FRENCH POLYNESIA
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Translated from the French by Dr. Robert Crane

BASIC INFORMATION

The Land

French Polynesia consists of 121 islands, 76 of which are inhabited, and forms five
archipelagoes dispersed over a maritime area of more than 5 million sq km located halfway
between Australia and California. The most widespread archipelago, that of the Tuamotu
Islands (which are included with the Gambier Islands in a single administrative subdivision),
is made up of coral atolls, while the other archipelagoes are composed primarily of higher
islands. Eighty-seven point three per cent of the population of French Polynesia, estimated
by the census of 2002 at 245,516 people, is concentrated in the Society Islands. The largest
island, Tahiti, measuring 1,042 sq km, accounts for nearly 170,000 inhabitants or 69 per
cent of the total population (ISPF 2003). The most distant archipelagoes have seen strong
emigration to Tahiti since the 1960s. A significant natural increase in the population has
compensated for this phenomenon in the Marquesas Islands and Tuamotu-Gambier, but
the southern islands have experienced clear depopulation. These migratory movements,
from the rural islands towards the urban or suburban zones of Tahiti, are at the heart of the
contemporary changes in the Polynesian sector of French Polynesian society. They express
and amplify the decline of a traditional way of life that closely linked membership to a
territory, to bonds of family solidarity and to community religious identity.

Several explanatory factors can be noted, in particular the rapid change in the economy
and the development of the educational system.

Economy

From a family economy founded on fishing and agriculture, which still remains on
several islands, French Polynesia moved to a monetarized, commercial economy combining
massive imports, unrestrained consumption and rapid growth of the public administration,
the principal employer with nearly 40 per cent of paid employment. This rapid evolution is
one of the consequences of the establishment in 1963 of the Centre for (nuclear) Experi-
mentation of the Pacific (CEP) on the atolls of Moruroa and Fangataufa, preceded in 1961
by the opening of the international airport of Tahiti-Faa’a. Significant infrastructure work
(airport construction as well as road building and building) attracted many workers at the time,
many of whom then settled permanently in the suburbs of Papeete, the capital. The arrival
of civil servants — metropolitan, military and civil — was accompanied by the creation of administrative employment accessible to Polynesians, and growth in the service and commercial sectors. The means of transport were modernized, while the medical structures and the educational system developed, although they remained concentrated on Tahiti.

After the final cessation of nuclear testing in 1995, the French government set up a fund for the economic re-conversion of French Polynesia (FREPAP) which includes annual aid of 150 million euros and emphasizes the development of fishing, pearl farming and tourism. Unemployment — of long duration in four cases out of ten — was calculated at the time of the 1996 census at 13.2 per cent. This phenomenon particularly concerns non-graduate young people — 30.4 per cent of the unemployed (ISTAT 1999:122) — and accentuates the impoverishment of the most modest households, whose level of income is lower than the very high cost of living in Papeete. As a result, zones of unhealthy housing and great poverty contrast with the villas built by the wealthier social classes on the heights of Tahiti and Moorea.

**Education**

The level of Polynesian education has progressed appreciably since the 1960s, thanks to a school participation rate now equivalent to that in France. The age at which compulsory schooling finishes was extended in 1992 from 14 to 16 years old. There has been real but limited adaptation to the Polynesian context, with respect on the one hand to the instructional programmes, especially in history and geography, and on the other to structures specifically designed for Polynesian students experiencing difficulty in the standard educational system. Centres for education in technologies appropriate to development (CETAD) were created in 1980 by the French Ministry of Education, as were Centres for Young Adolescents (CJA) in 1981 by the Polynesian territorial assembly. Teaching takes place in French. The Polynesian languages (Tahitian or reo Māohi, Tuamotuan or Paumotu, and Marquesan) are taught as “regional languages” (Malogne-Fer 2001).

The evolution of this educational system contributed to several significant sociocultural developments. It permitted the emergence of new degree-holding and salaried social categories. Teachers, for example, were recruited massively during the 1980s in order to ‘oceanialize’ primary education teaching. More generally, low-to mid-level local civil servants were hired.

The development of the educational system also played a part in the erosion of the use of the Polynesian languages. French appeared increasingly, according to the expression used by the Polynesian Minister for Education in 2000, to be the language “of social advancement,” while the Polynesian languages were perceived more as “an inheritance,” or as languages “of social cohesion” (Malogne-Fer 2001: 811-812). According to the census of 1996, the proportion of people more than 14 years old stating that they were able “to speak, read and write” a Polynesian language was nonetheless steady at 73 per cent.

Above all, the educational system seems to be a powerful factor in rural migration. Beginning in the 1980s, several middle schools (junior high schools) were built in the archipelagoes, but the geographical spread of the Polynesian islands forces many pupils to leave their island to attend a boarding school at the age of 12. There are still nearly 2,000 students in this situation. To continue their studies in secondary school, they must move to Tahiti, or attend the secondary school in Raiatea (Leeward Islands). Lastly, the University of
French Polynesia, established in Punaauia, near Papeete, has 2,300 students today. In 2003, the university launched a programme of 'Internet campuses' intended to develop distance learning. The involvement of the families in their children's success at school, considered as necessary for social success, leads many parents to follow their children to the island where their school is located and then on to Tahiti.

In a more indirect way, while insisting on individual merit and the need 'to make their way in life' by leaving their island 'to do better' than the preceding generation, the educational system contributes to the trend toward autonomization of the individual with respect to the traditional social structures, and encourages social and geographical mobility. Merely reproducing the situation of the parents often appears as the non-choice of those who have 'failed.'

According to the census of 1996, the distribution pattern of those 14 years old and older by level of studies was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Level of studies in French Polynesia in 1996</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No schooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School (Junior High)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School (Junior High) and professional diploma (BEP, CAP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School (Senior High)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ITSTAT, 1999

**Health**

Following the establishment on 1 January 1995 of generalized social coverage, which guarantees Polynesians health insurance and access to medical care, the coverage rate at the end of 1999 was 95.36 per cent of the population. French Polynesia thus profits from a high level of coverage of medical costs. This level, however, varies widely among the islands. The majority of hospital infrastructures are concentrated in Tahiti. Over the years the medical condition of the population has changed. The strong decline in major parasitic or infectious endemic diseases has left in their place diseases characteristic of the developed countries, such as cardiovascular illnesses and cancer (CESC PF 2002: 5).

As in several other countries of the Pacific, the diseases related to overweight are considered a major problem for public health in French Polynesia: obesity touches 40 per cent of the adult population, and 27 per cent of children at age 11. A second point of increasing concern relates to traffic accidents, the primary cause of death among those 15 to 44 years old (in 2001 alone, there were 62 deaths and 440 injuries). The number of vehicles practically doubled between 1997 and 2001 (CESC PF 2002: 8), a phenomenon related at the same time to changes in the economy and to the increasing distance, in Tahiti, between the home and the workplace. Over the last 10 years, many households have left the urban zone of Papeete to seek cheaper land on which to build homes in more distant communities, sometimes even reaching the peninsula.

The number of births has decreased since 1988 and, in spite of a net decline in the infant mortality, demographic growth has tended to slow, while a slight ageing of the population has been observed. More than half of the population is less than 25 years old,
but life expectancy at birth has increased by more than two years since 1990 and the percentage of more than 60 year olds continues to increase (6 per cent in the 1996 census).

Families and Territories: a Redefinition of Membership

If rural migration, changes in the economy and, more generally, the social and geographical mobility observable today in French Polynesia inevitably modify the forms of religious life, these forms are also influenced by less obvious but more critical transformations, which affect in particular the family as a traditional social institution and the relationship with the land of origin or fenua. Several indicators make it possible to measure the trend that has taken place from the traditional, extended family — the feti’i — towards a family life more centred on the couple and their children. Between 1977 and 2002, one thus notes a considerable reduction in the average size of households, declining in 25 years from 5.2 to 4 people, a tendency that is observable in the whole of French Polynesia although it is particularly accentuated in the urban zones of Tahiti (ISPF 2003). The family unit based on the cohabitation of generations has given way to new, more distant types of family relations. In the same manner, it has become frequent for a couple to refuse their parents the right to adopt one of the children (generally the first born). This phenomenon reflects at the same time greater autonomy with respect to family authority, which was traditionally incarnated in the generation of the grandparents, and the profound impact of the Western model of education, as communicated by the school and the administrative services in charge of children.

The increased mobility of Polynesians has also modified the character of families, and alliances are no longer limited to members of the insular or religious community alone. This mixing of populations, which contributes to the progressive emergence of a true Polynesian national identity, has introduced a dimension of plurality within families. Both parents are not necessarily of the same island. Nor do they inevitably belong to the same church. A survey carried out in 2000 in Tahiti by the Louis Harris Institute shows that the rate of religious homogeneity within couples greatly decreased in a generation. It was 85 per cent among the Catholic or Protestant parents of the people questioned, 92 per cent among Mormons. However, in the following generation, the rate falls to 70 per cent among Catholics (17.5 per cent of them have a Protestant spouse), to 62.5 per cent among Protestants (a quarter have a Catholic spouse) and to 50 per cent among Mormons (La Dépêche de Tahiti, 11 September 2000).

More autonomous with respect to the preceding generations, and of more various origins, contemporary Polynesian families thus maintain more complex relationships with inherited identities — family, community, and religious — whose transmission is no longer automatic. For example, it is common for parents of different religions to agree between themselves to divide the children between the religions, according to the order of birth or sex. This more or less random attribution of religious memberships has two consequences. First of all, it opens to the children the possibility of choosing, at adulthood, one or the other of the parental religions while remaining within the framework of family fidelity. Thus, it introduces a dimension of choice into the heart of what was hitherto an obligatory heritage: that one remains faithful to the family line of belief or that one moves away from it. Today, this has increasingly become an individual decision.
This evolution of family bonds joins a broader evolution of the social bond: the weakening of the so-called 'natural' communities, going hand in hand with a remarkable growth of what one might call voluntary communities, i.e. those founded on a personal choice of commitment. Two indicators testify to this: firstly, the dynamism of associations, which constitute for young people in particular a "privileged form of community integration, identity assertion and cultural action" (Brami, 2000: 140). According to official statistics gathered by public services in French Polynesia, more than 500 associations are created each year. In October 2001, some 9,418 such declared associations were counted. As A. Brami emphasizes: "Tahiti has relatively few cultural associations in a strict sense, but the majority of associations, apart from partisan trade associations, clearly assert in their statutes their wish to take part in the diffusion of 'traditions' and 'traditional' culture to Polynesian youth" (Brami 2000: 154).

The association appears to be a means of reactivating "traditional" identities, which contributes — particularly in an urban environment — to rebuilding solidarity, voluntarily making it possible "for its members to preserve their independence, while feeling their membership in a culture, in a cultural community: to individuate while identifying" (Brami 2000: 160). This associative dynamic is at work in the fields of sports (dugout canoe clubs) and of culture (songs and dance), as well as in the religious field (associations created by the churches for additional activities or by the parishioners themselves).

The second indicator of these developments in social relationships is more difficult to measure but is just as significant. It is an increasingly widespread conviction in contemporary Polynesian society. It opposes the constraining tensions inherent in family relations, to a type of relation regarded as emblematic of a happy social relationship: friends, to whom one is bound by personal affinities. The extended family is then described as one of the principal sources of pe'a pe'a (troubles, worries). This negative perception is explained on the one hand by the autonomization of the 'small family' with respect to the feti'i already mentioned, and on the other by a specific difficulty that generates a good share of family conflicts: the joint possession of property.

**Land Tenure: Joint Possession and Family Disunion**

"May God preserve me from quarrels over land" said an old Tahitian prayer at the beginning of the last century. Land arguments have always impassioned Polynesians and the case lists of the courts are overwhelmed today with land litigation (CESC PF 1990: 6).

The traditional land ownership regime in French Polynesia mixed the rights of ownership held primarily by the extended families with the rights of use granted by them to other individuals. This habit led to a certain inaccuracy: "land conflicts were regulated by custom and as no written title existed, actually occupying the land constituted the only guarantee of the right of each" (CESC PF 1990: 6). In spite of this margin of uncertainty, property rights strongly marked the anchoring and unity of the family, by establishing a common link of descent with a founding ancestor, whose name was generally associated with that of the land.

After the establishment of the French protectorate in 1842, followed by the annexation of Tahiti in 1880, a whole body of laws, which were gradually extended to all of the archipelagoes, sought to establish rights of ownership by encouraging the Polynesians to officially declare the land they believed they owned, under the control of assemblies (Tahitian
law of 24 March 1852) or of district councils (decree of 24 August 1887). Due to their lack of exact limits, cadastral measurements and precise registry office entries, these efforts did not however bring the expected clarification.

In the 20th century, other texts facilitated the division of the undivided land and property transactions. Nonetheless, much land was divided only among branches of the same family. According to the Economic, Social and Cultural Council of French Polynesia, the situation was as follows in 1990 (CESC PF 1990: 30–34):

- In the urban zones of Tahiti, the proportion of the land divided or in the process of being divided was more than 50 per cent, just as it was in Moorea, a tourist island.
- In the Leeward Islands, much of the land was still in joint possession, the divided grounds were held generally by family branches and the “subdivisions” had only started.
- In the Marquesas group, the northern islands had 1/8th of the land in “uncontrolled joint possession, that is, one does not know precisely who has property rights,” and great families possessed significant areas, while in the islands of the south property is parcelled out in smaller areas, and it is often difficult to establish indisputable rights of ownership.
- In the Tuamotu Islands, the situation is described as “more inextricable than elsewhere”, and 90 per cent of the coconut groves — which give rise to many conflicts — are in joint possession.
- In the Austral Islands, the majority of the land has remained in joint possession.

The conflicts around joint possession were naturally accentuated by the rise of a cash economy dominated by the tertiary sector and urbanization. This economy perceives the land as of commercial value, which it is tempted to convert into monetary value, despite the traditional attachment to the fenua. Given the complexity of these ‘land businesses’ systematically subjected to an overworked court system, interminable family conflicts multiplied, reflecting the weakening of family cohesion, as each person defended his own objectives over the family’s interests for which no-one is any longer the legitimate spokesman. This is why joint possession in French Polynesia causes contradictory feelings, with two opposite interpretations: for some — in particular the Protestant Church — it is a structuring element of the Polynesian identity, which must be preserved; for others, facilitating the individualization of landed property would help to foster social harmony and economic development.

The Ethnic Question

The issues related to joint possession are among those that crystallized with the cultural revival during the period 1970–1980 and are concerned with the contemporary definition of indigenous identity. Indeed, since traditional identity rested above all on the bond with the land and on family transmission of knowledge, language and religious affiliation, it has inevitably been upset by the rapid social transformations experienced in French Polynesia during the last 40 years.

The militant movement that began in the 1970s can consequently be perceived as a modern reformulation of the Polynesian tradition. It allowed a symbolic rehabilitation of the indigenous Ma‘ohi identity in a specific political context: that of a French domination that is still exerted but which now goes hand in hand with the rising power of the local government, thanks to several statutory modifications. To fully understand all the implications
of the ethnic question in French Polynesia, it should moreover be added that Polynesian society became, during the 20th century in particular, a multicultural or “mixed” (métisse) society, to use the expression of Michel Panoff (1989).

The last census to include a declaration of ethnic membership, that of 1988, indicated the following distribution among the Polynesian population born before 1979:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Polynesians &amp; assimilated</th>
<th>Europeans &amp; assimilated</th>
<th>Asian &amp; assimilated</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Total population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single ethnicity</td>
<td>65.37%</td>
<td>12.04%</td>
<td>4.78%</td>
<td>0.72%</td>
<td>82.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed ethnicity</td>
<td>15.21%</td>
<td>1.24%</td>
<td>0.64%</td>
<td></td>
<td>17.09%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>80.58%</strong></td>
<td><strong>13.28%</strong></td>
<td><strong>5.42%</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.72%</strong></td>
<td><strong>142,736</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ITSTAT, 1988 (cited by Poirine, 1992: 154)

Even if they must be handled very carefully, these figures bring several significant reference points because they testify both to concrete realities and to identity representations. On a first reading, they show that the Polynesians co-exist with groups of foreign origin, be they European (popa’a) or Chinese (tinito), which together were estimated at the time to be a fifth of the population. European immigration, mainly French, is a direct consequence of colonization, and increased with the massive arrival of civil servants in the army or in education, beginning in the 1960s. Chinese immigration began in 1865 in order to provide coolies for the ‘Great Plantation’ of cotton and coffee established on the peninsula of Tahiti. But the Chinese community was truly constituted only after the occurrence of two large waves of immigration 1907–1914 and 1921–1928. Primarily of the Hakka culture, the Chinese of French Polynesia could be naturalized French citizens after 1964 (individual naturalizations) and 1973 (law on collective naturalization).

The second piece of information given by these figures reveals, paradoxically, the force of the assimilation process and ethnic-cultural mixing. Indeed, the declarations concerning ethnicity emphasize that a very large proportion of ‘Polynesians’ (more than 80 per cent) regard themselves as not being of mixed blood. Nonetheless, at the same time a considerable number of Polynesian families have in their genealogy at least one ancestor of non-Polynesian origin. Similarly, it is clear that a child born of a union between a Polynesian and a person of non-Polynesian origin is regarded more as a ‘Polynesian of mixed blood’ than as a popa’a or a tinito of mixed blood.

Although the ‘demi’ (‘half’) identity was until the 1980s largely valued as an expression of social success, contrasting with the situation of Ma’ōhi, who were defined at the time as ‘pure Polynesians’ living on rural islands and having little formal education, several factors have contributed since then to enhance the Ma’ōhi identity. The cultural pride launched by this cultural revival had ramifications in the political and religious fields, not without instilling in the minds of many Polynesians a certain insecurity about their identity, or even a feeling of exclusion. Indeed, all Polynesians are not Ma’ōhi, since they may belong to one of the cultural minorities of French Polynesia or because they are not recognized under the criteria established to obtain ethnic-cultural authenticity: physical appearance, way of life and — most importantly — mastery of the language.
In the political field, the autonomous government of Gaston Flosse (*Tahoera’a Huiraatira*) saw in the exaltation of the culture and of the *Ma’ohi* identity as opposed to ‘foreign’ intrusions (i.e. the supervision exerted by the French State) a skilful means to obtain greater autonomy for the local government and to thwart the ambitions of the independence party (*Tavini Huiraatira*), which demands the liberation of the *Ma’ohi* people and lands. In the religious field, the Protestant Church has developed a theological discourse directed towards the valorization of a *Ma’ohi* identity which is inseparably ethnic and religious, anchored in the bond to the ancestral land and the language. This orientation was expressed in 2004 by the renaming of the church: formerly the Evangelical Church of French Polynesia, it is now the *Ma’ohi* Protestant Church.

Thus, the question of ethnic identity today occupies a central place in Polynesian social representations and even partially conditions the choices of religious affiliation, whether it is a question of reaffirming one’s membership in the *Ma’ohi* people by a religious engagement, or on the other hand withdrawing from the collective destiny and from the uncertainties of its identity by emphasizing one’s individual religious identity.

**Government**

The French State is represented in French Polynesia by the Haut-Commissaire of the Republic, but since the first Statute of 'internal autonomy' in 1984 its official powers have gradually been reduced to regalian fields only, to the advantage of a local government that has very broad legitimacy and powers (Al Wardi 1998).

After several statutory modifications, the organic law of 27 February 2004 made French Polynesia an 'overseas country' of France. In particular it authorizes the French Polynesian government to take measures supporting the employment of residents (article 18) and makes it possible for the local Assembly to adopt “laws of the country” (article 140). The members of the Assembly are elected by the citizens of French Polynesia every five years, using an electoral mechanism that ensures over-representation of the least populated archipelagoes to the detriment of Tahiti. The Assembly then elects from among its members the president of French Polynesia, who designates the members of his government.

From 1982 to 2004, one man — Gaston Flosse — and one party — *Tahoera’a Huiraatira*, an autonomist party affiliated with the French party of Gaullist inspiration, the RPR, and later the UMP of Jacques Chirac — directed the French Polynesian government practically uninterruptedly, as well as the majority of the communes with the notable exception of Faa’a, whose independence leader Oscar Temaru has been mayor since 1983. In June 2004, and again in February 2005, the Union for Democracy (UPLD), led by Oscar Temaru, won the elections. This defeat for Gaston Flosse (in spite of a failed attempt to overturn the Temaru government) expresses not so much the will for independence (a position clearly rejected, at least in the short run, by the new President) as a strong demand for democracy and the exasperation of the population with the excesses of an authoritarian vote-catching system.
THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION

Diversification of Churches, Fluctuation of Membership

The census of 1951, which mentioned only five religious organizations, indicated that a quarter of the population was then Catholic, a little more than half was Protestant (54.81 per cent), and the remaining churches were Seventh-day Adventist (SDA), Sanito or Reorganized Mormons, and Mormon (LDS), the last three comprising only 6.41 per cent of the inhabitants.¹ The results of the last census to include religious affiliation (that of 1971), testified to a certain stability, although during those 20 years the Catholic Church clearly progressed (to 34.5 per cent) and the historic Protestant Church had already begun a relative decline (to 50.5 per cent, whereas the census of 1962 estimated the Protestant share at 54.7 per cent) — a decline that has since continued.

In contrast, the 1980s seemed to mark the beginning of a new religious era in French Polynesia, with faster and deeper diversification. This has primarily benefited the Christian churches of the professing type, which require a personal commitment symbolized by adult baptism (Pet 2003). New churches have developed — Jehovah’s Witnesses and Pentecostals in particular — while the SDA and, especially, the LDS churches have progressed in a very significant way, at the expense generally of the Protestant Church. The increased religious options have been accompanied by greater mobility (intergenerational and individual), which testifies to a trend toward greater autonomy with respect to the inherited religious identities. Religious affiliation has become for more and more Polynesians a personal issue, which sometimes leads them to attend several churches before making a final choice.

The latest indications available, which come from surveys carried out in Tahiti in 1986 and in 2000, show that at present close to one Polynesian in five belongs neither to the Catholic nor to the Protestant Church. It is possible that this proportion itself is underestimated, for at least two reasons. The first is the methodological difficulty arising from the different understandings of the concept of ‘member’ in the churches. The professing churches

Graph 1: Growth Rates of Different Religious Groups in French Polynesia 1971–2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Group</th>
<th>1971–2000 Growth Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pentecostal Churches</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jehovah’s Witnesses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanitos</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh-day Adventists</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latter-day Saints</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic Church</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant Church</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Population</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

0% 100% 200% 300% 400% 500% 600% 700% 800% 900%
reserve this term only for adult members who have actually expressed a commitment, or who show sufficiently regular attendance. On the other hand, the term for the Catholic Church and, to a lesser extent, for the Protestant Church, does not imply the same degree of practice. Thus, according to the survey carried out in 2000 by the Louis Harris Institute in Tahiti, 35 per cent of Catholics “never practise,” and 40 per cent practise only “from time to time.”

The second difficulty is the significant variability in individual behaviour, which makes the traditional concept of membership more doubtful: some continue to identify with the family church while attending another church, others regularly attend the worship services of various confessions or do not attend anywhere any more. Some of the faithful in the Protestant Church receive Pentecostal baptism by immersion while remaining within their church. The relation between religious identity and institutional membership is becoming tenuous.

Table 3: Religious affiliation in French Polynesia 1971–2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>adh.</td>
<td>adh. %</td>
<td>adh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant Church</td>
<td>57,286</td>
<td>50.6</td>
<td>88,750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>39,170</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>68,541</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latter-day Saints</td>
<td>3,570</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>12,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh-day Adventist</td>
<td>2,652</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>9,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanito</td>
<td>3,282</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>7,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jehovah’s Witnesses</td>
<td>464</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AOG French Polynesia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AOG USA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alleluia Pentecostal Church</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant dissidents</td>
<td>631</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahá’í</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. T. Church of Tahiti</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese traditional religion</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tibetan Buddhism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated and others</td>
<td>591</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Religion</td>
<td>5,435</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>7,689</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Population</strong></td>
<td><strong>113,266</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>200,000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Growth rates of different religious groups in French Polynesia 1971–2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Total number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Average per year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>+123,414</td>
<td>+109 %</td>
<td>+3.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant Church</td>
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<td>+56.1 %</td>
<td>+1.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>+14 %</td>
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<td>+831 %</td>
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<td>Pentecostal churches</td>
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Data Analysis

Is the Evangelical Church, now called the Ma’ohi Protestant Church (EPM), still the largest church in French Polynesia? The survey of the island of Tahiti by the Louis Harris Institute, published in September 2000, which estimated the Catholics at 45 per cent and the Protestants (a term which in French Polynesia designates only members of the EPM) at only 34 per cent, caused much debate and surprise. Although the continuous decline of the EPM is hardly in doubt, it was the extent of this decline and, in parallel, the apparent growth of the Catholic Church which were a surprise. Should these results be attributed to an over-representation of the urban population among the sample? At all events and in the absence of other indications, it seems clear that the proportion of Polynesians who are Protestant (EPM) and of those who define themselves as Catholic are approximately equivalent today, in the vicinity of 40 per cent each. This situation points in the first case to a relative retreat — the number of Protestants is growing less quickly than the total population — and in the second case to stability, even a slight increase.

The Ma’ohi Protestant Church (EPM; EEPF until 2004)

The EPM is the heir of the first Protestant mission in the Pacific, which established Christianity in Tahiti and then contributed to its spread to many other Pacific islands. On 5 March 1797, missionaries disembarked from the ship Duff, chartered by the London Missionary Society, in Matavai Bay. This symbolic date, registered since 1978 on the calendar of Polynesian official festivals and commemorated each year by the EPM, constitutes the central pillar of the church’s identity, which is based both on historical primacy (which confers a specific legitimacy to it) and on the alliance between a people, a culture — ma’ohi — and the Gospel. The Bible in the Tahitian language — completed in 1838 and hardly modified since — thus became “the ultimate reference of the traditional reo ma’ohi” (Nicole 1988: 61), the sacramental receptacle of this meeting between the Word of God (Te parau te Atua, a Tahitian expression designating the Bible) and Tahitian culture. The safeguarding of the former is considered inseparable from the preservation of the latter.

Supported by King Pomare II, who was baptized in 1819, British missionaries established Protestantism in Tahiti and Moorea, and then in the Leeward Islands (from 1817) and in the Austral Islands (1821–1826), where the Protestant congregations have always been led by Polynesian “teachers” (missionaries), deacons and pastors (Vernier 1986: 43 ff). After the introduction of the French protectorate over Tahiti in 1842 and the French-Tahitian fighting which followed in 1844–1846, the situation of the missionaries of the London Missionary Society quickly became difficult. The French government supported the efforts begun in 1834 by a Catholic mission. It intended to control the Protestant parishes and to fight against British influence.

In 1863 the British missionaries relinquished control of the Tahitian church to French missionaries of the Society of Evangelical Missions of Paris (Zorn 1993: 171–176), who had to prove that it was possible to be at the same time Protestant and French. The French Protestant mission gave great attention to the teaching of girls and boys under the aegis of Charles Viénot (Zorn 1993: 230), and also to the constitution of a unified Protestant church on the French presbyterian-synodal model rather than the congregational basis of the London Missionary Society (Vernier 1986: 75–84).
Relations between political and religious authorities oscillated in the 19th century between co-operation and suspicion. In Tahiti and the islands that would later become French Polynesia, the Law of 1905 that separated church and state was not applied, creating a special regime for the French colonies and for the Catholic Church.

In 1963, the Evangelical Church of French Polynesia became autonomous, that is to say it was thereafter directed by Polynesian pastors and no longer depended on French missionaries. The autonomy of the church took place in a global context of decolonization — particularly in Africa where the Society of Evangelical Missions of Paris was also active. In French Polynesia this decolonization did not take place, mainly because of the establishment of the Experimentation Centre of the Pacific (CEP) in 1963. In 1982, after several years of discussions, the EEPF officially adopted a position opposing nuclear testing (Malonge-Fer 2003) and the church, through the Moruroa e Tātou association, has continued to call for greater openness about the environmental, health and social consequences of the nuclear tests.

In 2001, based on the position that political commitment is increasingly difficult to reconcile with a commitment to the Church, the administration of the EEPF asked its ministers, deacons and evangelists to choose between their ecclesiastical functions and their political mandates, thus creating heated parish discussions on the meaning of their commitments and the way they should exercise their ministries. At the same time, however, the leaders of the church and particularly the President, Jacques Ihoua, spoke out in 2001 in favour of a liberation of the Maōhi people: this position was expressed in both a religious register (individual and spiritual liberation) and also a political register (independence).

For some 20 years the Protestant Church has undergone profound changes, both organizational and ministerial. Its parish organization is founded on the principle of territorial membership. With the exception of the two extra-territorial parishes of Bethel (French speaking) and Jordan (Chinese speaking), each parish is divided into amuiā'a or groups that include parishioners by geographical or family origin. This principle of territoriality is reaffirmed both by the creation and dynamism of Austral Islands amuiā'a in Tahiti and by the work of the Commission for Theological Activities.

The amuiā'a structure is long-standing, although in an urban setting the geographical and religious mobility of the parishioners has weakened its relevance by bringing together people who do not necessarily have family or neighbourhood ties. Immigration to Tahiti — often in quest of salaried employment, the schooling of the children, or the health of elderly family members — however, has been accompanied by a reactivation of the amuiā'a as a meeting place for immigrants. This is particularly the case for the largely Protestant inhabitants of the Austral Islands, who organize in Tahiti through the amuiā'a. These groups have brought together the faithful by their island of origin since the 19th century, for example in Tiroa'a, the large parish in Papeete. New island-based amuiā'a have also been created over the last 15 years in the parishes of Papara, Paea (west coast of Tahiti), and Mahina (east coast of Tahiti).

Recent developments in the Commission for Theological Activities insist on the links that unite the Maōhi to the land (te fenua) and the language (reo maōhi) and make the maōhi identity the sole way to the word of God (Saura 1989 Fer and Malogne-Fer 2001 and 2002). These theological works have elicited a certain number of reservations and criticisms, particularly when dissension and schism in parishes (in Papetoai) followed the celebration of the Lord’s Supper with local elements such as the taro, the uru (breadfruit) or
coconut. Other innovations are directly inspired by this theological reflection and have raised fewer reservations: the introduction of musical instruments and flowers into the church, and the lightening of the pastoral or diaconal dress (pareo, shirts with Polynesian designs, rather than a western suit coat). The most committed parishes in this theological and liturgical renewal are those of Moorea in the Windward Islands. The work of the Commission for Theological Activities, given its difficult reception in the parishes, raises the issue of the place of this commission within the church. As it is directed by a layman, Turo Raapoto, a doctor in linguistics, the commission and its work are often perceived as being more linguistic than theological.

At the same time, the interrelation between the land and Protestant identity is being contested by the commencement of French-speaking services in the parishes of Tahiti. Begun in the 1970s in the parishes of Pirae and Punaauia and in the 1990s in the parishes of Mahina and Paea, such services do not function in the amuurada organizational mode and are developing another way of being Protestant, outside the community framework and the traditional pattern of parochial activities. According to its initiators, this minimum structure centred exclusively on Sunday worship of short duration (one hour) could be a means of bringing people back to worship, in particular the young people who no longer have a command of the Tahitian language. The focus is more on the message preached than on parochial activities. Its detractors see, on the other hand, direct competition with worship in the Tahitian language and a way for parishioners to gradually disengage from parish life. A worship service in the French language, as a parish institution existing somewhere between affiliation with Polynesian Protestantism and disaffiliation from it, raises the question of religious membership that is partially dissociated from an anchoring in the land.

The changes in parish organization have been accompanied by reforms of the pastorate, centred around three points: emphasis on the training of pastors, access for women to the pastorate and the development of specialized ministries (chaplains in schools and hospitals). The church officially recognizes three ministries: the pastor who is ordained, the deacon who is installed and the evangelist who is sent. The autonomy of the church in 1963 resulted in a reflection on the training of pastors, in conjunction with the various regional and international ecumenical organizations such as the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC). Since 1967 the church has sent pastors for further training at the Pacific Theological College (PTC) in Suva (Fiji) or in France (faculties of theology in Strasbourg and Montpellier). In 1994, the pastoral school of Hermon in Papeete joined SPATS — the South Pacific Association of Theological Schools — which links all the accredited theological schools of the Pacific and makes it possible for them to deliver diplomas and degrees recognized Pacific-wide and requires the baccalaureate (high school diploma) for all applicants to the pastoral school.

In 1995, the church authorized women to become pastors. The first woman pastor, Marthe Peni, who entered the pastoral school in 1997, was ordained in August 2003, after four years of studies at the pastoral school and two years of training in a parish. Today she is pastor-chaplain at the Samuel Raapoto Protestant middle school in Pirae. At present, women constitute half of the student body at the pastoral school (6 out of 12 in 2002). This significant move of women into the pastorate again poses the question of the requirement of pastors to be married, which dates back to the time of the London Missionary Society. Indeed, the pastor’s wife has a particular role in the parish. She takes an active part in certain activities, in particular those of women (including tuaro’s tuahine or biblical reflections.
by women, house visits, sewing workshops) without being either remunerated or ordained. On the other hand, the entry of women to the pastorate raises questions about the place of a man who is only ‘the husband of the woman pastor’ and who is the object of sometimes violent mockery. The inversion of the roles of husband and wife thus brings into question the relevance of maintaining the obligation to marry and of the parochial organization that was based on the model of the pastoral couple (male pastor, lay woman), which has now become only one configuration among several.

Finally, the feminization of the pastoral corps has been accompanied by a desire in the church to make a greater response to the requests of young people in the church — by organizing worship in the French language, developing specialized ministries (pastor-chaplains in the education system), and initiating a reflection within the church on the improved integration of young people in the decision-making structures of the parish. In 2005, the commemoration of the arrival of the Gospel on 5 March was thus devoted to youth and organized by the young people of the church. The celebration was centred around sports activities, songs and dances, and brought together more than 7,000 people.

The Catholic Church

In the 17th century the expedition of Quiros (1605–1606) intended to evangelize the “Southern Land,” and during its search for the mythical continent planted a cross on the Polynesian atoll of Hao (Hodée 1983: 164). Catholic missions, however, had to wait until 1834 to be permanently established in the archipelagoes that form French Polynesia today: in the Gambier Islands, where priests of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary (called “Picpus”) achieved the conversion of King Maputea in 1836 and set up an all-embracing Catholicism, covering all aspects of social life; and in the Marquesas Islands, where the first mission was founded in 1839 on the island of Nuku Hiva. Even today the map of religious affiliations in French Polynesia still keeps the imprint of the territorial division that took place at that time. The Catholics took the Marquesas and Gambier archipelagoes, then a good part of the Tuamotu group. Moving on from their first stronghold of Tahiti, the Protestants took the Austral Islands and the Leeward Islands. The Catholics entered Tahiti also, and that island quickly became the place where competition between the two missions was the sharpest, with both of them opening schools and building imposing places of worship there. In 1860 a Catholic cathedral was inaugurated in the centre of Papeete.

School development played a determining role in the development of Polynesian Catholicism. Under the direction of the Sisters of Saint-Joseph of Cluny and the Brothers of Plœrmel, the development of the schools facilitated the establishment of several Catholic parishes in the districts of Tahiti between 1844 and 1876 (Hodée 1983: 175). The reputation of these institutions, in particular that of Lamennais junior/senior high school in Papeete, then attracted many families to the Catholic Church. Without necessarily having strong religious convictions, the families wished above all to give their children the best chances of social success. By means of this approach, in the 19th century the Catholic Church wove particularly close links with the local elite emerging at that time, and has preserved them until the present.

After 1949 (the date when the People’s Republic of China was established), the Catholic mission in French Polynesia reached out particularly to the local Chinese community, whose children were already formed the biggest group in the Catholic schools — some 53 per cent
of enrolment in 1951 (Coppenrath 1967: 99). The church was helped by the support of several missionaries driven out of China, who were thus familiar with Chinese culture and language when they came to Tahiti during the 1950s. Encouraged by the Council of Vatican II (1962–1965), which preached respect for cultures and the use of local languages, the church ordained the first French Polynesian Chinese priest, Lucien Law, in 1964 and created a Chinese extra-territorial parish in Tahiti, which worships in the Hakka language (three quarters of French Polynesians of Chinese extraction are of the Hakka culture). From 1960 to 1970, the Chinese community of French Polynesia joined the Catholic Church in large numbers. This indicates that the church had a very benevolent attitude to Chinese traditional cultural and religious practices, which are considered by other Christian churches to be incompatible with Christianity. As a Chinese priest declared while celebrating Chinese New Year’s Day in January 2001 at the cathedral in Papeete, one can be both Catholic and “100 per cent Chinese”: it is not forbidden to attend the Buddhist temple Kan Ti to perpetuate the tradition of Ka San, the offerings placed twice a year on the tombs of deceased relatives.

The Catholic Church never wanted to become the church of the Māōhi people, and many of its priests still come from France. Nevertheless, as Father Hodée wrote in 1983:

The Catholic Church is Tahitian with the Tahitians, Marquesan with the Marquesians, Paumotu with the Tuamotuans. Maohi language, pastoral style, church organization are clearly Polynesian (...) The temptation is great to make as many churches as there are ethnic groups, languages and communities, whereas we must “choose all” and learn how to live together (Hodée 1983:492).

In spite of these specific assets — its schools, its success with Chinese residents and its capacity for adaptation to the local identities — the Catholic Church would undoubtedly not have had any greater success than the EPM in resisting the changes in Polynesian society, had it not been for the spectacular revitalization brought to it during the 1980s by the charismatic renewal. As early as 1970, Canadian sisters of Our Lady of the Angels launched the first charismatic prayer group. In 1977 and 1978, after pilgrimages to Paray Le Monial (a stronghold of the French charismatic renewal directed by the Community of Emmanuel), laymen followed by Father Hubert Coppenrath set up prayer groups in the parishes of Pirae and Papeete.

The movement was given considerable impetus by the visit of Father Tardif to Tahiti in November 1982. He celebrated healing masses in Tahiti, Moorea and Raiatea in the presence of several thousand people. What until then was the experience only of a few enthusiastic groups now became a much bigger popular movement, obliging the Catholic hierarchy to reinforce their structures to channel a sometimes overflowing enthusiasm. Hubert Coppenrath, named diocesan coordinator for the renewal, organized training courses for the lay leaders of the various groups. At the same time the church opened a centre for spiritual retreats, Tiberiade, on the peninsula of Tahiti. Offering new forms of intense but guided religious experience on weekends, the centre has attracted an ever increasing number of Polynesian Christians, be they Catholic, Protestant or Adventist.

In 1987, however, the dramatic events on Faaité, an atoll of Tuamotu, where several people supposedly ‘possessed’ were burned alive by the population after the visit of three women proclaiming the charismatic revival, dealt a crushing blow to the rise of the movement. At the time of the lawsuit in 1990, which was the focus of intense media attention, the Catholic Church was accused by several residents of France of having reactivated pagan beliefs by stressing the emotional side of the faith to the detriment of “the authenticity of
the doctrinal content” (Saura 1990: 104). This summary denunciation of the charismatic communities, accused of returning Polynesians to their “basic nature” (paganism), ignores an essential source of the charismatic renewal in French Polynesia: the renewal — explains one of its organizers — seemed to offer a way of being more alive, by which people found something from earlier times when there was a society of amuina’i (in this context: community, solidarity), of the human contact that had been eroded since the CEP. Here again can be seen the arrival of the consumer society, the notion of every man for himself and somehow, dehumanization (Pain and Christophe 2000, interview by authors).

The charismatic renewal today touches at least a quarter of the Catholic parishioners. It has produced within the Catholic Church a restructuring of community in an associative mode, while making it possible for individuals to be integrated into a community not by obligation but by personal choice founded on affinity. Initially the renewal was a local movement, through the creation of small parochial groups. Later, four diocesan groups emerged, crossing parish boundaries. This dynamic, which is also found with other non-charismatic groups like the Living Rosary or the Legion of Mary, opens the way for a redirection of religious commitment, less directly constrained by the church hierarchy, in groups generally directed by lay people. The surge in the numbers of these ‘born again’ Christians, reuniting with a religious identity that had until then been merely formal (Hervieu-Leger 1999: 124), and often committing themselves not only to the renewal groups but also to the service of the wider church, thus gave a second wind to the Catholic Church in French Polynesia. In 1999 the accession of Hubert Coppenrath to the office of Archbishop of Papeete (succeeding his brother Michel, who was much more reticent with regard to the charismatic renewal), consolidated the charismatic tendency of the church.

The Church of Jesus-Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS)

The islands now known as French Polynesia were one of the first mission fields of the LDS Church. In 1844, that is to say only 14 years after the publication of the Book of Mormon by Joseph Smith and the official creation of “the Restored Church,” Mormon missionaries were at work in the Austral Islands, on the island of Tubuai. The following year, missionary Benjamin Grouard obtained several conversions on Anaa, in the Tuamotu Islands. In this archipelago, as on Tubuai, the Mormon mission met with real success between 1844 and 1852. At this time the number of converts approached 2,000 (Ramstad 2003: 97). In 1852, however, the hostility of the French administration and competing missions — in particular Catholic — led to the departure of the missionaries. They returned only in 1873, but in the meantime the LDS Church had undergone a schism: the first missionaries to return to these islands belonged to the Reorganized Church of Latter-day Saints, called “Sanito” in French Polynesia and in New Caledonia. Missionaries of the older LDS Church arrived only in 1892.

Until the 1950s, the LDS Church did not experience significant growth in the islands of French Polynesia, and concentrated its missionary manpower on the Tuamotu Islands. For many years the French administration imposed certain restrictions on the mission, with regard to the entry of new missionaries, the issuing of building permits, the collection of funds and the establishment of new missionary stations. In 1960, the LDS Church counted scarcely 3,000 members, including 700 in the Tuamotu Islands. By then there were more than 1,700 members in the Society Islands, in particular in Raiatea (Leeward Islands) where