

# Reformed and Evangelical Protestantism in France

## 1974-2024 ... and Beyond!

Paul WELLS - Emeritus Professor Faculté Jean Calvin, Aix  
and Pierre Sovann CHAUNY, Professor of Systematic Theology, FJC, Aix\*

### The Past: 1974–2016

**PSC to PW:** Dear Paul, you arrived in Aix in 1972, two years before the official launch of Faculté Libre de Théologie Réformée. Could you share with us your memories of your first impressions upon arriving in France that year? More specifically, how would you characterize French culture at that time? What did the Church in France look like? And what was the state of theology?

**PW's reply:** These past 50 years have been marked by the fastest change our world has ever known. The technical revolution is the origin of this change, impacting other areas such as the social, political, and religious realms. France in 1972 was a different world, unimaginable for today's young people. No internet, no mobile phones, no color TV, no high-speed trains (Paris was 8 hours by train from Marseille), no low-cost flights, and no fast food. Good old French cuisine!

My impressions of the culture:

1. France was still very Catholic, and the Roman Church was present in every aspect of life. I believe around 80% of the population was baptized Catholic in 1950. During this period, the Church lost France.
2. Secularism was less "hard," although the separation of "two Frances" was a reality. The terrorism after the 2001 Twin Towers catastrophe changed all that.
3. Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, communism was still an ideal, and class struggle was visible. This has been replaced by the struggle of groups—LGBT+, gender, and sexual liberation. In 1972, we were still living in the aftershock of 1968.
4. Poverty was different back then (material, not moral as today)—we were at the end of the "thirty glorious years" and before the first oil crisis.

\* This discussion was a contribution to the 50th birthday celebration at the Faculté Jean Calvin in Aix-en-Provence on 21st September 2024.

Regarding the Church: It was the beginning of the decline of Christian values and the rise of religious pluralism. The established « multitudinous » churches, as they were called, were very much at ease (too much so) in Protestantism, Karl Barth's theology was dominant (the theology of the "death of God" was just beginning to take root), and evangelicals in France were very few. Over the past fifty years, the trend reversed, and evangelical churches have become the majority, while members of mainline pluralist churches have been leaving (sometimes joining the evangelicals, Pentecostals, etc., but very often abandoning the faith altogether).

Theology: Secularity had not yet completed its work. Evangelicals, though few, were still hesitant. Evangelical publications have steadily increased over the past 50 years, and evangelical theological colleges and Bible institutes have done their work.

**PSC to PW:** Let's now move to the founding of this theology faculty. Since the 1940s, there had been a first Protestant theology faculty (belonging to the Eglise Réformée Evangélique Indépendante) on the property where we are today, but it ceased its activities in 1967. Seven years later (and two years after your arrival in Aix), a new free Reformed theology faculty (FLTR) opened its doors. What memories would you like to share with us about the founding of the faculty at that time? How was the new project different from the old one? How was the teaching staff formed? What vision motivated you? More specifically, for you personally, what project did you want to undertake in the field of systematic theology in this context?

**PW's reply:**

1. The Faculté Libre de Théologie Réformée, as its first president Pierre Filhol said, was "free" — meaning free from both the state and the church. It was autonomous and confessional. The board members adhered to the French confession of faith (La Rochelle) regardless of their church background.
2. The faculty members were appointed with this perspective, but they were very diverse in their backgrounds, personalities, and ages, and open to receiving students from all walks of life.
3. The vision at the beginning was to renew the Protestant churches in France, particularly the Eglise Réformée de France (this was the first dean Pierre Courthial's great hope; I now think he was wrong, as he failed to realize that theological pluralism is, by nature, irreformable and tends to become a dogma, a dogma that is necessary for the church to exist).
4. My desire was to see the rebirth of the theology of grace from the French-speaking tradition—of Calvin, Beza, Viret, Turretin, etc. But the focus on Scripture with the history of redemption — creation, fall, redemption for the glory of God — was paramount for me.

**PSC to PW:** That was the initial project. Tell us about the impact of the creation of the Faculty starting in 1974!

**PW's reply:**

1. The impact was significant from the start. The fact that FLTR existed as an alternative to other faculties was a thorn in the side of pluralist churches. In reality, pluralism did not accept a plurality of choices for theology students.
2. This rapid growth of the FLTR was halted by the decision of the Synod of St. Foy-la-Grande in 1978 (requiring that candidates had to complete the Master's degree in Montpellier to become a pastor of the ERF), by barring scholarships from local churches for students, and by the authoritarian bias of the Ministry Commission toward students coming from Aix.
3. About ten years after its founding, FLTR had a majority of students from evangelical churches...
4. The existence of FLTR impacted other faculties indirectly, moderating some of their radical positions.
5. That said, FLTR had little impact on French society as a whole, partly because the influence of Christianity was continually diminishing during this period.

**PSC to PW:** It was useful to reflect a little on the 1970s to understand the history of this faculty. But you stayed in Aix-en-Provence for 40 years, leaving in 2012, is that correct? In the meantime, the cultural and ecclesial situation evolved significantly. In your opinion, what are the most notable changes in French society and French evangelical churches? And, in hindsight, do you regret that the faculty missed certain opportunities during that period?

**PW's reply:**

French society is characterized by a conflictual model in public relations, partly due to the opposition between the republican spirit and the Catholic ethos. The class struggle has been replaced by new conflicts, characterized by actions from identity groups: LGBT, transgender, feminist movements, actions against fossil or nuclear energy, pro-immigration, and more recently pro-Palestinian and anti-Semitic actions. The woke struggles are often adopted and promoted by multinational companies seeking to impose a globalist vision according to the policies of the World Economic Forum (WEF). I don't understand the motivation behind these attitudes, except that it's politically correct to show a progressive and diverse image.

The new basic motif in Western society and France, replacing criticism of the big capitalist wolf, is the D.E.I of liberalism. — Diversity, Equity, Inclusion. This is infiltrating the Christian church, where the Church of England, for example, is straining to show that it is not lagging in the area of social progress (as Jean Brun, a professor at the FLTR, said, one must always accelerate more).

Political parties, adopting these new values, have become intellectual elites, cut off from the concerns of ordinary citizens (the political left no longer represents the working class) who feel abandoned by their leaders.

In this context, the danger of controlling actions and ideas is real (cf. the Covid pandemic, the monopolization of the legacy media by a single voice to the exclusion of others, technocracy à la Macron in politics, and the censorship of ideas and speech). In short, the danger of the future is a new totalitarianism. In this perspective, the FLTR/FJC's fight against one-sided theological pluralism was prophetic in defending the right to hold non-conformist positions. I have no regrets in this regard, including my harsh words on this matter, for example against Michel Bouttier (in *Etudes Théologiques et Religieuses* 1974/4).

Regarding the evangelicals, two comments can be made:

(a) In all evangelical communities combined, the faithful including leaders are asleep at the wheel. In their secure cocoon, the tendency is to turn a blind eye to these developments, thinking that everyone is nice, good, and everything should be tolerated. It is almost the opposite of the “old” evangelical attitude of suspicion toward the world. For this reason, D.E.I. attitudes infiltrate churches by osmosis. We align with the world without being really aware of it.

(b) The danger, including for the CNEF (National association of French evangelicals), faculties, and training institutes, is to follow the social movement so as not to make waves. The result is a form of Erastianism where the church willingly submits to the politics of civil magistrates and loses its prophetic character. I fear that what is happening in evangelical churches today is that we are following pluralist churches, but with a 40-year delay. The danger is a complacent, unconscious evangelicalism. Without color or smell, a bit like the old liberal humanist theologies.

**PW to PSC:** Now let's turn to you, Pierre-Sovann. You were born in 1983, so you grew up and were educated during the period we've just discussed. Does the way I've described it align with your perception of things? And could you tell us a little about your journey during this time: where you come from and what led you to succeed me as a theologian at FJC?

**PSC's reply:**

I was born four years after the second oil crisis, so I have always known “the crisis” (which was actually the term for the long decline of France and the West). I grew up in a first-generation evangelical family, and I am very grateful for everything my family and my church have given me in terms of faith and biblical knowledge, in an increasingly uncertain world where the idea of objective truth is fading. I read the Bible a lot throughout my childhood, but I had a big question mark when it came to the Old Testament, which I wasn't quite sure how to deal with.

When I reached my twenties, I underwent a significant theological evolution during my business school studies. I gradually abandoned the doctrines of Arminianism, Premillennialism, Dispensationalism, and Baptism, and embraced Calvinism, Amillennialism, Covenant theology, and Paedobaptism. After completing my business studies, I interned at an evangelical church in Paris (the Church of Ternes)

after spending a year in banking, and at that time, I was contacted by you, dear Paul, who came to recruit me to consider eventually succeeding you: a great honor!

### **The Past and Recent Present: 2016-2024**

**PW to PSC:** Since 2016, you have been in charge of teaching systematic theology here at the Faculté Jean Calvin. Let me ask a deliberately provocative question: In a postmodern age where the question of truth no longer holds significance, does systematic theology still really have a place in the training of pastors today and in the future? Does dogmatics, the area to which you and I are so attached, still make sense in our current context? Before replying to my question, perhaps you would like to share what you consider to be the most pressing challenges facing the Church today or your analysis of the current cultural situation in France...

#### **PSC's reply on the current challenges of the Church**

The main challenges for the Church today are the same, whether we talk about the obstacles it must overcome to proclaim the Gospel, or the influences it must protect its own members from. These are the characteristics of our time and society: materialism, hyper-individualism, self-centeredness... and pluralism, relativism, and progressivism. Progressivism is becoming increasingly the dominant religion... to the point that if one asserts that in France, there is a true "right to blasphemy" (though the concept itself should be questioned), it is nevertheless becoming increasingly difficult to openly criticize progressivism without being ostracized, much like past blasphemers in religious societies. The temptation for churches and Christians, then, is to self-censor and to mute what the Word of God says against certain progressive theses.

**PW to PSC:** And what about the cultural situation in France? For example, do you think the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, which has been much discussed, reveals what French culture has become at the end of this 50-year period since the founding of the Faculty?

"This is France," Emmanuel Macron said about the opening ceremony on X (formerly Twitter), not even bothering to express his thoughts in French. From someone who previously claimed that there was no "French culture," this is quite a statement... In the end, one of the French cultures competing with others—namely the ideology of diversity and hyper-liberal progressivism—is on track to dominance. In fact, the ceremony was acclaimed across Western countries, where only the more reactionary fringes saw fit to grumble...

I also became aware of the convergence of this new globalist, diversity-driven, and progressive culture with a neo-pagan zeitgeist. The strong references to ancient Greece, and the somewhat ad hoc mobilization of Dionysius in the actor Thomas Jolly's apology signal this quite clearly. As Chantal Delsol analyzed well before 2024, post-Christianity is to some extent a return to pre-Christianity. It is the return of paganism, Baalism, self-centered humanism (under the false pretense of reverence for

nature—Gaia), a humanism without hope and without God in the world.

A constant theme in the dominant globalist ideology promoted by the values of Olympianism is the erasure of borders. Sure, we still celebrate our country's champions with medal tables and national anthems... but that's about the extent of the nationalism tolerated by the Games. For the rest, it's the celebration of the globalist melting pot within the Olympic village that takes center stage.

In this sense, the opening ceremony truly reflected the "borderlessness" of Olympianism and the globalist, diversity-driven ideology, in which each individual is interchangeable with another as a consumer, with no regard for their culture of origin. Borders are erased symbolically, and in many ways, physically. The queer ideology, so pervasive in the ceremony, follows the same "borderlessness": the creationist boundary between men and women, inscribed in genetic reality, is erased by the confusion promoted by the elevation of these icons of post-modernity—fabulous and chimeric drag queens!...

**PSC to PW:** Before we return to your previous question about what systematic theology can still contribute today, I'd like to turn the question around. With your experience and analysis of the evolving situation, what do you think is the most urgent need for the Church, whether the Church is aware of it or not? What does it need urgently now?

**PW's reply:**

The greatest challenge and need is to rediscover the meaning of Protestantism, which is a movement of resistance. We must resist in our communities, in our families, and in our personal engagements. This means putting Scripture alone back in its rightful place, for its divine authority comes before all others.

Our churches must realize that their situation is minoritarian, for Western society is no longer Christian; it is post-Christian. That is to say, we need to develop a mentality that is proud of its minoritarian nature, different, non-conformist, with values that are not those of society, but those that please God.

We must avoid compromise as well, for compromise is the devil, and it leads to idolatry, to the service of false gods. This takes courage, and above all, that we put on the armor of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:10-18) to stand firm when the days are evil.

Ultimately, to return to systematic theology, we need a Trinitarian theology that honors God as the Creator Father, Jesus as the Savior and Revealer Son, and the Spirit as the presence of the risen Christ among His people to lead them into the life of the new creation. In the end, we need to regain communion with the resistance of the early Church, that of the apostles and martyrs, who faced Roman persecution, such as during the time of Emperor Domitian at the end of the first century.

**PW to PSC:** Let me ask you a question on the current needs of the Church: what is the role of teaching and preaching in the Church?

**PSC's reply:**

It is fundamental. "To the law and to the testimony!" Isaiah cried out, adding, "If they

do not speak according to this word, there is no dawn for the people." This is still true today. The life of the Church is to reform according to the Word of God, or to decline until its lampstand is taken away... this is also the fate of civilizations, which, according to René Grousset's words, are mortal... but I digress from the question...

### **The Future: And Now...?**

**PW to PSC:** Let's return to my previous question. Can systematic theology still contribute anything today, in such a context? And more broadly, how can the FJC, with its Reformed theology inherited from the 16th century, contribute to our France and our French evangelical churches in the 21st century?

#### **PSC's reply:**

The Western world is dying, in a state of post-modernity, due to its lack of historical roots. Evangelical churches, which have been booming in recent years, may now be reaching the limits of a growth model primarily centered on the crisis in Roman Catholicism and the void it leaves.

The future of evangelical theology lies in resourcing, returning to theological roots, anchoring in Reformation theology, but also in medieval and patristic theology. It is the rediscovery of what true catholicity means, rediscovering the faith in the light of all those who have preceded us and whom the Lord has illuminated throughout the centuries. Reformed theology, with its exceptional connection to the tradition in Protestant evangelicalism, has much to offer in this regard.

In the relatively near future, the evangelical world is called to become confessional, or cease to exist. This is why Reformed confessionalism can help the evangelical world by enabling it to build strong identities, where Baptists are truly Baptists, Methodists are truly Methodists, and so on. Only then will we be able to discuss what is essential rather than piecing together a patchwork of preferred doctrines in isolation...

**PSC to PW:** In my reply, I highlighted that what FJC and Reformed dogmatics can offer the Francophone evangelical world is a sense of confessional theology. You, who spent your entire career expressing with precision and vigor the defense of the classic evangelical doctrine of the Scriptures as the very Word of God written, would you agree that we should not only defend the security of this precious foundation of the Word but also, in this advanced postmodern era, rediscover a more ecclesial sense of articulating biblical truths? I believe we can no longer settle for each evangelical Christian, based on their personal reading of the Word of God, forming their own little doctrinal group that they believe to be the only biblical one. In other words, what is the importance of confessionalism, in your opinion, for the future of evangelical theology?

#### **PW's reply:**

Certainly evangelicalism must become more church conscious. In modern

individualism, the temptation is to see the church as a place of personal enrichment, where we go because it feels good. But in the biblical perspective, if I am a believer, I belong to Christ, and if that is the case, I belong to all those who are in Him, I am united with them, as well as with Him in one body. This is the meaning of our baptism, we are united with Christ in a new life in communion with others. When Jesus says to the disciples in John 15, "Abide in Me, and you will bear much fruit," He means, "Abide *together* in Me." This makes us members of a great people, the universal Church, which confesses the name of Jesus. We are true confessors with others from all times.

**PW to PSC:** This leads me to another question along the same lines: What is the importance of our Christian past in shaping our attitudes toward the present?

**PSC's reply:** Does the question refer to the role of the past in dogmatic teaching at FJC? Or is it about the role of France's Christian past in shaping the attitudes of French Christians toward the current cultural situation?

The Christian past of this country means that its current rejection of Christianity is apostasy. There is nothing good in this, because apostasy brings judgment, and we have probably been in this state for some time. Symbolically, the constitutionalization of abortion is perhaps a much more significant marker than the Olympic Games opening ceremony, which has received a lot of attention but is ultimately quite anecdotal.

Scripture exhorts the kings of the earth to embrace the Son before His anger is aroused. It also promises in Isaiah that the princes of the earth will nourish the heavenly Jerusalem of the new covenant. Personally, I subscribe fully to the Confession of La Rochelle, and I confess that it is the role of the public authorities to consciously serve the Lord. The leaders of this country must embrace the Son before His anger is kindled, lest it be kindled indeed.

Therefore, the attitude of Christians should be, when this situation is recognized, one of supplication, of confessing the sins of this people, in the manner of national prayers of repentance as seen in Daniel 9, Ezra 9, and Nehemiah 9. We would do well to proclaim solemn fasts for this country (and for the West in general, of which this country is a part) as often as possible, for example on national civil holidays (May 1 and 8, July 14, November 11).

**PSC to PW:** With your experience and analysis of historical evolution, what specific actions do you think can still bear fruit in Christian testimony? What do you think we should do now?

**PW's reply:**

We need to be creative. Create small groups for spiritual action and encouragement with various focuses, to promote the development of Christian attitudes and the biblical gospel in all areas of life. Evangelical churches also need to encourage the lost confidence in biblical preaching as God's way to do his work. We need models of believing churches with strong biblical preachers.



We must not forget that "small is beautiful," and small seeds grow into large trees. This is what I tried to show in my latest little book, *Growing in Christ*. For my part, and to conclude, my 40 years pilgrimage in Aix went by like a lightning flash, but I am almost envious, dear Pierre-Sovann, because I would love to be in your place to tackle the new challenges of theological teaching in a different era. If I had to do it again, I would gladly accept, because *je ne regrette rien!*