its establishment was authorized in 1954 (Ramstad 2003: 85). During the 1960s the Mormon mission moved towards Tahiti and concentrated on training many missionaries and local leaders. From 1968 this training was given at a Language Training Centre, later renamed the Missionary Training Centre.

The fastest LDS expansion took place between 1970 and 1980. This expansion was visibly spectacular in that it resulted in the rapid construction of many churches, in Tahiti and in the archipelagoes. How can one explain this growth, which made it possible for the LDS Church to number more than 6 per cent of the Polynesian population in its membership in just a few years? Mette Ramstad, who made a comparative study of conversions to Mormonism in Polynesia, notes that unlike their counterparts among the Hawaiians and Maori, “most of the LDS informants in French Polynesia did not express any special interest in an American connection or refer to older migration legends from their area” that were likely to give credence to the idea of an Israelite background (2003: 217). They appeared to be more interested in the offer of the LDS Church to reunite the members of a family after death by ensuring their salvation through baptism (“sealing ordinances”), and through personal and family “sanctification.” This strong orthopraxic dimension and the associated benefits conferred by strong individual commitment to God and the Church seem to have been the determining factors of Mormon success in French Polynesia. On this point, the accounts of conversion collected by Ramstad completely support the analysis made in 1984 by G. Simon, who also underlined the attractiveness of the LDS mode of operation:

... the clear hierarchical system does not prevent a great diffusion of responsibility. Everyone very quickly has a role, a title, an importance. The traditional relationship between the pastor, the *prometea*, the one who knows, and he who listens and follows, gives way here to a situation in which each one has the duty and the possibility of progressing in the hierarchy. The valorization of the individual is ensured by a pedagogical approach that is highly appreciated by teachers, of whom there are many in the Church. The stress laid on holistic education, physical, moral, domestic, and not just spiritual, and on the visible effects that this education implies for everyday life, constitutes another attraction (Simon 1984:74).

Church authority seems to be less an authority of control and collective direction than that of an educator bringing to each one the tools to learn and “progress.”

Lastly, the success of the LDS Church owes much to the effectiveness of the missionary methods adopted at the beginning of the 1980s: The traditional door to door tracting was discontinued in many parts of East Polynesia because it was viewed as ineffective and time consuming. The new method was called the missionary “friendshipping programme” which challenged every member to be a missionary (Ramstad 2003:105). From the outset, this ‘friendly evangelization’ (which also aided in the rapid development of Pentecostalism) bases the religious experience of the new convert not on authoritarian church direction, but on friendly interpersonal relations: it is by following friends that one ultimately joins the church. The centre of gravity thus moves from the group towards the individual and the family, and from the church toward the home of the faithful. LDS members organize their own family home evenings:

These family home evenings then become the new image to the outsiders of how much the LDS Church actually helps in making happy families. The missionaries often meet the new investigators at members’ homes. Sometimes the missionaries will bring with them church films and videos on such topics as eternal families, celestial marriage, and happy family unity (Ramstad 2003: 159).
According to the general model of the LDS Church, the Church of French Polynesia is organized in ‘stake’ — each one a territorial organization of several independent parishes — or in ‘districts’ when the local establishments (or ‘branches’) are considered insufficiently developed to form independent parishes (Simon 1984: 67). The first stake was established in Tahiti in 1972 and the island today counts four, in Papeete, Arue, Faa’a and Papeari. The Leeward Islands constitute a fifth stake, while the other archipelagos are structured in districts: the district of Tubuai — the Austral Islands, and the districts of Takaroa Tuamotu and Makemo Tuamotu. The Marquesas Islands, where the LDS Church has few members, are simply branches of the district of Makemo.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA)

In French Polynesia, the Adventists are called ‘petenia’ (‘Pitcairn’ in Tahitian), in reference to the inhabitants of the island of Pitcairn who were the first Adventists in the Pacific, in 1886, and to the ship Pitcairn whose stopover in Tahiti in December 1890 marked the beginning of the SDA mission in the Society Islands. The converts first came particularly from the Protestant Church, attracted by the prospect of orthodox restoration of the Early Church (with, in particular, respect for the Sabbath) and by the North American origins of the mission. All of this was in the context of French-Tahitian confrontations. The Protestant pastor Paul Deane, born of the union between an American and a woman of Raiatea, was converted in 1892 and contributed in the years that followed to the progress of Adventism in Tahiti and Raiatea (Martin 1990: 9). On Raiatea, the SDA mission was established in the principal village of Uturoa in 1894, while the revolt against France — precipitated by the seizure of the Leeward Islands in 1887 — was at its peak. The Protestant Church itself was at this time (1863) still directed by French missionaries.

Thus, Adventism appeared in French Polynesia as a rigorous North American alternative to traditional Protestantism under French influence. The SDA Church is still today one of the six components of the New Zealand Pacific Union Conference, which has its headquarters in New Zealand. However, this special relationship with the United States and the English-speaking Pacific has grown more tenuous since the 1950s, with the assertion of French influence and the emergence of a Polynesian pastoral corps. Indeed, French personnel directed the French Polynesian mission from 1950 until 1984. Certain SDA leaders even wish to group the missions of the French-speaking Pacific in a separate union. The great majority of Polynesian pastors are trained by apprenticeship (there is no structure for SDA pastoral education in French Polynesia) or, increasingly often, in France (at the Collanges seminary), Fiji or Papua New Guinea (Taputu 2002, interview by authors). Since 1984 the church has been chaired by a Polynesian pastor.

The SDA Church is especially well established in the Society Islands, as well as in some of the Austral Islands (Rurutu where the SDA presence goes back to the 1930s, Tubuai and Rimatara), but is not strong in the archipelagoes of Tuamotu-Gambier and the Marquesas. According to very precise statistical data assembled by the General Conference of the Church, in 2003 the SDA in French Polynesia had 4,537 baptized adult members, who are part of a total SDA population (children and non-baptized adults included) of a little more than 12,000 people (Taputu 2002, interview by authors, and Louis Harris survey). Many are members of the middle class, often civil servants, and ‘demi’ by ethnicity, for whom education — in the broad sense — is the key to personal success. The SDA Church, in addition to its
insistence on certain principles of hygiene and a list of food proscriptions inspired by the Old Testament, has also developed a significant school network in Tahiti: several primary schools and a middle school (junior high school) for general and agricultural education.

Three other departments occupy an essential place in the activities of the church: the Sunday School, the department of youth and the department of “health-temperance.” The latter is inspired by the many writings about food reform and health by Ellen White, who was a leading figure in American Adventism in the 19th century. Very attentive “to family morals and the education of children” (Simon 1984: 86), the church recently created a department for women, which regularly invites French or North American speakers to come to French Polynesia to hold conferences (Taputu 2002, interview by authors). Lastly, the SDA Church was among the first churches in French Polynesia to open a bookshop, which distributes in particular such publications as Vie et Santé (“Life and Health”), often well beyond the circle of faithful Adventists. There is also a radio station, “The Voice of Hope,” established in January 2001.

The Re-organized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Sanito)

The Sanito Church of French Polynesia, which for the last few years has called itself “the Community of Christ,” was born of the Mormon missions of the 19th century. Independent from its American administration since 1973, it appears definitely more Polynesian than the LDS Church, with “the absence of ‘popa’a’ missionaries, its assemblies predominantly Maohi in which suits and ties are rare” (Simon, 1984: 75). It is established in the Windward Islands (Tahiti and Moorea), in some 15 atolls of Tuamotu, and in Tubuai (in the Austral archipelago). It is organized, on the one hand, in congregations subdivided into districts then into sections, and, on the other hand, in ministries, the whole being placed under the authority of a ‘regional presidency.’

The places of worship are of a modesty that contrasts with the monumental aspect of LDS church buildings. At the section level, there are no specific meeting houses. The faithful gather in their homes. The spiritual education of the faithful is carried out at Centres for Christian Education, where the weekly classes are open to all but more particularly to those in leadership positions (Simon 1984: 79).

The ministries are primarily directed toward social action, with three main spheres of activity: teaching, youth and women. Since the 1960s, the church has established two technical schools in Tahiti, which are partly subsidized by the local government. Their objective is “to make it possible for young people who ‘are failing at school’ to continue technical and tradesmen’s pre-professional training or general purpose vocational training in the tertiary sector” (RLDS 1979: 35); this includes typing, secretarial skills and accountancy. These programmes, which are also open to adults in the form of “courses for social advancement,” enjoy an excellent reputation among the Polynesian population. In the field of youth, the church has founded a social, educational and sports centre in Faa’a. It also organizes vacation centres, a scout movement and a sports association.

Lastly, the Sanito Church is characterized by a long-standing commitment to the promotion of women’s interests in the church and in society. In 1984 the World Conference of the denomination gave approval to the appointment of women as pastors, and in May 2003, during a gathering of 300 Sanito women, an article in La Dépêche de Tahiti, entitled
“A Very Feminist Church,” announced that “a project going in this direction could be born very soon” in French Polynesia (14.05.2003). Briefings for women regularly take place on topics such as family planning, home budgeting, the education of children and family problems (Simon 1984:80). The World Conference also accepted, in certain cases, the termination of pregnancy and the church does not forbid its members to divorce when “all attempts at reconciliation have been in vain” (Simon, 1984: 77).

Jehovah’s Witnesses (JW)

In 1958, two American couples from Los Angeles brought the faith of the Jehovah’s Witnesses to French Polynesia, and celebrated the first baptisms. In 1959 a congregation was formed in Papeete. The missionary action was undertaken by a local couple — an American married to a Tahitian woman. Starting in 1960, they were assisted by French “special pioneers” (Simon 1984: 33). In the census of 1962, 132 people declared themselves Jehovah’s Witnesses in Tahiti and 20 in Raiatea. The number rose to 464 in 1971. During the 1980s, the church progressed quickly and spectacularly. Today, it represents about 2 per cent of the Polynesian population, with assemblies at which, according to the observations of G. Simon in 1984, “popaia and demis are numerous; the Chinese community is also rather well represented” (1984: 99).

Jehovah’s Witnesses are especially well established in Tahiti, in several of the Society Islands, and in the Austral Islands (in particular, Rurutu). Recent missionary efforts in the Marquesas Islands, on Ua Pou (where a community was founded) and on Nuku Hiva (where the Witnesses built an imposing ‘Kingdom Hall’ in the village of Taiohae), seemed to meet with more limited success. The congregations of the faithful are gathered in two districts under the authority of a Polynesian president, Alain Jamet. In 1993, the administrative headquarters (‘Bethel’) was established in Toahotu, on the peninsula of Tahiti.

Although classified among the ‘sectarian’ movements by a French parliamentary report in 1996, the Jehovah’s Witnesses are perceived in French Polynesia as one of the authentic expressions of Christianity. Many Polynesians denounce their intensive proselytism and the dogmatism encountered during their door-to-door visits, but many of the faithful from other churches nevertheless admire their militancy (interpreted as the sign of profound faith) and their knowledge of the Bible. In their move from one church to another, it is not rare for Polynesians who are ‘seeking’ to agree to receive JW lessons for several months, although they may later join another church. One such case is a young woman who ultimately converted to Pentecostalism. She explained:

I greatly appreciated their teaching, that the word of God is the truth, which I accepted ... On the other hand, I did not want to be a Jehovah’s Witness. At the time, I had the impression that they had undergone brain washing. They all say the same thing. It seemed that they could not think differently ... It is for that reason that I did not choose the Jehovah’s Witnesses (Vanessa 2001, interview by Yannick Fer).

The Pentecostal Churches

Pentecostalism first appeared in French Polynesia in 1962, with the visit of the Chinese-American Pastor Hong Sit, sent by the Chinese Foreign Missionary Union, a Baptist revivalist organization that has been devoted to the evangelization of the Chinese diaspora since 1928. During July and August 1962, the small Chinese Protestant community of Tahiti
which until then, in the parish of Bethel, had consisted primarily of the Chinese pupils of the Protestant Viénot School and their families — accepted nearly 100 new converts, all baptized by immersion in a river on the west coast. In 1962 and 1963, a total of 288 people were baptized in this way. Some (about 60) were already members of the Protestant Church. But, for the majority, this baptism marked a conversion, an abandonment of the traditional Hakka religion in favour of charismatic Protestantism. The effectiveness of their new religion seemed to them to be proven by the practice of speaking in tongues and, especially, by the healing that accompanied the prayers and preaching of Pastor Sit (Fer, 2005 b).

The converted initially joined the Bethel parish of the EEPF, and later a Chinese-speaking parish called Jordan, created for them in May 1964. But there were many misunderstandings between, on the one hand, a Chinese community convinced it belonged to true Christianity and, on the other hand, the Polynesian leaders of an EEPF that had just become autonomous (in 1963), who saw in this ‘Protestantism Chinese style’ only the expression of an irreducible heterodoxy and culturally defined identity. In 1967 this led to schism. The overwhelming majority of the faithful and half of the deacons of the Jordan parish left the EEPF to found an independent church, the Alleluia Church.

Led by a military chaplain of Pentecostal inclination, and after 1974 by missionaries of the French Assemblies of God, this church was the first Pentecostal church in French Polynesia. Successful evangelization campaigns organized at the end of the 1970s by French missionaries, in Papeete and on the peninsula of Tahiti, generated a rapid growth in its membership and ultimately a new split. Concerned about the influx of Māohi converts, who in the long term were likely to put the cultural and community identity of the church at risk, the Board of Directors decided in 1982 to dismiss Louis Levant, the French missionary who had assumed the pastoral charge. Contrary to the Board’s expectations, 80 per cent of the church members then followed their pastor, to found the Assemblies of God (AOG) of French Polynesia, of which Louis Levant is still president today.

This church quickly became the principal Pentecostal church in French Polynesia, being currently established in Tahiti (Papeete, Faa’a, Tiarei and Taravao), Moorea, all the Leeward Islands (except for Maupiti), Rangiroa (Tuamotu) and Nuku Hiva (Marquesas). In 1997, the church created the first Christian radio station in French Polynesia, ‘Te Vae o Te Tiatuiraa’a’ (RTV, the Radio of Hope), which organizes regular concerts of ‘Christian’ music and in 2000, according to a Louis Harris survey, had between 4,400 and 7,700 listeners during the week.

The pastors of the AOG are, in the majority, Polynesian (six of them, as well as three French pastors and an American missionary couple), and were mainly trained by apprenticeship until the opening of a Bible School in March 2001. In the same way, the members of the Assemblies (except in Papeete where believers of Polynesian, Chinese and European cultures are together) are generally of Polynesian Protestant origin. In approximately two cases out of three, they left the EEPF, sometimes following a healing experience (from disease or alcoholism), or else after a dispute (with a pastor, a deacon or the theology of the EEPF). But what justifies these conversions is above all the conviction that they had to “take themselves in hand,” to rely no longer on the insurance of an inherited religion for a changed life and for obtaining a salvation that can only be personal. As a member of the AOG puts it: “Each individual seeks... It is not religion which saves. It is not just because the grandparents were pastors that, automatically, the grandchildren are saved. Each one will find himself before God. My great-uncle cannot account for me, nor my grandmother,
I myself must do so” (Jacob 2000, interview by authors).

Upon entering the AOG, the converts join a militant, interdependent community (‘brothers and sisters in Christ’) within which they gradually learn how to live ‘as Christians,’ by making their lives living testimonies in the service of the ‘Great Commission.’ This ordering of personal lives, which often has visible social effects — family stability, professional progress or success at school for the children — is not seen by the faithful as a benefit of the church framework, although it is that, but as a personal relationship with a very close God, who acts here and now in response to the prayers of those who have ‘opened their heart to him.’ In other words, one of the Pentecostal specificities is to convince the convert that it is not a religion or a church that saves, but Jesus alone, and that the comments (advice, admonishments) of the pastors or co-religionists are never anything other than messages ‘on behalf of God.’ This type of socialization is very good at meeting the expectations of those who, while remaining attached to their Protestant identity, can no longer bear the weight of a too obviously hierarchical authority and of suffocating community control. Moreover, it has the indirect effect of maintaining a dynamic of institutional dispersion, by facilitating the rise of various churches or of more or less formal groups, because the ‘Christian life’ of many of the faithful frequently overflows the borders of a single church and spreads throughout a multitude of affinity networks.

One of the major poles of these networks consists of a group of Pentecostal inspiration created in 1985 in Papeete by young EEPF members, following an evangelistic campaign run that year by Youth With a Mission (YWAM). During the 1980s and 1990s, a second significant pole was the Christian Centre of Bonne Nouvelle (“Good News”), in Faa’a. Founded in 1982 by the American AOG, this church was directed from 1989 to 1997 by Pastor Tua, a Tahitian who, with the assistance of the local directors of YWAM and other organizers trained in Hawaii, developed different forms of charismatic and cultural expression, such as the ‘dance for God,’ which particularly attracted Protestant and Pentecostal young people. In 1997, the church was again taken in hand by American missionaries, and in 2000 it was integrated into the AOG of French Polynesia.

In 1999, a small group of Pentecostals who until then had met together at Bonne Nouvelle, or in the group directed by the young EEPF members, or at home meetings, founded the Church of the Full Gospel, directed by an American pastor from Pacific Ministry International, the missionary branch of the First Assembly of God of Maui (Hawaiian Islands). This church, which draws many of the faithful from the AOG, distinguishes itself from the Assemblies by three characteristics: a greater number of charismatic practices, a more significant opening toward Polynesian cultural expression (music and dance), and the emphasis laid on spiritual combat, along the lines of the ‘third wave’ of American Pentecostalism inspired in particular by C. Peter Wagner and teachings of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California (Cox 1995: 249 ff.).

Lastly, the Calvary Chapel Church, attached to the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, was begun in 2001 by a Tahitian-Hawaiian couple close to the EEPF group of charismatic believers.

The organizers of these various sites of Polynesian Pentecostalism came together in September 2004, to organize for Tahiti the 14th Prayer Assembly of the Pacific, preceded by a ‘March for Jesus’ in the streets of Papeete.
Protestant Dissidents (Breakaway Churches)

Since the 1950s, the Protestant Church (EEPF, now EPM) has undergone several splits, which gave rise to what are usually known as the ‘small churches,’ now gathered in a federation. These churches, whose theological orientation is not completely identical to that of the EPM of today, were not born from theological dissension, but more often from conflicts between parishes and the administration of the Protestant Church, generally concerning financial issues, changes of pastors or political issues.

The Keretitiano (Christian) Church was created in 1951 by parishioners of Afaahiti (peninsula of Tahiti) who were dissatisfied with the attitude of the administration of the Protestant Church toward the pastor of this parish, Pastor Mahinepeu, who was accused of embezzlement (Simon 1984: 36). Other parishes joined Afaahiti at the time of disagreements related to a change of pastor (in Rimatara), or to the referendum of September 1958 concerning the adhesion of French Polynesia to the French Republic (in Tahiti and the Leeward Islands, the ‘no’ party left the Protestant Church of which many leaders espoused the ‘yes’ position). The Keretitiano Church, the most significant of the ‘small churches,’ is present in Tahiti, Rimatara and the Leeward Islands.

Founded in 1961 in Papeete, the Autonomous Church in the beginning included Pastor Mahinepeu — excluded by the majority of the parishioners from Afaahiti — and his supporters (Simon 1984: 37). It was established thereafter in several places on the island of Tahiti.

In 1977, a schism in the parish of Papara led to the creation of the Pain de Vie (Bread of Life) Church, directed until his death in 1993 by Pastor Tupai, and since 1995 by his sister-in-law (between 1993 and 1995, Pastor Tupai’s wife temporarily took charge). Initially, it was a question of pastoral transfer: after four years in Papara (west coast of Tahiti), Pastor Tupai was named to Papenoo (east coast) in 1977, and in order to preserve her job as town secretary and not to interrupt the schooling of the children, the pastor’s wife decided, with his agreement, not to follow him to his new parish — an arrangement rejected by the EEPF administration. It should however be noted that other considerations, more theological, distinguished Pastor Tupai from the majority line within the EEPF and gave the Pain de Vie Church a particular identity. During Tupai’s studies in France, his wife explained, he understood many things he felt it was necessary to change: “When the Pastor began our church, inside, the usual barriers were not present, a separation between the persons in charge of the church and the community was not desired. For us, barriers separate people. It is as if only we can be there and not you” (Tupai and Reid 2001, interview by authors).

This concept of church authority, which is closer to teachings about ‘the priesthood of all believers’ (more commonly found in the evangelical churches than in the strongly hierarchical EEPF), explains to a great extent why this small church was the first in French Polynesia to accept a woman pastor.

In 1985, approximately a third of the parishioners of Pueu (peninsula of Tahiti) left the EEPF with Pastor Teura to found the New Evangelical Church, which has 200 adult members today. Pastor Teura, who maintained difficult relationships with the administration of the EEPF, took part that same year in an evangelistic campaign led by YWAM in partnership with the EEPF. At the end of this campaign, explained a former director of YWAM:

He took with him a group of young people, and others who did not want to go home. He took them to other islands. I think that they were in Bora Bora, Huahine, Raiatea. During this trip
they continued to do what they had been doing with YWAM, ... there were about thirty people. 
And the director of YWAM had told them clearly that he did not agree with that at all .... They 
ignored him and continued, even in the name of YWAM, in the islands (Isabelle and Richard 
Betts 2001, interview by Yannick Fer).

But these young people did not follow Pastor Teura, who established his own church 
consisting only of former parishioners from Pueu, who were never given an evangelical or 
charismatic orientation. From 1993 to 2000, a former pastor of the EEPF (who had left 
because of his divorce) succeeded Teura at the head of this church. Since then the Autono-
mous Church has approached the EEPF, which has assigned one of its pastors to officiate 
at the Lord’s Supper every first Sunday of the month in the ‘small Church’ in Pueu.

Lastly, since December 1995, a dispute has brought the administration of the EEPF 
into conflict with the local church councils of three parishes on Raiatea (Leeward Islands), 
which seceded under the aegis of Pastor Philippe Tupu. The reason for the rupture is, 
officially, mainly financial: suspecting the central treasury of the EEPF of badly managing 
the money paid by the parishioners during the annual collection (the mə), the pastor decided 
to keep the money collected in his parish, to finance the repair of the church. The 
administration of the EEPF called it embezzlement and relieved him of his duties in December 
1995. Tupu organized the occupation of the churches and other buildings of the parishes 
concerned and the affair took a more legal turn, since the courts were called upon by the 
two parties in conflict to rule on a delicate question: “To whom do the churches belong?” (a 
headline in les Nouvelles de Tahiti of 24 September 1999). Indeed, the grounds (often placed 
at someone’s disposal by parishioners) and the buildings inherited from the Society of 
Evangelical Missions of Paris became properties of the autonomous EEPF in 1963, but 
some uncertainty remains concerning the respective rights of local church councils and the 
Property Board (Conseil d’Administration des Biens) of the church. The highly publicized 
“Tupu affair” is testimony to the recurring tensions between parishes, which assert an 
autonomy close to the congregationalist model, and the central administration of the church, 
which functions more in a presbyterian-synodal mode. The affair is based, moreover, on 
multiple oppositions — of a personal, policy and theological nature. On the personal level, 
the relations between Tupu, who is a former director of the Pastoral School, and President 
Ihorai of the EEPF (until 2004) did not facilitate the resolution of the conflict. On the 
political level, the fact that in August 1995 Tupu accepted the invitation of the Flosse 
government to make a trip to Moruroa — in contradiction to the stance of the EEPF 
administration against the brutal resumption of the nuclear tests — is explicitly mentioned 
in the announcement of his dismissal. On the theological level, Tupu, educated in France at 
the Free Faculty of Reformed Theology in Aix-en-Provence and at the European Biblical 
Institute in Lamorlaye — two establishments of evangelical tendency — always opposed 
Māohi contextual theology. In 1999 some of the parishioners of Papetoai (Moorea) who 
rejected the celebration of the Lord’s Supper with coconut milk and breadfruit joined 
Tupu’s movement.

The Bahá’í Faith

A first assembly was established in Papeete in 1958, but it was not maintained, and it 
was only during the 1980s that the Bahá’í Faith was permanently established in French 
Polynesia. Until now, however, it has not experienced a development comparable to that 
observed in other Pacific Islands (Hassall 1996: 3), although its presence has become more
visible in the last few years. The Bahá’í of French Polynesia are organized in two local spiritual assemblies, in Papeete and Paea (west coast of Tahiti), and seem to have a few believers in the Leeward Islands also. A regional committee of Bahá’í teaching in French Polynesia was also set up (Teinauri 2001: 7), and twice a year the members, who are mostly of Polynesian origin, gather for a ‘regional meeting.’ An important feature of these gatherings are workshops intended for children, since one of the priorities of the Bahá’í religion, in French Polynesia as elsewhere, is education (La Dépêche de Tahiti 11.01.2005).

The Church of Tahiti of the New Testament

This church is the fruit of a schism that occurred in 1981 within the Alleluia Church. From the first years of this church some of the members militated in favour of an absolutely Chinese Protestantism and disputed the appointments of missionaries of the French AOG to direct the church. At the beginning of the 1970s, several leaders and members of Alleluia met in Hong Kong with representatives of the Church of the New Testament founded in 1963 by Kong Duen Yee, a former actress who converted to Pentecostalism and became an evangelist. Pastor Sit, who met her at the end of 1962, wrote:

A converted movie actress, Kong ... Duan-yi who had wonderful evangelistic meetings at the beginning, was now making her headquarters in Hong Kong, and was sending her co-workers to our meetings to record every service. She seemed to have adopted our teachings, but often went to the extremes. ... Sister Kong certainly had the gift of an evangelist, and as such had been helping all kinds of churches in soul-winning and outreach. Then, an American minister visited her and allegedly told her she was called to be God’s apostle to the East. As such, she had been holding meetings in Malaysia, starting new churches, and pulling believers out of their own churches to join her (Sit 1999: 72-73).

Between 1963 and 1966 (when she died), having become a prophetess of the new church, Kong Duen Yee produced a series of writings partly inspired by Pentecostalism. With the Bible they form the corpus of beliefs of this church. Later they were supplemented by the writings of her successor, who emerged in 1973 after a period of conflict over the leadership. The faithful call the new leader Elijah Hong (because he is ‘the Elijah of the latter days’ announced by the Old Testament), ‘leader of the apostles’ and ‘prophet of all nations,’ and he was installed on Mount Shuanliu Ku in Taiwan. The Church of the New Testament, which is also established in Malaysia and Canada and on the west coast of the United States is strongly centralized and hierarchical, and is firmly under the authority of Elijah Hong.

The Church of Tahiti of the New Testament, officially created in 1981, is present in Tahiti and Taha’a. Relatively closed and almost exclusively Chinese, it has developed a range of commercial activities through two companies, of which the best known is Araka Fish, famous in the Chinese community for its dried and salted fish. The church possesses a small island in the atoll of Rangiroa and has a pearl-farming operation there. The church became known to the general public by articulating on several occasions — in particular in 1985 during the passage of Halley’s Comet — an apocalyptic vision of contemporary events and a discourse centred on head-to-head combat with Satan and his acolytes (in particular the Chinese and Taiwanese governments, which are hostile to the church). Lastly, for the last few years, Elijah Hong has proclaimed the need for “a return to Eden” and has encouraged his believers to develop a non-toxic agriculture “without chemicals, without pesticide”: 
“So, we do everything ourselves, our own compost,” explains a spokeswoman of the church; “we have compost worms, thus we do many natural things. It is sure that one cannot be saved 100 per cent, but that is our goal” (Patricia 2002, interview by Yannick Fer).

**Judaism**

Some Jewish families were resident in the 19th century, but “the existence in Tahiti of a structured Jewish community dates only from the 1960s,” states B. Saura (2004: 111). The installation of the CEP having brought French Jews to Tahiti, generally Sephardi originating from the former French colonies in North Africa, this small community founded the Cultural Association of Israelites and Sympathizers of Polynesia (ASCISPO) in 1982. A synagogue was inaugurated in Papeete in December 1993 (*La Dépêche de Tahiti* 27.12.1993).

**Chinese Traditional Religion and Buddhism**

In 1876 the Chinese immigrant community built a Buddhist temple in Papeete, dedicated to the hero Kan Ti.

The majority of the Chinese who settled in Tahiti came from a very modest rural background, and although certain ancestral customs, beliefs and ceremonies dominated their everyday lives, traditional culture eluded them because very few immigrants knew enough written characters (Wen Fa 1979: 137).

The religion practised in the Kan Ti temple observed above all a fidelity to the ancestors, in a context of family and community traditions. The temple delivers amulets — in particular ideograms presumably carrying beneficial influences that one posts on the walls of the house — which are divinations or horoscopes tracing the destiny of the newborn. Although these practices are maintained, in particular among the Tahitian Catholics of Chinese origin, very few people still define themselves as ‘Buddhists.’

The Buddhism that has developed in Tahiti in recent years is of a totally different nature. It is Tibetan Buddhism of the Nyingmapa school (founded by Kyabje Kangyur Rinpotché). The temple of Gyatso Dzong in Punaauia (west coast of Tahiti) and the Naropa Buddhist Centre (opened in 1993 in Papara, on the west coast of Tahiti) regularly accommodate European or Tibetan teachers. These new Buddhists are primarily French people from the medical profession. An association, Himalayan Exchanges, was also created. Its object is: “...to promote humanitarian and medical aid to Himalayan countries like Tibet, India and Nepal... In a spirit of exchange and sharing, these countries will make known, through our association, their cultures on the spiritual, artistic and medical levels” (http://www.echangeshimalayens.org, 15.04.2005).

**Other Religious Movements**

In its edition of 16 April 2000, *La Dépêche de Tahiti* made a count of movements regularly described as ‘sects’ in the reports of the French Parliament or of organizations such as the CCMM (Centre against Mental Manipulation, which has a local correspondent in Tahiti). Some of these are movements of the New Age type, which do not necessarily show the characteristics of dangerousness usually associated with the concept of a sect and are organized in affinity networks around bookshops and conferences centred on well-being and pure living.
A second category includes movements whose dangerousness has been underlined, in particular by legal decisions: Vipassana (connected in French Polynesia to Siderella, Iso-Zen and Galacteus); and Mandarom (of French origin, and with about 30 followers according to La Dépêche de Tahiti). La Dépêche de Tahiti also mentions Shimeiko (a movement of Shintoist inspiration which is said to have about 60 believers in Tahiti), the Raelians (few in number), and Galacteus (which is reputed to possess a small island in Bora Bora).

Lastly, two movements deserve detailed attention: The Children of God and Te Tumu Nui. The Children of God movement was founded in California in 1968, in the wake of the Movements for Jesus, by the ‘prophet’ David Brandt Berg (known as ‘Moses David’). It practises 'flirty fishing’ i.e. sexual intercourse as a means of evangelization (Vernette and Moncelon 1996: 100–104). During the 1970s these Children of God were integrated for several months into the Protestant parish of Bethel (Papeete), leading part of the congregation into street evangelism. Becoming clandestine thereafter, the movement — which now has only a handful of believers — called itself Youth in Action, thus playing on a confusion with the name of the organization YWAM.

The healing sect Te Tumu Nui was created by Gerard Amaru, who was convicted several times for swindling (on the occasion of his thirteenth judgment, in January 1994, La Dépêche de Tahiti spoke of a “professional swindler,” greeted by the president of the court as an “old acquaintance”). Installed in Papara (west coast of Tahiti), the sect has had a certain success for several years, in particular amongst the socially disadvantaged Tahitian population, by developing two types of activities: initially, meetings were centred on healing, imitating several features of Pentecostal meetings (welcome, reference to the Holy Spirit, resumption of the name of the Pentecostal church of Noumea “Viens et vois” (“Come and see”), punctuating speeches with “alleluia,” etc), thus creating genuine confusion. Gerard Amaru, whose brother is an AOG pastor, indeed attended the AOG for some time. But the meetings of Te Tumu Nui are used particularly for money-making activities, bringing together esotericism, Christianity and Polynesian traditional medicine. Gerard Amaru himself is presented as a great healer, called “Raa Nui,” and Te Tumu Nui offers “baths of purification, energy massage, ancestral remedies, and medical care.”

**Para Church Organizations**

**Youth With a Mission (YWAM)**

Engaged from the late 1960s in the Pacific (in 1967, a first campaign took place in New Zealand, for the Pacific Islanders of Auckland), YWAM also quickly began work in the French-speaking countries, drawing on its French-speaking base in Lausanne, Switzerland. During the 1970s several teams visited French Polynesia to establish contacts, evaluate the possibilities of collaboration with the local churches and meet with the Polynesians. In 1982, the year that the YWAM ship *Anastasis* made a stopover in the port of Papeete, the organization acquired a certain visibility, with Bible distributions and mime shows, songs and dancing. Young missionaries were billeted by the Alleluia and Morija churches (founded in 1979 by a dissenting AOG pastor, the latter church closed its doors in 1986). In 1983 a group from Hawaii, in partnership with the AOG, led an evangelistic campaign in the Society Islands.
But it was in 1985 thatYWAM became permanently established in French Polynesia, at the time of the International Year of Youth, collaborating this time with the EEPF. As in several Pacific Islands, the prospect of a re-mobilization of the young people of the church is what particularly attracted the leaders of the EEPF: YWAM proposed to fight against the expansion of the Mormon churches and the disengagement of the rising generation by offering them freer, more modern means of expression, an international vision, and the opportunity to take part in the missionary adventure. For several weeks in the Society Islands, a team of 60 people from Europe, Africa and Hawaii organized meetings centred on evangelization and aimed at the young leaders of the UCJG, the youth movement of the EEPF.

The charismatic and de-institutionalized character of YWAM Protestantism was not perceived by the leaders of the EEPF at first, but in the years that followed it created a series of tensions and misunderstandings, leading to a rupture in 1996. Indeed, for the YWAM team members who remained on the spot after the 1985 campaign, the EEPF was more a field of mission than a true institutional partner. While taking part in leadership of the Bethel parish, they held meetings at their residences during which they prayed for healing, the awakening of the church and the action of the Holy Spirit here and now. They also supported the efforts of EEPF youth touched by the 1985 campaign, who organized a charismatic group for prayer and training within a traditional parish of Papeete. Lastly, by means of personal contacts and informal meetings, YWAM established links between the Protestant parishes and various sites of Pentecostalism in French Polynesia, in particular the Church of the Bonne Nouvelle. Some young people from the Protestant parishes of Papeete attended a discipleship training school (DTS, the first training level offered by the YWAM’s University of the Nations), then became full-time team members in Hawaii or in French-speaking Switzerland. Those who were attracted by the freedom of expression — in particular of cultural expression, since YWAM accepts and promotes the use of Polynesian music and dances during worship — and convinced of the need for a more intense personal commitment very often have difficulty in re-entering parishes where the deacons oppose this type of evolution. Many of them join the Pentecostal churches.

In 1996 the EEPF broke with YWAM, which then turned to the AOG and developed a programme of activities for young people within the Assemblies of Papeete and Taravao. In particular, they developed the King’s Kids programme (choreography, mimes, nature camps and excursions). In 1997 a discipleship training school was organized in Papeari, on the west coast of Tahiti. It had five students, including four from the AOG. The school had a phase of practical evangelization on the atoll of Apataki, in the Tuamotu Islands. Pastor Thurner was one of the trainers in this school, and for this reason he was invited to preach in several Assemblies. In 1999 the couple responsible for YWAM in French Polynesia decided to follow Thurner when he founded the Full Gospel Church, leading to the end of YWAM’s collaboration with the AOG.

Since 1999 this Full Gospel Church has regularly accommodated YWAM team members, as it did in 2002 with a training course organized by a group from Island Breeze, a ministry of YWAM that encourages the use of Polynesian cultural expression in the service of evangelization.
Association of Christian Surfers

The Association of Christian Surfers Tahiti is a member of the Federation of Tahitian Surfing and is affiliated with Christian Surfers International (CSI), which was founded in 1983 in Australia. The movement in French Polynesia was officially created in 1998 by Kevin Heminway, a former team member of YWAM who came to the country at the time of the 1985 campaign. Himself a surfer, and more particularly a well-known shaper of boards, he resigned from YWAM in 1985. His subsequent work has been the evangelization of those involved in Tahitian surfing, which includes many amateurs and nearly 300 licensed practitioners (277 in 2001). In 1997 an evangelistic campaign carried out jointly by Heminway, Surfers for Mission International (SFMI) — a ministry of YWAM — and the AOG had encouraging results and gave birth to the Association of Christian Surfers Tahiti.

The evangelization of young surf lovers entailed showing surfing films and concerts of Christian rock 'n' roll. Moreover, since 1999 the Association has organized an annual world level competition on the coast of the Tahiti peninsula, the Sapinus Longboard Classic. This competition alone ensures Christian Surfers Tahiti a media exposure that belies its small number of members (29 in 2001), and is one of a series of partnerships both institutional (with the French Ministry for Youth and Sports) and commercial (through sponsorships).

Relations with the AOG, whose two representatives (a church member and a pastor) sat on the board of directors of Christian Surfers Tahiti in 1998, have since weakened.

SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

Until now, French Polynesia has not experienced a diversification of religious affiliation and a development of interdenominational evangelical organizations as great as in other Pacific Islands. In 1994 Manfred Ernst underscored this fact: "...there are fewer really new religious groups active in French Polynesia than for example in Fiji, Tonga, or Western Samoa. The growing groups are, with the exception of the Jehovah's Witnesses, not really new, since they have their beginnings in the 19th century" (Ernst 1994: 141).

The two large historical churches, EEPF (today EPM) and the Catholic Church, include more than three quarters of the population and remain the determining identity reference points. At the same time the level of effective religious practice is decreasing and the movement of individuals among the various churches is increasing. In other words, the modes of membership and the relations with the religious institution are evolving more quickly than the religious identities themselves. This shift — which is perhaps only temporary — partly masks the depth of the changes in progress. Indeed, the Catholics and the Protestants of today do not always resemble those of preceding generations, when territorial, family and religious membership was indivisible.

Within the Catholic Church, the great mass of the non-practising contrasts with the 'born again' of the charismatic renewal, who reclaim their Catholic heritage by means of a personal engagement in affinity communities.

The EPM, opposed to this type of charismatic 'awakening,' has undergone a relative decline for several years, and this has been accompanied by considerable internal transformation. Its public stands and the work of its Commission of Theological Activities, directed particularly towards mobilizing the Maohi ethnic-cultural identity, with their political implications, attract all the attention. They carry within them both the prospect of militant
re-enlistment and the risk of disaffection, the latter by those who do not wish to bind their religious life to the political destiny of a Maōbī people in whom they do not always recognize their identity. For a number of external observers, they also mark a nationalist trend that will in the long term lead Polynesian Protestantism to a kind of asphyxiation.

They are, however, only the most visible part of a set of reflections, attempts at adaptation and tensions, which show to what degree the EPM is ultimately the church that best reflects contemporary Polynesian society. The EPM espouses the contradictions of this society, undergoes the mutations more than other churches, but is also the church that can, better than the others, translate them into religious language. The experimentation that is played out around worship in the French language, the entry of women into the pastorate, and the separation between church ministries and political offices, are some examples. The points of tension are numerous: the parochial organization as amuira'a, which for some is an essential identity reference mark, has become for others a yoke unsuited to the new ways of life. Attachment to the traditional church community, which was inseparable from the Polynesian Protestant identity in the past, is faced with an increasing rejection of collective constraints considered now to be too heavy and exerted by a suffocating line of authority (in particular that of the deacons).

The advance of the new groups, the professing churches, has come primarily at the expense of the EPM and very often nourishes these internal tensions. It was long slowed by a political and cultural context related to the French domination, but today a context of dynamics, social or more strictly religious, seems to support the establishment and the development of this type of church in French Polynesia.

The French State has intervened in the religious field in at least two ways: on one hand by being opposed to religious movements it regards as foreign — in particular American — or dangerous (the French concept of ‘sect’ being generally more extensive than that in other Pacific Islands), and on the other hand by maintaining as much as possible a distinctively French separation between religion, ‘private business,’ and the public domain. The restrictions on residence rights for foreign missionaries and the impossibility of organizing open air meetings as freely as the missionary churches could in Fiji, Tonga or Vanuatu, for example, were thus added to the obstacle of the language.

This official regulation focused on control of the borders is implicitly founded on an understanding of religious change as an exogenous phenomenon, the disturbances from outside being contrasted to an interior space that, left to itself, would remain stable. The representatives of the two large Polynesian churches are also sometimes tempted by this simple reading of the changes that are occurring: it is supposedly because new ‘foreign’ churches came that religious practices were upset. In fact, the progress made by the professing churches seems to repose on a more complex dynamic.

Firstly, it testifies to a progressive obliteration of the differences between French Polynesia and the rest of the Pacific Islands: migrations, exchanges, and the accelerated circulation of people and information — through the transnational networks of churches or by the Internet — have helped bring to French Polynesia phenomena that other islands have experienced over a longer time. This is true for the historic churches — with the diffusion of contextual theologies like the “coconut theology” of Dr S.A. Havea of Tonga, through the PTC, the PCC or the CEVAA — just as much as for the more recent churches: for example, the recovery by certain Pentecostal churches in Tahiti of the Hawaiian Christian hula. It is thus probable that in the next few years we will see the establishment in French Polynesia of
various movements (especially Protestant evangelical movements) already present in the Pacific or in the United States, not via foreign missionaries but on the initiative of Polynesians who have discovered new churches while visiting or living in other countries.

Secondly, the progress of the professing churches in French Polynesia rests on a whole range of social transformations. Some are long term processes, like the making of a Polynesian nation by the mixing of populations originating in the various archipelagoes, a phenomenon which contributes to a greater religious mixing within families and also to the emergence of personal membership choices. Other such changes were caused or accentuated by the establishment of the French CEP, even if one finds them — to differing degrees — in many societies of the Pacific. Thus, the appearance of new social categories, such as civil servants, the expansion of an economy of wage-earners and of consumers, rural migration and the growth of urban centres inevitably modified family organization and the relation of individuals to the churches. The various forms of mobility (social, geographical, personal or inter-generational) observable in contemporary Polynesian society have been reflected, especially since the 1980s, in the religious field, with a significant circulation of individuals seeking a 'true' or 'good' church. Lastly, individuals need 'to make their way in life' and to ensure their safety (material and spiritual) by themselves. This development, arising mainly from these evolutions and the rise in education level, maintains deep affinities with the religious discourse centred on the assumption of responsibility for one's aspirations and personal problems.

But these dynamics of social and cultural change intersect also with properly religious dynamics: the Mormon and SDA churches have now reached a significant size which, allied with their long establishment, makes them change agents. To a lesser extent, other churches whose influence cannot be measured only by the still small number of regular members, such as the Pentecostal churches, are change agents too. More proselytizing than the historic churches, and less inclined to compromise with what they regard as the flaws of contemporary Polynesian society, they contribute to the diffusion of new moral standards, and of new representations of oneself, of salvation and of existence. They adhere in particular to promoting the model of the 'Christian family' and a moralization of life: a firm condemnation of alcoholism, adultery or homosexuality, a mistrust of 'worldly passions,' and more or less explicit denunciation of political practices (e.g. corruption and authoritarianism).

Regarding the religious institution, they propose other forms of sociability, a different distribution of responsibilities and often another type of authority, which competes with — and with the eyes of the converted, disqualifies — the more traditional religious organizations. In the majority of these churches, the intensive and continuous training of the members seems to be the key element, which ensures the incorporation of strong collective values. On these depend, on the one hand, the cohesion of the group and the militant commitment of each member, and on the other hand, the legitimacy of the church framework. The latter, often more constraining than in the historic churches, is better accepted by converts who see it as necessary to the proper functioning of the missionary enterprise, or live with it in the 'enchanted' mode of a personal relationship with God.

The will to learn, to progress while acquiring new knowledge of a Christian God already familiar to a large majority of Polynesians, plus the conviction that this God requires more than mere formal membership in a church and that he can, in return, transform personal lives, ultimately appear to be principal sources of the attractiveness of the discourse of the professing churches in French Polynesia.
Notes


2. The Haut-Commissaire "is in charge of the national interests, of respect for the law and international commitments, and of public order and administrative control" (article 3 of the Statutes of French Polynesia).

3. From 1987 to 1991 the government of French Polynesia was led by Alexandre Leontieff (autonomist tendency), while G. Flosse and his party were in opposition.

4. 14.38 per cent of the individuals in the census were counted as 'not declaring.' Cited by B. Saura (1993: 127).

5. A survey carried out on a representative sample of 1,000 persons over 18 years old, with the results published in La Dépêche de Tahiti on 11 and 12 September 2000. Eighteen per cent of Protestants declared that they never practised their religion, 47 per cent practised from time to time. Only 13 per cent of LDS members and 8 per cent of SDA members declined they never practised their religion, and the proportion of those who often or very often practised their religion was much higher (39 per cent of SDA, 53 per cent of LDS).

6. The 1971 data came from the census of 8 February 1971 (INSEE). The 1992 data are estimations made by Manfred Ernst (1994: 133). The 2000 data came from a Louis Harris survey carried out in Tahiti. The results are weighted to extend it to the whole of the population of French Polynesia and are completed by research and personal observations for the churches not mentioned in the survey.

7. The dissident Protestant churches, often called 'the small churches' spring from schisms within the Protestant Church: the Keretitiano (Christian) Church, the Pain de Vie (Bread of Life) Church, the Autonomous Church, the New Evangelical Church.

8. In the census of 2002, there were 245,516 inhabitants in French Polynesia and the average annual growth from 1996 to 2002 was 1.8 per cent, which allows the 2000 population to be calculated at 236,780.

9. The Pentecostal churches are not cited in the 1971 census and at the time only one Pentecostal church existed, the Alleluia Church. The baptismal registers indicate that 360 were baptized by immersion in 1962-1963, the date of the Chinese Pentecostal 'awakening.' The great majority of them left the EEPF in 1967 at the creation of the Alleluia Church. Thus, we estimate the number of Pentecostals in 1971 at 340 people.

10. In 1992, Manfred Ernst noted the presence of a charismatic group in almost every parish and estimated that between 20 per cent and 30 per cent of Catholics were charismatic.


12. For a detailed analysis of Pentecostal churches in French Polynesia, see Fer, 2005 (a).

13. The Polynesian pastor who undertook a training course at the South Pacific Bible College of the Assemblies of God in Fiji after his apprenticeship period is a notable exception. An "evangelization and healing" meeting in the Maco Nena omnisports room on 12 September 2001.

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