

The Open Brethren Movement in France*

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The evangelicals in France who meet locally as ‘assemblies’ and are sometimes referred to as ‘les frères larges’ have already been described in substance by the historian Sébastien Fath with a trio of characteristics, namely ‘a pronounced and total rejection of all clergy, an emphasis on Biblical holiness and distrust of any institutional ecumenism’.¹ The Brethren movement, however, as a whole has remained ‘the most under-studied sector of France’s nebulous evangelicalism’.² Moved therefore by intense curiosity, my research enabled me to retrace the story of the implantation of the Open Brethren in l’Hexagone,* of which I will give a very imperfect survey in the first part of this article. In the second part I will tackle the social functioning of this group.³

I. The implantation of the Open Brethren in France

1. *Historical context*

Delving into the historical context has first of all highlighted for me how the French Open Brethren movement has had a Europe-wide input, in similar fashion to most of the evangelical world in France.

* Translated from the French by Brian Davies.

¹ Sébastien Fath, *Du ghetto au réseau: Le Protestantisme évangélique en France, 1800–2005* [*From the ghetto to the network: Evangelical Protestantism in France*] (Genève, 2005), 361–2.

² Fath, *Du ghetto au réseau*, 369.

* Translator’s note: ‘l’Hexagone’ is a phrase used for the mainland of metropolitan France because of its shape on a map, and is frequently used to designate the country itself.

³ A comprehensive account of the research undertaken, including the primary and secondary sources used, is the present writer’s *Les frères larges en France métropolitaine: Socio-histoire d’un mouvement évangélique de 1850 à 2010* (Paris, 2017).

Thus it was the Genevan Awakening which first played a major role by encouraging a militant protestant re-mobilisation, as evidenced by the influence of the Pélisserie Chapel in Geneva: in the twentieth century this fellowship was to support missionaries like Abel Félix (1923–2014) working amongst the assemblies in France.

The movement called the Plymouth Brethren is fundamental for our study. With its beginnings in 1825 in Dublin, this movement brought together pious people from various Protestant denominations who rejected ‘existing ecclesiastical structures in order to recover the pure original faith and practice of the Early Church’.⁴ This network sought to democratise access to the sacred and to promote spontaneous participation in its religious gatherings. John N. Darby (1800–1882) soon distanced himself from the other Brethren by his doctrine of the visible Church being in a state of ruin, resulting in the dissolution of ecclesiastic offices due to the absence of apostolic authority; his concern to disassociate the remnant of true Christians from evil led to his being characterised by disciplinary intransigence and exclusivity. From the mid-nineteenth century, therefore, the Brethren movement presented a divided face: on the one side, various groups of so-called ‘Close’ or ‘Exclusive Brethren’,* and on the other, the autonomous assemblies of ‘Open Brethren’, following the course of Anthony N. Groves (1795–1853) and his brother-in-law, George Müller (1805–1898).

In consequence, in French-speaking Switzerland, the confluence of the Geneva Awakening and the Plymouth Brethren movement resulted in the Swiss grouping known as Open Brethren. This religious awakening also erupted in Italy during the first half of the nineteenth century, in particular in the alpine valleys of Piedmont, where Christians from the canton of Vaud were active: it was thus

⁴ D. W. Bebbington, ‘Le Protestantisme évangélique anglo-saxon au XIX^e siècle, Un Réseau international de convertis’, in S. Fath (ed.), *Le Protestantisme évangélique, un christianisme de conversion : Entre Ruptures et filiations* (Brépols, Belgium, 2004), 44.

* Translator’s note: in France the Exclusive Brethren, or ‘Darbyites’, are usually called darbyistes.

that the Italian network of Churches of Christian Brethren, amongst others, came into being. So it was not only from across the Channel but also from Switzerland and Italy that the various founders of the Open Brethren in France came.

2. Scattered beginnings (1850–1915)

During the first phase of implantation of Open Brethren, various zealots came onto the scene whose activity produced small scattered groups of believers. Paris was thought *avant-garde* because it was there that the first Open Brethren-style assembly appeared in the era of the Second Empire.* It is not unlikely that it was the fruit of the activity of one or several dissident Swiss pastors who had been banished from the canton of Vaud in 1820. In any case, it was a Swiss immigrant, Antoine R. M. F. Bieler (1807–?) who led this first assembly in the mid-nineteenth century. Subsequently, other associates also came to the fore, such as the English brother Albert E. Brooks (1864–1937), who, in collaboration with another brother, distributed no less than 55,000 tracts and Scripture portions at the 1900 Paris world fair, the Exposition Universelle.

Meanwhile, just before the centenary of the French Revolution, the predominance of Catholicism in France still preoccupied foreign missionaries, and the seditious impulses of certain anarchists were worrying, to British evangelists in particular. These sentiments did not, however, get the better of the zeal of these foreign revivalists who put in place the basis of the Open Brethren movement in our country. For example, on the Côte d'Azur, where a population of British winter migrants had developed in the second half of the eighteenth century, a revival began at Vallauris around 1888 under the preaching of the shipping magnate, Richard M. Brocklebank (1843–1903). Matters accelerated four years later with the arrival of the Italian, Maurice Demaria (1863–1947), who was eager to evangelise his immigrant compatriots. Groups of Brethren developed likewise at Cannes and Nice. In addition, in 1901 Henri S. Contesse

* Translator's note: 1852 to 1870.

(1872–1960) came to preach in the region: born into an Open Brethren assembly in French-speaking Switzerland, he had given himself to gospel service in accordance with a vow of his mother, the daughter of Antoine Bieler. It happens that in one of his accounts he does not hesitate to rebuke ‘priests with a conscience sold to Satan’!⁵ In fact, the missionary was trying to impress his Swiss readers; and he did not omit to appeal to their generosity so that he would have the means to expand his evangelistic trip.

Elsewhere, at Die in the Drôme Department in south-east France, in 1884 the revivalist William Bird, whose ancestors seem to have been from Jersey but who was born in the canton of Geneva, took charge of a small group of Reformed Church dissidents. This preacher was joined ten years later by the Frenchman Samuel Vernier (1845–1904), previously a Reformed pastor: he was son of the revivalist Jean-Frédéric Vernier (1796–1871) of the Department of Franche-Comté in eastern France and had moved towards Brethren-style ecclesiological convictions, finishing up by renouncing his clerical salary in order to evangelise freely—the help that was occasionally sent by British Open Brethren was very opportune. Then in 1899 Henri Contesse came to work at Die—and the following year he married the eldest daughter of Samuel Vernier.

Immediately after the Separation of Church and State in 1905,* many evangelists felt that doors in France were at last opening to their message, so that around the middle of 1907 Albert Brooks moved to the dynamic industrial city of Nantes in western France; he spent his time handing out gospels, particularly at factory entrances. He used his car to distribute an abundance of literature at fairgrounds and markets in the region. In 1910 he was joined by the young Swiss René Zinder (1886–1968), whom he persuaded to come and evangelise in Nantes and who soon became very enthusiastic about the interest aroused amongst, in particular, the workers in the factories of the biscuit manufacturer Lefèvre-Utile (LU). However,

⁵ H. S. Contesse, in *Semailles et Moisson* [*Seedtime and Harvest*] (Jan. 1902), 8.

* Translator’s note: this was the law which established the separation between Church and State.

the following year, René Zinder, left to work in the Auvergne in central France.

During this time the Bieler assembly in Paris comprised about twenty members, followers of the ‘Pure Gospel’,⁶ including the Englishman Joseph E. Dutton (1858–1927), who had joined the Brethren in Great Britain. Having the habit of hailing passers-by in the street, of distributing thousands of Gospels and of organising unauthorised meetings on the boulevards, he frequently found himself at the police station! His compatriot Edward A. Salwey (1865–1949), a former Royal Navy Commodore, came to the capital in 1914: having already joined the Open Brethren in Great Britain, he quickly established contact with them in Paris. Like Dutton, he did not fail to have himself arrested by the police—no less than sixteen times in two months—for handing out tracts and carrying billboards in the streets; but he did underline, a posteriori, the great courtesy of the police.

On the other hand, tent evangelism, which started in 1912 at Digne-les-Bains in south-east France, provoked the following sarcastic commentary in the newspaper *La Croix des Alpes et de la Provence*:

We are told that this poor shed has pretensions to be a Protestant chapel and that several times a week sermons are given to the few people drawn there by religious ignorance or futile and imprudent curiosity, and that with this varnish of gentleness and philanthropy which false prophets know how to exploit the preachers are simply teaching the doctrines of Luther and Calvin. . . .

A man of the people, . . . whom we questioned on this subject, gave us this reply . . . “Do not worry . . .; here in Digne we have too much good sense to run looking for a new religion” This conversation . . . really put us at ease over the possible future of this heretical show, and we firmly hope that this flimsy temple whose

⁶ Archives nationales, le fonds de Moscou, serial no. 19940488/62, the Police Prefect to the Minister of the Interior, letter of 21 Dec. 1915, Paris. [Translator’s note: Le Fonds Moscou (the Moscow Collection) is the collection of French archives, seized by the Germans during the war, and returned by Russia in 1994 and 2001.]

thin canvas is truly a symbol of the value of the doctrine being preached there will soon be swept away with the leaves of the trees.⁷

But a few months later, a Sunday service was regularly being organised in the home of Henri Contesse, recently moved to Digne.

Certainly, the first phase of the Open Brethren implantation in France propelled to front-stage several pioneers with powerful voices and the will power of Corneille's heroes. Self-taught for the most part, they took advantage of the wind of religious liberty blowing through the land to come to grips with Romanism, the pugnacity of which they often encountered during this period. So in 1915 there were a dozen assemblies, a good many of them planted in areas not marked by Darbyism: for example, the Nantes district and the Alpes-Maritimes department had no Darbyite group in 1915, whereas two important areas of Darbyite influence, namely the Gard and Pyrénées-Atlantiques Departments, had no Open Brethren assembly.

3. The amalgamation phase (1916–1945)

The second phase of Open Brethren implantation from 1916 to 1945 is one of integration. In fact, after the mobility of the previous years, the organisation of a first revivalist get-together in Digne in 1916, drawing as it did believers from the whole south-west quarter of France, marks the beginning of a new stage. Thus the Open Brethren gradually wove regional webs to such a point that their evangelistic action was energised. If colportage slowed down, evangelistic literature was distributed in abundance, and tent campaigns multiplied, with help in 1929 from the Swiss assemblies in the form of the 'Tente française' (French Tent), as it came to be called. As to preaching, it was purposely fired by an eschatological perspective. In addition, the movement's vitality produced charitable works, and that in a country which had become materially anaemic.

The dynamism of the young French assemblies is evident, for example, in the Alpes-Maritimes, in the slipstream of Louis S. Arnéra (1862–1948), a tailor from Piedmont who had arrived in 1901

⁷ *La Croix des Alpes et de Provence*, 8 Sept. 1912, 3.

after breaking with Roman Catholicism. So it was that at the end of the Great War the assembly in Cannes was evangelising energetically, sometimes using a tent brought by Joseph Dutton, sometimes baptising converts in the coastal River Loup. Soon there evolved two Cannes assemblies, one speaking French, the other Italian. A new assembly was also formed in the working-class district of La Bocca, following bombardment by American B-29s in November 1943.

Evangelistic dynamism also characterised the assembly in Paris, as they used a hut, put-up specially for evangelistic meetings at the Porte des Lilas near to the Zone, the area of shanty towns encircling the city of Paris: Englishman George G. Jones (1900–1966), arriving in 1926 and commended by the Sunderland assembly, was soon evangelising amongst small and great. Although the assembly declined in energy with the outbreak of the Second World War, and the Porte des Lilas hut was destroyed in 1940, the following year saw the arrival of Dr Pierre Bernard (1914–2003), who having grown up in a Darbyite family in the Haut-Vivarais (Ardèche Department), took to the Open Brethren assembly to such a point that he became a preacher there.

The assemblies movement also touched the suburbs of Lyon, where at the start of the *Années Folles*, as the ‘Roaring Twenties’ of the 1920s came to be known in France, a new group was formed round the evangelist Edmond Squire (1882–1943), a native of French-speaking Switzerland. In Lyon itself an evangelistic mission was also started in 1924; their showpiece was the car of a particular type that René Zindler, in Lyon at the time, described:

The lower flap of a partition in the car instantaneously forms a platform whilst the other, the upper flap, forms the roof. The interior of the car is decked with several Biblical texts arousing the curiosity of the public. [The wife of Edmond] Squire is at the harmonium, and her young daughters are there to help with the singing. On hearing the first hymn, the crowd gathers and their number soon reaches the 4,000 mark. . . . The singing is pleasing, although we are accompanied by shouts and whistles. . . . Then it's my turn to preach. I talk about the cause of wars, of misfortunes, of human confusion

and of the only means of being set free. There are signs of approval on lots of faces; there are also protests on the side. At this moment we distribute tracts, having to throw fistfuls into the air to reach the largest number. . . . about a hundred hare-brained listeners howl and whistle out of malicious pleasure. . . . Stones and lumps of earth start to fall on the car; I get one of these projectiles on the back of my head. . . . When the car, changed into a volcano, set off to leave the place, a stone smashed into the glass and broke it.⁸

No less astonishing was the work undertaken in Marseille by the German Max Anger (1909–1997), whose wife was French: from 1944, Sunday after Sunday, he accosted hundreds of pedestrians out for an afternoon stroll on la Canebière, the high street in the old quarter; then those interested were invited to follow him to his mother-in-law's ironing room to be once more entertained with the gospel! In fact, the seaport city became henceforth the evangelistic territory of this former Salvation Army captain with the result that independently of the already existing Exclusive Brethren fellowship, there evolved a new Open Brethren assembly.

Examples of such evangelistic initiatives could be multiplied, starting with the Englishman William E. Taylor (1879–1965) and his tours,⁹ mainly in the southern Perpignan area, with a caravan bought in 1918 from an acrobat. Certainly, between the wars, the Open Brethren experienced solid development in France, especially in the south-eastern quarter of the country. Their evident proselytisation, not short of will power, in fact produced little church cells, sometimes maturing in the intimacy of a home before moving to rented premises; and the teaching of children played a strategic role. Without seeking any institutional recognition, these young assemblies did not hesitate to express their faith through adult baptism and the Lord's supper. However, their precariousness was

⁸ R. Zinder, *Semailles et Moisson* (Apr. 1924), 58.

⁹ Having left Jersey in March 1916, commended by the local assembly, William Taylor was first connected to the Pioneer Mission in France, a daughter organisation of the Pioneer Mission of C. H. Spurgeon (1843–1892), but established by Samuel Levermore, a British adherent of the Brethren.

perceptible due to their fragile numerical foundation and elementary structural evolution, whilst their integration into French society was not yet settled. In that state their fate was always largely dependent on their leaders, who generally happened to be Swiss or British missionaries. That said, it stands out that the resolute commitment of these individuals and their diligence in visiting the different assemblies allowed profitable relationship webs to be woven, on a regional and even national scale.

4. Combined effectiveness (1946–2010)

The third phase of implantation of the Open Brethren from the end of the Second World War to entry into the new Conseil National des Évangéliques de France (National Evangelical Council of France) is characterised by concerted, collaborative effectiveness. In effect a new era began in 1946, as the kick-start was given to the periodical *Servir en L'attendant* [*Serving as we wait for Him*], to youth camps and to national conferences. These briskly led initiatives accompanied the expansion of the Open Brethren group and the progressive establishment of their assemblies. On the threshold of 1947 their number was twenty-nine; in 2010 there were seventy more. They are to be found mainly in a band stretching from the Vendée to the North, that is, where darbyistes are scarce.

In the Department of Nord-Pas-de-Calais, for example, every summer after the fall of the Third Reich, the French Village Workers, a modest body of young Christians,¹⁰ almost all British, conducted evangelistic campaigns with their call to faith and conversion. The generally cordial reception by the French, a century after the region was opened to Baptist influence, partially from Switzerland, can certainly be attributed to the role played by the United Kingdom in the liberation from the German yoke. This evangelistic movement will have been the catalyst for the militancy of the Open Brethren, if only for having provided a launch pad for

¹⁰ Even if the French Village Workers belong to different churches, it is significant that the three leaders of the movement, including the pioneer Cecil Moody (1910–1997), were members of an assembly of Open Brethren in Bristol in the 1950s.

the ministry of Peter Wheeler. It was also after having met the French Village Workers that Pierre Bernard founded a small Open Brethren assembly at the village of Petite-Synthe, now a suburb of Dunkirk.

However, assemblies came into being in other regions. For example, the fellowship in Strasbourg, which came to be known as La Bonne Nouvelle [The Good News], really took off just after the war before assimilating several members of the German-speaking Open Brethren assembly founded by Charles Freysz (1883–1970) more than a generation earlier. Also, in Auvergne an Open Brethren assembly was born as a result of the defection of a group from the Exclusive Brethren: a quite exceptional scenario in the history of the Open Brethren in France. In 1949 a new assembly came into being at Chambon-sur-Lignon around former darbyste Paul R. Grand (1886–1965). Furthermore, the proselytising activity of the Open Brethren was to be seen in the Grenoble district, where the French Tent was set up in 1946. It was to the Grenoble assembly that Marcel Tabailleux (1926–2000) came to minister in 1960. Some years later this evangelist then became the figurehead of a new assembly formed in 1963 by about ten families who came from the Brethren fellowship of Hussein Dey in the suburbs of Algiers.

Elsewhere, other evangelists followed their own pathway. Max Anger in Marseilles is a case in point. He regularly went down to La Canebière with a few believers from the assembly to make contact with the crowds and bring a few who showed interest to the chapel rented from the Eglise Evangélique Arménienne [Armenian Evangelical Church]. A passing preacher was amazed in 1947, writing ‘Curious congregation . . . ! Employees in their work clothes, soldiers, women with their filled shopping baskets; the black Senegalese, the sunburnt legionnaire, the provocative prostitute all together to hear the gospel’.¹¹ That year also the work of Max Anger was reinforced with the arrival of Abel Félix, who had been converted in the Pélisserie Chapel in Geneva. Max Anger also later did tent evangelism; in doing so, he was sometimes disturbed by ‘a

¹¹ P. Gadina, *Semailles et Moisson* (Feb. 1947), 26.

few black shirts* whom one has to combat with buckets of water or sometimes a mere threat'.¹²

Meanwhile the assembly in Paris, strengthened by the arrival of fugitives from Algeria and Morocco, was engaged in all-out evangelism and in 1958 formed a new assembly in the north of the capital. Another meeting started in 1966 in the 20th arrondissement. This new evangelistic venture was led by Kabyle Elie Chouakri (1933–2003), alias Alain Choiquier, born a Muslim and converted at the age of 18 through the ministry of Ralph H. Shallis (1912–1986); it was the origin of the so-called Paris-Nation assembly.

Thus it was that after the fall of the Nazi regime the Open Brethren redoubled their activity in France. Whilst the general public were distancing themselves more and more from religious institutions, evangelists, a fair number from Switzerland but more and more Anglo-Saxons, did not tire in sounding out the call to personal conversion, thus participating in the general movement that was making religious experience a personal affair. The Open Brethren were eager to engage in public activity; they preached in open spaces, which, like the tents used in the season of good weather or the shops converted into places of worship, were less likely to remind the public of the power of the churches. New assemblies thus emerged. In fact, the Open Brethren tended to radiate from an assertive core, so that there began to appear regional poles comprising several assemblies. Loose networks formed around Paris, Grenoble, and Strasbourg. Ultimately, acting more or less in concert at regional level, the Open Brethren emerged as a relatively compact, united group on a national level as well.

However, the assemblies suffered from a certain vulnerability, as far as premises were concerned, because more or less desirable changes of address were fairly numerous, with the risk of adversely affecting their visibility. In general, the religious dynamism of the movement masks a persistent fragility, if one is to judge by the sense

* Translator's note: forerunners of the mods and rockers.

¹² M. Anger, *Semailles et Moisson* (Aug. 1961), 120.

of deficient supervision, by the low membership numbers of the majority of assemblies, as well as by the transience of some of them—this seems to corroborate, to a certain degree, the concept of ‘liquid modernity’ under which Zygmunt Baumann subsumes the current fragility of human ties.¹³

However, whilst corresponding to a distinctive habitus, the microcosm of the Open Brethren exhibits a certain diversity of sensitivity.¹⁴ Authority of the charismatic type, which can still be seen in the early years of the twenty-first century amongst the assemblies, even though they were still growing in number, also leads to a certain variety of ways of acting, in spite of a tangible global process towards institutionalisation. A thematic analysis therefore now proves necessary to go beyond the empirical stage and to try to conceptualise the functioning of the Open Brethren in France.

II. The social functioning of the Open Brethren

If in the first part of my article I have painted a broad-brush picture of the establishment of the Open Brethren in France, it is now fitting, in order not to over-emphasise the array of colours, to bring out certain constants and distinctive features so as to identify the essential character of this evangelical movement. In plain language, I want to attempt to cast some light on the overall structuring of the Open Brethren as well as on their generic stance on social involvement.

1. Organisational structure

¹³ Z. Bauman, ‘Vivre dans la « modernité liquide », in X. Molénat (ed.), *L’Individu contemporain: Regards sociologiques* (Auxerre, 2006), 116.

¹⁴ In any case it is important to consider the co-operation offered for the implantation of the Open Brethren by such evangelical organisations as Operation Mobilisation, the French Village Workers, Gospel Literature Outreach, Liebenzell, or also the Mission Évangélique des Alpes Françaises and then the Unevangelized Fields Mission.

Conforming to the congregationalist model, in which members of the local fellowship are ultimately responsible for the basic decisions, each Open Brethren assembly is self-governing. Certainly, this arrangement rests on the empowerment of associated individuals who thus seek to protect themselves from external interference and to resist the anonymous tyranny of any centralisation. In the mid-twentieth century, talk was even of wanting to preserve a healthy 'variety of thought'¹⁵ and of methods of self-organisation within the limits of submission to Christ. Nonetheless, over the decades a certain evolution is discernible, moving towards a model in which the plurality of church fellowships no longer took precedence over their solidarity. Very early on the Open Brethren recognised and valued the family bonds which united them; for example, right after the Great War their networking took the path of regional congresses. The result was that whilst relationships between the assemblies were arranged without recourse to a central institutional authority, by structural necessity the Open Brethren finished up after the 1950s endowing themselves with national associations, able to make decisions which would have repercussions on the life of different local groups.

However, it seems necessary to know whether the cohesion of the Open Brethren is ensured by the personal charisma of the leaders or by the common overarching ideology. Undeniably, the continuous development and the youthfulness of the movement point to the particularly fecund influence of the assembly builders; The importance of spiritual gifting and the openness to revival seem to indicate a spiritual economy based on leaders disinclined to accept any supra-local theological authority. That said, the pioneers and other ministers embodied and transmitted a real tradition betrayed only by the odd slip here and there. In effect, a good number of the Swiss and British assembly planters came from Open Brethren circles. They, in fact, brought with them points of view,

¹⁵ F. A. Tatford, French trans. by R. Masson, in *Servir en L'attendant*, (Feb. 1957), 950.

eschatological and especially ecclesiastical, which when allied to their rejection of Darbyite Exclusivism offer an insight into an orthodoxy of its own kind and into a distinctive identity. What is more, the ministers were protected against authoritarianism not only by the taboo of autocratic clergy but also by the affirmation of *sola scriptura* and the particularly acute sense of the priesthood of all believers. In fact, what must certainly be recognised is the ordinary evolution of Open Brethren in France towards a mode of operation in which normative theology tends to become embedded as a principle of cohesion.

In the end it seems that a sort of ‘Plymouthist’ instinct led to a repulsion of any institutional mediation. It is thus quite logical that in their meetings the Open Brethren apply the principle of the priesthood of all believers; and it is to expunge any vague wish for the monopoly by church leaders of spiritual functions that all believers are invited to share in communal edification, with a mistrust of formalism in their services. The way in which the Police Prefect in Paris described the ‘Bieler Assembly’ in 1915 is significant: ‘The people who attend these meetings are dissidents of Protestantism not recognising any religious hierarchy and having no other pastor than Jesus Christ.’¹⁶

In fact, the outworking of authority in the assemblies was very much in line with egalitarian principles. The church minister was, in fact, essentially an instrument, against a clearly anti-clerical background. The legitimacy of the minister was therefore not considered to depend on his professional position, and for a long time a real reticence in regard to settled, paid pastors was observable. In this context evangelist René Zinder did not shy away from announcing in 1950: ‘It will be the case in this country (France) . . . where clergy have abused their privileges and powers, that pastors and teachers will have to work with their hands, at least partially, to provide for their needs so that they are not considered parasites in

¹⁶ Le fonds Moscou, Police Prefect to the Minister of the Interior, letter of 21 Dec. 1915.

the nation'.¹⁷ In any case, it becomes clear that for the Open Brethren a degree of pragmatism increasingly overrode ideology, so that a church fellowship turned to a full-time minister or decided to do without on the basis of its means or the vocations it identified. Thus came about the adaptation to new social conditions: with the question of a professional pastor the notion of 'plasticity'¹⁸ of Protestant groups is summed up.

In rejection of the Darbyite postulation of the ending of all formal ministry, each assembly undertook to recognise responsible brethren, termed elders,* on the basis of their qualities. Decision-making authority in regard to church order was lodged in a body of elders, exercising pastoral ministry together and with differentiated responsibilities: this egalitarian precept offered a stark contrast to Catholic culture and the centrality of the priest as a hieratic figure, and claimed to be more radical than the arrangement in which a lay pastor is *primus inter pares*. It appears that here we are putting our finger on one of the main ideas of the Open Brethren, perhaps even their principal distinguishing feature amongst evangelicals. It even seems that the more the Open Brethren appointed paid pastors, whilst still wanting to remain basically a lay entity, the more the norm of corporate governance in the assembly appeared as their shibboleth. In general, this governance principle was promoted formally and systematically as they emerged from the phase of dynamic planting. Paradoxically, the institutionalisation in some measure of this corporate principle presented itself at the time of the establishment of the Brethren as the formula of an effort resisting the institutionalisation of their movement.

For the rest, the apparently aggressive proselytising revivalism of the Open Brethren, whether professionals or volunteers, showed itself in an unflinching call to conversion. In fact, each assembly wishing to stay mobilised and to resist fragmentation, had hardly any

¹⁷ R. Zinder, *Semailles et Moisson* (Sept. 1950), 130.

¹⁸ J.-P. Willaime, 'La Problématisation protestante de la tradition et ses effets sociaux', *Études Théologiques et Religieuses*, 73 (1988), 401–2.

* Translator's note: French *anciens*.

choice: “evangelise or perish”, those are the alternatives’!¹⁹ In point of fact, in the congregationalist system of confessors, keeping numbers up by the conversion of unbelievers is determinative, and relaxing aggressive evangelistic activity threatened sooner or later to alienate the militants. In concrete terms, in particularly stark fashion up to the *Trente Glorieuses*,* the militancy of the Open Brethren expressed itself in various practices: colportage, visits, literature distribution, open air preaching, tent meetings, well publicised campaigns, and also Sunday schools and Thursday schools,* youth groups and camps, special language and needlework courses, and the distribution of block calendars.

Those contacted or affected by these methods were diverse. That said, a number of converts seem to have been Catholics, whereas Darby had attracted mainly Protestants. Moreover, the map of the spread of Open Brethren assemblies during the Fifth Republic* confirms that impression: it is particularly clear in the north-west quarter of l’Hexagone, whereas the darbystes scarcely entered any but the ‘regions affected by the Reformation, either Calvinist in the south of France, or Lutheran as in Alsace’.²⁰ Recruitment to the Open Brethren took place for a long time and in large measure in a modest social milieu, the apparent conclusion being that humble circumstances were synonymous with a relatively strong receptivity to the message of hope. This situation seems very different from that of the beginnings of the Brethren across the Channel.²¹ However, the

¹⁹ M. Goodman, French trans. by J. André, in *Servir en L’attendant* (Feb. 1965), 2006.

* Translator’s note: The ‘Glorious Thirty’ was a phrase coined by the demographer Jean Fourastié for the period 1945–1975 when France’s economy grew rapidly, leading to increased prosperity.

* Translator’s note : Thursday used to be a non-school day in France.

* Translator’s note: 1958 to the present.

²⁰ C. Maillebouis, ‘Sur l’implantation du « darbyisme » en France au XX^e siècle’, *Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire du Protestantisme Français*, 159 (2013), 342.

²¹ For example, Nathan DeLynn Smith, *Roots, Renewal and the Brethren* (Pasadena, CA, 1986), 7, recalls that several of the first Brethren leaders came from

later diversification in the social composition of French assemblies is linked with a tendency towards more bourgeois recruitment.

2. *Stance on social involvement*

As a religious group originating in France in a militancy that straddled three centuries, the Open Brethren movement does not merely give rise to a particular organisational structure, but it also corresponds to a cultural heritage which determines a certain worldview and a particular engagement in global society.

In the period of their implantation it was notably their millenarian standpoint that led these Brethren to interpret the past and contest the present order, using the future order as the starting point. By asserting human failure at the end of each period of sacred history, the eschatological position that was prevalent in the assemblies turns out to be especially pessimistic about the moral evolution of humanity. This position amounts to a denunciation of the futility of social utopias and to an assertion of the foolishness of the idea of salvation through culture. This viewpoint, in fact, clearly contests the Enlightenment idea of progress. On the other hand, a hyperaesthesia is manifested, which one cannot fail to attribute to Romantic pessimism. In addition, this position leads quite naturally to a certain withdrawal from society. Admittedly, we have nowadays to be aware of the diversification of eschatological opinions in the Open Brethren, but there is still the common expectation of the *parousia* with the sweet hope of another world into which conversion opens the door. This should at the least, be enough to put into perspective their significance for the socio-cultural landscape.

It is also undeniable that conversion, a true cement for one's identity, itself gives access to a certain sociableness/sociability, bringing together, as it does, diverse individuals marked by a common foundational spiritual experience, which in turn shapes an alternative lifestyle. In the assemblies, as elsewhere, in order to go some way to counter the moral influence of state schools or the

well-to-do or aristocratic classes: 'Interestingly, many of the early leaders came from nobility and wealth.'

media, a number of means were exploited for educating the children and young people with a view to giving a distinctive culture. In its relationship to the world, the revivalism of Open Brethren had rather a counter-cultural aspect, and a certain asceticism, with regard to the world, was to characterise the behaviour of the convert. In 1946, for example, the cinema was compared to 'poison',²² while evangelist Max Anger rejoiced over the comments made to him personally by a ladies hairdresser, recently converted:

Since you spoke to me the other time, I feel troubled because of my job. I feel it is incompatible with Christian life. In my work I am exposed to a lot of temptations and often drawn into frivolous conversations; and then, dyeing hair, doing the latest hairstyles, it's fostering vanity and the pride of this world. So I have decided to leave my job, even though it will cost me more than I could ever tell you.²³

Although opinions evolve with more or less coherence, the conservative ethic of the Open Brethren remained a fact of life; it has persisted for the whole of the movement's history, and it was meant to inform the whole of their life, making no distinction between the religious and the secular.

To put into some sort of scheme the resistance of the Open Brethren to influences which they judged nefarious, it can be useful to refer to the model of the citadel in Sébastien Fath's trilogy of concepts '*citadelle, sentinelle, passerelle*' (citadel, sentinel, footbridge).²⁴ In effect, the Open Brethren's counter-cultural tropism constrained them to shield themselves from the assaults of the spirit of the age and led them well and truly to adopt a singular pattern of behaviour in conformity to their beloved otherness as converts and recalling also the non-conformity of their Plymouth forebears. That said, the Open Brethren at the same time kept a close eye on those

²² M. Ernst, in *Servir en L'attendant* (June 1946), 3.

²³ Quoted by M. Anger, *Semailles et Moisson* (May 1946), 78.

²⁴ S. Fath, *Une Autre Manière d'être chrétien en France: Socio-histoire de l'implantation baptiste (1810-1950)* (Genève, 2001), 808.

around them, with the result that their sentinel identity was revealed. In seeking to lead their assemblies into the full light, they de facto revealed the militancy of a particular type of church, notably resistant to the idea of supra-local regulation. Moreover, the lack of hierarchy in the little assemblies and, singularly, the importance attached to the participation of all the members in services considerably facilitated the coalescence of the believers. The socio-demographic development of the assemblies was a sign of a certain intermixing of social categories over the decades. Here we see, then, the ‘footbridge’ dimension of the Open Brethren movement.

As to their beloved ecumenism, it embraced almost all evangelicals, to translate the reality of the spiritual unity of converts. Thus it was that the first precept of the Brethren drawn up in Dublin and Plymouth, continued to be observed. In fact, considering especially the attitude of the Open Brethren pioneers in France, one detects the whiffs of a non-denominational religious vision: thanks to a line of thinking enamoured with primitivism, value is given to a form of generic Christianity which easily allies itself to the promotion of congregationalism. This line of thinking is rooted in the Open Brethren’s Romantic predisposition to withdraw from the world in which they readily included religious systems. Thus the use of denominational labels tended to be discredited as a worldly principle. It is for example instructive to read the testimony of Marcel Tabailoux, when he applied to be a student at the Institut Biblique de Nogent: to the question ‘To what church or assembly do you belong?’ He replied ‘None, except the Church of the Lord, and the assembly in which God has placed me for His work.’²⁵ That is not to say that he despised the Algerian assembly from which he came; his attachment to the unity of the body of Christ led him simply to give little importance to the reality of denominational groupings.

Furthermore, the social stance can be assessed by the charitable activities that may develop. The case of the Open Brethren offers us confirmation that a somewhat ascetic spirituality can yet produce a

²⁵ Archives of l’Institut Biblique de Nogent, M. Tabailoux, *Questionnaire pour candidats*, 27 Sept. 1956.

substantial involvement in the world and its needs. They did in fact launch several social projects, which were very admirable in the context of their limited numerical strength—they took the initiative in the period between the two wars, a time when in general ‘Protestant good works . . . were withering’.²⁶ Their efforts in this respect particularly targeted first children, next older folk, and then the Third World. Their counter-cultural tropism allied with a degree of Romantic pessimism did not in any way prevent a form of investment in social space by a few heroes of faith.

With the exception of the retirement home La Clairière (The Glade) in Montmelas-Saint-Sorlin in the Rhône department in eastern France, each faith project was initiated by a courageous leader who claimed no other title of honour than to be a conscientious witness for Christ, creating a range of charitable works within the fold of the Open Brethren. In fact, this charitable impulse, responding to society’s needs in the sphere of educational aid, was evident before there was any kind of recognisable cohesion amongst the assemblies. The spontaneity of individual initiatives seems to have benefited from a great freedom of material expression which was prevalent in the Open Brethren’s sphere of influence, producing a more or less durable flow of social aid activities which relied at a secondary level on the support of an international network of friends and subscribers to religious magazines in vogue in the assemblies.

Especially noteworthy is the setting up of children’s homes to take care of orphans and homeless or illegitimate children. I would mention by way of example La Maison des Enfants [The Children’s Home] and La Maison du Printemps [The House of Spring]. La Maison des Enfants came into being in 1929 through the American Priscilla E. Hoops (1893–1983): the McCall Mission entrusted two small children to this missionary, who looked after them in a villa she rented in Brittany. After several months the home moved to the Paris region and took in about twenty children! The assembly in the capital did not delay in showing support for the work, led from 1931

²⁶ M. Gilson, ‘Une Minorité en action: la charité protestante en France, XIX^e-XX^e siècles’, *Le Mouvement Social*, 234 (Jan.–Mar. 2011), 75.

by Priscilla Hoops and Kenric A. Johnson (1890–1950), the year in which they were married. Then immediately after the Second World War La Maison des Enfants in Brittany was set up, carrying on the mission work until 1978. In total, more than 200 children were cared for; some were even adopted.

La Maison du Printemps at Digne-les-Bains owed its existence to the desire of Constance Contesse (1873–1940) and Henri Contesse (1872–1960) to rescue and care for abandoned children or orphans, who were reliant on the help of public services. Thus at the end of the 1920s children, and even quite small ones, were being schooled. The following extract reveals the solicitude of this married couple:

Above all we have it on our heart to devote ourselves to those who are completely abandoned, that is those whose birth is often kept secret,

When we think of the appalling number of cases of infanticide, we would like to meet the unfortunate mothers who come to think of such a crime and to say to them, “Our arms are open. They will take the poor innocent little creature that you want to destroy.”

Perhaps there might be some who would not commit this act of dark despair.²⁷

Soon La Maison du Printemps was housing about twenty children. However, this work closed after 1940, after the death of Constance Contesse, that highly skilled educator and eminent personality.

Incidentally, the role played by leading women like Priscilla Johnson and Constance Contesse at that time is remarkable: besides offering maternal care, these Christians assumed important management responsibilities, so that in the sphere of social aid they were front-stage in ways that they would not have been in church services. Additionally, these works of charity undertaken in the twentieth century in the sphere of influence of the Open Brethren naturally combined evangelism with social assistance. Nevertheless, growing secularity in the charity field sounded the death knell of institutions set up between the wars.

²⁷ H. S. Contesse, *La Bonne Revue* (July 1934), 319.

Finally, the way in which French society received the proselytising efforts of the Open Brethren throws light on their social stance. Noteworthy is the fairly favourable attitude of the Republic. Thus it was that between the wars municipal authorities were very often well-disposed towards the Open Brethren in that they were willing to make a room or an open-air site available to their evangelists; the welcome proffered by municipal authorities contrasts with the resistance of numerous mayors in the Paris region since the end of the twentieth century, who, in the context of an aggressive Islam, oppose the desire of evangelical immigrant communities to open a place of worship.

On the other hand, a significant aspect of the history of the first half of the twentieth century is the antagonism/disconnect between the evangelism of the Open Brethren and French Catholic universalism, even if one should not paint too black a picture of the situation—many signs of improved relationships did appear after the Second World War. At Digne for example, at the beginning of the First World War the Catholic clergy, seeming to suffer from a fever of anxiety, spread the downright slanderous accusation of espionage against Henri Contesse, with the result that in the spring of 1915 youngsters libelled the evangelist in the streets with the insult ‘Bosch’. As the Prefect explained in May, Henri Contesse had

set up . . . a dissident congregation that has attracted the animosity of the clergy, who saw the new work as competing with them and potentially harmful to their material and moral interests.*

When the war broke out, it was the priests who first accused him of spying: the parish priest in Digne went to find the wife of the military commander to ask her to warn her husband of the dangers that the ‘German’ posed to the National Defence Forces.²⁸

* Translator’s note: French : ‘[Le] clergé, qui voyait dans l’œuvre entreprise une concurrence susceptible de nuire à ses intérêts matériels et moraux.’

²⁸ Archives nationales, le fonds de Moscou, serial no. 19940437/340, Prefect Fontanès, letter 14 May [1915], Paris.

As to the French population in general, their attitude to the Open Brethren was usually hardly more than a certain level of mistrust: by their assertiveness and their insistence that other systems of belief did not offer true salvation, they seemed like exotic elements, even somewhat at odds with national culture, just like most other evangelicals. That said, there was no lack of situations of downright adversity, although it was more as Protestants and not specifically as Open Brethren that the assembly pioneers suffered sporadic, more or less virulent outbursts from disapproving parties.

Such has been, in brief outline, the social functioning of the French Open Brethren assemblies. From a purely formal point of view, one could recognise in such a minority network a microcosm of the canvas of evangelical denominations. For all that, we can be fairly sure that these Brethren will still be able to help tone the muscles of French evangelicalism.