacts) and indirectly (through intermediary actors). These influences vary in function of the structure of the existing church networks in France and in function of the types of churches which make up the milieu. In order to test this thesis, we elaborate a research project: a qualitative study of a random sample of evangelical churches in eight departments in Eastern France consisting of semi-directive interviews with pastors, participatory observation of worship services and a review of contemporary evangelical literature.

The first section of the dissertation is also the opportunity to place evangelicalism in its historical context. We present the historical development of four types of churches in France with an emphasis on the interplay with foreign evangelical groups. Lastly, we examine the principle characteristics and views about France among American evangelicals.

The second section is devoted to an analysis of the direct influence of American evangelicals on the French churches studied. One can identify several kinds of interpersonal relationships and behavior within network structures. We categorize these different types of networks as doctrinal affinity networks, historical affinity networks, mobilization networks and support networks. Each of these modes of behavior characterizes certain types of French churches more than others. Mennonite churches, for example, tend to have numerous direct relationships with American

churches, but solely those having an historical and demonstrable Mennonite identity. These relationships, which we call historical affinity networks, are durable and constituent of the group identity. Pentecostal churches, on the other hand, tend to join mobilization networks with American churches. These relationships tend to be short-term and oriented toward a specific goal. Such networks can also contribute to the regulation of authority within the French Pentecostal churches and confer a certain amount of social legitimacy to them.

Our study would suggest that the direct American influence on French churches is quite limited. None of the pastors interviewed was American. No American leader seems to play a role of articulator between the different currents of French evangelicalism. On the contrary, French churches of all types are extremely wary of the deleterious effect which a close association with Americans can have on their own image within France. Likewise, we find no correlation between the intensity of relationships within trans-Atlantic evangelical networks and the appearance of distinctly American traits in French churches. Individualism, activism, emotional enthusiasm, optimism and fundamentalism do not seem to better characterize those French churches having relationships with American churches than those which do not have such relationships. For example, the independent Baptist churches in the study had some of the strongest and most enduring affinities with American fundamentalist churches. However, they have tended to distance themselves from certain aspects of American fundamentalism, in particular strict abstinence from alcohol and political activism.

The third section of the dissertation focuses on indirect influences of Americans on French evangelicals, that is to say influence which bypasses interpersonal relationships. Two indicators are useful for analysis: worship music and Christian book publishing. In both cases, American presence in France is quite strong. Over 24% of the worship songs in the main evangelical hymnals, as well as 44% of the books published by evangelical publishers are of American origin. In the church services we observed, one in three worship songs was a translation of an American hymn.

Clearly, American evangelicals produce a significant amount of material which is readily available in France and appreciated for its quality. However, it is less clear that this material is an important source of American influence. For example, a comparison of the frequency of evocation of various themes between American worship music and other worship music reveals no significant difference. The act of translating from English into French is also a creative

process, and there are numerous examples where the French versions of worship songs are markedly different from their American sources. Likewise, the French pastors interviewed had a strong preference for reading books by French authors, even though books by American authors are more abundant in Christian book stores. Many of the salient features of American popular evangelical literature are very rare in France: targeting books to a specific readership, self-promotion by the author and the genre of Christian fiction, to name a few. It is true that English language expressions such as “one way” have become commonplace in religious discourse in some French churches. However, this does not appear to be the result of the influence of American evangelicals so much as of American popular culture in general.

In the third and final section of the dissertation, we examine several indicators of the limits of American evangelical influence in France. For example, church administration in France is generally more associative in France and more entrepreneurial in the United States. Furthermore, unlike in the United States, evangelicals in France do not constitute a well-defined electorate. The attempts to formulate political demands through an evangelical lobby have not yet been very successful. Likewise, attitudes toward alcohol are very different among evangelicals in the two countries. French evangelicals are much more likely to drink alcoholic beverages than their American co-religionists, and generally see no basis for a strict policy of abstinence for Christians. Lastly, in spite of the fact that Halloween is generally accepted or tolerated by American evangelicals, in France it has been flatly rejected by most evangelicals. Indeed, French evangelicals have joined forces with French Catholics in denouncing what they consider an Anglo-Saxon consumerist pagan holiday. We examine the social factors in France and in the United States which may explain these differences.

We conclude by situating our work in a larger discussion about the effects of globalization on religious groups. Clearly, by their greater numbers and resources, American evangelicals do exert a certain influence in France. French evangelicals are increasingly confronted with the fact that they are part of a world-wide movement. However, this is not a case of one group exercising hegemony over another. Rather, we are witnessing a phenomenon of “glocalization” where the local and the international overlap and reinforce either other. In most instances, when French churches develop relationships with American churches, they do so in function of their perceived needs and opportunities within the French *champ social*. French evangelicals are thus more than just receptors of influence but social actors in the fullest sense.