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***“The Protestants here are very particular: they used to be Methodists”:* A Historical Reflection on French Methodism**

Abstract: This article traces the history of Methodism in France since its introduction in the 1780s. It was always a minority into the larger Protestant minority, probably hampered by its being intrinsically linked to British Methodism. In 1938, French Methodism merged into the Presbyterian *Église réformée de France*, leaving only a few communities which are today members of the U.S.-based UMC. This article will first present the birth and implantation of Methodism in France, then its consolidation and salient features before concluding on the enduring, albeit silent, influence of Methodism in French Protestantism since 1939.

Keywords: France. Switzerland. Methodism. United Methodist Church (U.S.A.). Methodist Church of Great Britain.

Methodism in France has always been a minority into the larger Protestant minority. The year 1870 with its 30 Methodist ministers and 184 places of worship was indeed the high-water mark of a confession which only went downhill from there until 1938 when French Methodism merged (or should one say “was absorbed”?) into the Presbyterian *Église réformée de France*. Some congregations refused to follow the movement and tried to remain independent but they soon disappeared or joined the (U.S.) United Methodist Church. The present-day 23 congregations of the *Union de l’Église évangélique méthodiste de France* are affiliated to the U.M.C.

This last development is surprising since for 150 years, French Methodism was intrinsically linked to British Methodism – a remarkable occurrence in Continental Methodism. What is not remarkable, however, is the rarity of the Methodist congregations: Methodism is indeed a very small minority in Continental Europe and has long been so. Already, in 1971, it

was observed that one could find small groups (between 1,000 and 5,000 members) of Methodists in almost every Continental European country¹. The situation does not appear to have changed in 50 years, to follow the World Methodist Council's website². Methodism is still present today in most Continental European countries, however its audience remains extremely limited, except maybe in Germany where Methodism was introduced by a Mission launched in 1831 by a lay Württemberger, Gottlieb Müller (1785-1858)³. Müller had come to England during the Napoleonic Wars and there he had discovered Methodism: he started preaching in the region of Stuttgart and his efforts were acknowledged in 1831 by the Wesleyan Methodist Conference when he was officially recognized as a lay missionary⁴. In 2016, there were almost 30,000 German Methodists in Germany⁵, down from about 53,000 in 1970 (evenly split between East and West Germany⁶). These are rather low figures (reminder: the German population in 2020 was roughly 83 million): they are however much higher than those of other Continental Methodist congregations⁷.

The development of Methodism on the Continent was predominantly the result – not of British missions – but of immigrants' preaching, and more precisely of German-speaking or Scandinavian emigrants since some U.S. Methodist confessions specifically catered to these communities. In some other instances, Methodism reached Continental communities through the agency of U.S missionaries, which had sometimes become aware of the situation of Europe as members of nursing teams with the American Expeditionary Forces during the Great War⁸.

¹ Claude-Jean Bertrand, *Le Méthodisme* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1971), 267.

² World Methodist Council, "About Us", <<https://worldmethodistcouncil.org/europe/>>, accessed 15 May 2023.

³ Bertrand, *Le Méthodisme*, 268.

⁴ Ulrike Schuler, "Methodism in Northern and Continental Europe" in Charles Yrigoyen, Jr (ed.), *T&T Clark Companion to Methodism* (London & New York City: T&T Clark International, 2010), 171. See also Entry "Germany" in John A. Vickers (ed.), "A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland", <<https://dmbi.online/index.php?do=app.entry&id=1110>>, accessed 15 May 2023.

⁵ World Methodist Council, "About Us", <<https://worldmethodistcouncil.org/statistical-information/>>, accessed 15 May 2023.

⁶ Bertrand, *Le Méthodisme*, 268.

⁷ On Methodism in Germany before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall, see Schuler, "Methodism in Northern and Continental Europe", 178-179.

⁸ Patrick Streiff, "Le Méthodisme français et les particularités de son histoire" in Patrick Streiff & Jean-François Zorn (eds), *Facettes du méthodisme français* (Maisons-Laffitte: Ampelos, 2016), 14.

This might, although indirectly, explain why most Continental European Methodist Churches belong to the United Methodist Church's Central and Southern Europe Central Conference⁹.

The History of French Methodism stands out because for a long time it stayed out of direct U.S. influence as it remained intrinsically linked to British Methodism – which, although not unique, is a remarkable occurrence in Continental Methodism. Three time periods can be laid out: from 1783 to 1852, French Methodist congregations are under the authority of the British Wesleyan Conference; from 1852 to 1939, the French Methodist Church¹⁰ lives the life of an independent denomination; finally, since 1938, Methodist congregations are a very rare occurrence in France.

This paper will first present the birth and implantation of Methodism in France through Normandy (I), then to the “Founding Fathers” of the confession (II). We'll then turn to the consolidation and salient features of French Methodism (III) before concluding on the enduring, albeit largely silent, influence of Methodism in French Protestantism after 1939 (IV). An afterword (V) will present the bibliography of French Methodism.

I. France: a Methodist missionary land?

Methodism entered France through the Channel Islands. These have been a personal possession of the English Sovereigns in their capacity as Dukes of Normandy ever since the

⁹ The United Methodist Church in Central and Southern Europe, “Countries”, <<https://www.umc-cse.org/en/countries.html>>, accessed 14 April 2022.

¹⁰ Already called “*Église évangélique méthodiste de France*”. The words “*et de Suisse*” were briefly added to its official name when the congregations from the Swiss Canton of Vaud acknowledged the authority of the French Conference.

11th century. The first Methodist preachers came there in 1783¹¹, and John Wesley visited them from 14 August to 6 September 1787¹² with Dr Coke where he remarked “surely, God will have a people in this place¹³”.

In the summer of 1791¹⁴, Jean Angel, a Methodist tradesman from the Channel Islands, whom his business had brought to the little port of Courseulles-sur-Mer (in the Norman *département* of Calvados) – 12 miles North of Caen, discovered that the small Protestant community there seemed to lack a Minister (in reality, a Minister from the Reformed Church came from Caen twice or three times a year). Shocked as he was by what he saw as his coreligionists’ lack of spiritual life, he offered to provide them with a resident pastor¹⁵. Some time later, at the request of Jean Angel, the British Conference sent Jean de Quetteville, an itinerant preacher, as well as a lay preacher, William Mahy (1764-1813), both French speakers from Guernsey¹⁶. The two men visited several Protestant communities over a month, after which Jean de Quetteville returned to the Channel Islands and left W. Mahy go on with the work at hand¹⁷. It seems good results were achieved, and it brought Thomas Coke’s attention to what was going on in France.

¹¹ Entry “Channel Islands” in Vickers (ed.), “A Dictionary”, <<https://dmbi.online/index.php?do=app.entry&id=571>>, accessed 14 April 2022.

¹² John Wesley, *Journal*, vol. 24, 51-57 [all references to John Wesley’s *Journal* will be to the Bicentennial Edition].

¹³ *Ibidem*, vol. 24, 51.

¹⁴ The date is disputed (this may have been in 1790). After confronting several sources, Dr Pierre Sogno concludes for 1791, and this is the date I’m following here, cf. Pierre Sogno, *Les Débuts du méthodisme wesleyen en France 1791-1825* (unpublished PhD thesis), Paris: Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines de l’université de Paris, 1970, p. 40

¹⁵ Matthieu Lelièvre, *Histoire du méthodisme dans les îles de la Manche* (Paris: Librairie évangélique, 1885), 403-405.

¹⁶ Entries “de Quetteville, Jean” and “Mahy, William” in Vickers (ed.), “A Dictionary”, <<https://dmbi.online/index.php?do=app.entry&id=2245>> & <<https://dmbi.online/index.php?do=app.entry&id=1794>>, accessed 29 April 2022.

¹⁷ Matthieu Lelièvre, *Un Précurseur du Réveil : Pierre du Pontavice, gentilhomme breton, missionnaire méthodiste et pasteur réformé, 1770-1810* (Paris: Librairie évangélique, 1904), 15.

Dr Coke went to Paris accompanied by Mahy and Quetteville in September 1791¹⁸. On the basis of obviously misguided reports, Thomas Coke thought that the fall of Roman Catholicism in France opened the door to success to any Protestant mission¹⁹. After having bought a disaffected church with a capacity of 2,000 to 2,500, Thomas Coke found himself dejected when Jean de Quetteville's inaugural sermon brought over 36 persons only. Thomas Coke's own sermon, delivered in French, only brought six hearers the next day²⁰. Dr Coke left France never to come back again. However, in 1796, when it was suggested that Thomas Coke devote himself entirely to the U.S. Methodist Episcopal Church, he accepted with the following caveat: "unless a way should be opened to France²¹". As is well known, Methodism was itself at the time (in the 1790s) in a time of transition. The hopes that Coke put into France were representative of his view of the worldwide mission of Methodism (in the United States of course, but also in India).

For many years, Methodism in France remained confined to Normandy, still benefiting from Mahy's tireless efforts over 19 years. Apart from J. de Quetteville's occasional visits to the Continent (two weeks in 1792 and three or four months in 1802)²², W. Mahy was quite isolated, and this for three reasons: 1. He was the only Methodist preacher/pastor in France; 2. He was by birth subject of a country almost continually at war with France over the Revolutionary era and the First Empire²³; 3. He was a Protestant in a country, and in a region, overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. Despite all his effort, W. Mahy never managed to open a

¹⁸ Thomas Coke ordained them both deacons and then "elders", cf. John Wesley Etheridge, *Life of the Rev. Thomas Coke, D. C. L.* (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference, 1860), 158 & 228. See also John C. Bowmer, « Ordinations in Methodism, 1791-1836 », *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 36 (1967), 37.

¹⁹ Samuel Drew, *The Life of the Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D.* (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference, 1817), 242.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 242-243.

²¹ Etheridge, *Life*, 275.

²² Lelièvre, *Un Précurseur du Réveil*, 25.

²³ France and Britain were thus at war from 1793 to 1815 with a brief, 13-month, interlude in 1802-1803 (the so-called "Peace of Amiens").

church in Caen, mainly because of the Reformed Minister's and presbytery's hostility²⁴. Théophile Roux, as well as Matthieu Lelièvre, argue that this was because the Reformed community feared that Mahy's preaching would lead some of their congregation to change their Church affiliation²⁵. For health reasons, W. Mahy eventually left Normandy in 1810 and died three years later near Manchester²⁶.

II. The "Founding Fathers" of French Methodism

In the first years of his ministry, W. Mahy had received the help of a Breton aristocrat, Pierre du Pontavice (1770-1810). Having discovered Methodism while an *émigré* in Britain, P. du Pontavice had been received in full connexion in 1800²⁷ and stationed in the Channel Islands²⁸. He had then been sent to France in 1802 once the Peace of Amiens had allowed movements to resume between the Islands and the Continent²⁹.

For eight years, Pierre du Pontavice criss-crossed Normandy as an Evangelical preacher. On 15 December 1805, after having gone through the customary oral examinations, he was ordained a Pastor of the Reformed Church in Paris and was appointed Second Pastor in Bolbec, a position which saw him in charge of five parishes in the North-East of Normandy³⁰. It seems that this move was motivated by P. du Pontavice's wish to benefit from the legal protections Emperor Napoleon I's regime accorded to ordained ministers of the acknowledged religions

²⁴ Lelièvre, *Un Précurseur du Réveil*, 30 & 32.

²⁵ Théophile Roux, *Le Méthodisme en France* (Paris: Librairie Protestante, 1940), 10-11.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 13. See also Entry "Mahy, William" in Vickers (ed.), "A Dictionary", <<https://dmbi.online/index.php?do=app.entry&id=1794>>, accessed 29 April 2022.

²⁷ Matthieu Lelièvre, *Un Précurseur du Réveil*, 78.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, 41-42.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 86-88.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 110.

(Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism)³¹. While ministering in and for the Reformed Church, the aristocrat remained in connexion with Methodism: he didn't appear to have seen any paradox in his situation since he considered his ministry as fundamentally Protestant, and not necessarily or exclusively tied to any confession in particular³². His ministry was short-lived anyway since he died only eight years after having settled back in his native country³³.

For four years after the death of P. du Pontavice, French Methodists were left to themselves, until Napoleon's first abdication (April 1814) once again opened the door of France to British Wesleyan Missionaries³⁴. France was indeed experiencing a transition as it moved away from a sort of exceptionalism, and resumed its place as a full member of the concert of Nations (of Conservative nations, that is). Enter then Armand de Kerpezdron (1772-1854), another Breton aristocrat who had also left France after the French Revolution³⁵. After having converted to Protestantism, Armand de Kerpezdron had spent three years (1811-1814) preaching to French prisoners of war detained in the United Kingdom³⁶. He was then stationed in Jersey and in Brussels before being sent to France in 1815³⁷. In 1818, he settled in Mer (30 miles south-west of Orleans), at the suggestion of the Wesleyan Missionary Committee because the 3,5000-inhabitant city sheltered an important, 1,000-strong Protestant community deprived of any pastor³⁸. Just like P. de Pontavice, A. de Kerpezdron wished to take advantage of the official status available to Protestant Ministers and he then applied before King Louis XVIII's

³¹ *Ibidem*, 107-108.

³² *Ibidem*, 186. Pierre du Pontavice's death in 1811 was duly recorded in the Conference Minutes for that year, as was the case for deceased Ministers, see *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences from the First Held in London By the Late Rev. John Wesley, A.M., in the Year 1744 [to 1813]* (London: John Mason/Wesleyan Conference Office, 1863) vol. III, 193-194.

³³ Roux, *Le Méthodisme*, 20.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, 23.

³⁵ Matthieu Lelièvre, *Armand de Kerpezdron : gentilhomme breton, missionnaire méthodiste, parmi les prisonniers français sur les pontons anglais, premier pasteur de l'Église Réformée de Mer (Loir-et-Cher) (1772-1854)* (Paris: Librairie Fischbacher, 1913), 5.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 12-78.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, 94.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, 112-113.

government for the vacant pastoral position at Mer. Thus in February 1820 he was officially appointed *pasteur de l'Église consistoriale réformée de Paris* ("Pastor of the Reformed Congregational Church of Paris") to discharge his functions in Mer³⁹, where he was to remain until his death in 1854⁴⁰. Just like (again) P. du Pontavice, A. de Kerpezdron did not see any contradiction between this position and his Methodist ministry⁴¹: as a matter of fact, this is because of the latter that he refused to be (re)ordained as a Reformed pastor⁴². He had indeed been received into full connexion by the British Wesleyan Conference in 1812⁴³ and his name was long included in the list of itinerant preachers⁴⁴.

III. Consolidation and salient features of French Methodism

Three years after the fall of Napoleon I, in 1818, the British Wesleyan Conference sent the itinerant preacher Charles Cook (1787-1858) to France. The London-born Minister was to be the leader of French Methodism for some forty years and introduced Wesley's preaching to new regions, in the South-East of France: Cévennes, Drôme and Vaucluse⁴⁵. Far from limiting himself to Normandy, C. Cook travelled widely through France and went as far as Lausanne⁴⁶. Under Charles Cook's leadership, French Methodism was to undergo various innovations: a

³⁹ Lelièvre, *Armand de Kerpezdron*, 133.

⁴⁰ Roux, *Le Méthodisme*, 25.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, 25.

⁴² Lelièvre, *Armand de Kerpezdron*, 125-126.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, 39-40.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, 113.

⁴⁵ Bertrand, *Le Méthodisme*, 269.

⁴⁶ Roux, *Le Méthodisme*, 38-39.

journal (*Magasin wesleyen*⁴⁷) from 1843, Sunday schools, and even the first French Methodist Theology Faculty which opened in Nîmes in 1860.

But the main innovation under C. Cook's watch was the creation of an autonomous French Conference (with jurisdiction, as already noted, extending to the Swiss Canton of Vaud)⁴⁸, which was decided at the Nîmes Conference in September 1852⁴⁹. Taking their independence must not be taken as a mark of defiance from the French Methodists towards the British Conference: on the contrary, both communities worked hand in hand to prepare this emancipation. The Wesleyan Missionary Committee helped the French with this and even continued sending them funds and preachers to the *Église évangélique méthodiste de France et de Suisse*⁵⁰. In terms of territorial organisation, the French Methodist congregations were divided into two districts:

*North (including among others Paris, Normandy and the Canton of Vaud)

* Center (Nîmes, Cévennes, Drôme, Alps...)⁵¹

Charles Cook was the first President of the French Conference and remained so until 1858, the year he died⁵². The way this assembly worked was rather original: the Conference (named "Synod" from 1898⁵³) met once a year and sat in each district alternatively. The Ministers from the district where the Conference sat were all members of the Conference, and two delegates from the other district joined them with consultative votes⁵⁴. Lay delegates joined

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, 78. The journal's name changed several times and publication was interrupted twice before being finally discontinued for good in 1939.

⁴⁸ In 1901, Switzerland (really meaning the Canton of Vaud) stopped officially depending from the French Conference and was officially attached to the (U.S.) United Methodist Church (*ibidem*, 106).

⁴⁹ Patrick Ph. Streiff, "Le méthodisme francophone : aperçu historique et bibliographique" in Miguel Brun, Françoise Deconink-Brossard, Denis C. Dutton et al., John Wesley : Actes du colloque à l'occasion du tricentenaire de la naissance du fondateur de méthodisme – Faculté de Théologie de l'Université de Lausanne, 12-13 juin 2003, Lausanne: Éditions du CMFT, 2003, <http://www.cmft.ch/fr/publications/articles-mthodistes/mthodisme-francophone/article-2003--mthodisme-francophone.html> (DOA: 03/05/2023).

⁵⁰ Roux, *Le Méthodisme*, 85.

⁵¹ *Archives du méthodisme*, I-1 (24/2/1853), 2.

⁵² Patrick Ph. Streiff, "Le méthodisme francophone : aperçu historique et bibliographique" ;

⁵³ Roux, *Le Méthodisme*, 183.

⁵⁴ *Archives du méthodisme*, I-6 (4/10/1853), 41

the Conference in 1879⁵⁵: initially two, their number grew to four until the decision was taken in 1890 that there would be a parity between the lay and ministerial members of Conference (by this time, it had been decided that all Ministers were automatically members of the Conference, following the British usage⁵⁶).

Finally, one should note the short-lived existence of another journal, *Archives du méthodisme*, which only lasted for four years (1853-1857). It was edited by Jean-Paul Cook (1828-1886) and mainly dealt with foreign Methodism, with China and English-speaking countries being foremost⁵⁷.

After becoming fully independent, French Methodism was to experience a constant – but always very limited – progression, going from 19 Ministers/probationers and 105 churches in 1853 to 30 Ministers/probationers and 184 places of worship in 1870⁵⁸. The Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871 proved the beginning of French Methodism’s slow decline although there was not necessarily a link between these two events. We notice however that in 1893 the number of Ministers and probationers had fallen by 20% to 24 and the number of places of worship to 138⁵⁹. Things went downhill from there: Pastor Théophile Roux even uses the phrases “sick tree” (“*arbre malade*”) and “weakening evolution” (“*évolution (...) affaiblissante*”) in his description of French Methodism between 1893 and 1914⁶⁰. T. Roux renounces giving his reader statistics or figures on the number of Ministers and places of worship for the years after 1893 in his History of French Methodism. He simply observes that two Ministers and two probationers died in action during the Great War⁶¹: Pastors Bertin Aguilon (1885-1914) &

⁵⁵ Roux, *Le Méthodisme*, 176. It may not have been a coincidence that the British Wesleyan Conference had taken the very same decision the year before.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, 177.

⁵⁷ See for example the issue of 2/9/1853 which devoted 5 pages (out of 8) to Australia, England, Ireland, China, Jamaica, the U.S.A. and Canada (*Archives du méthodisme*, I-5 (2/9/1853), 35-39).

⁵⁸ Roux, *Le Méthodisme*, 93-94.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, 178.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, 181.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, 207-208.

Jules-Philippe Guiton (1884-1918) and Messrs Étienne Klein (1888-1914) & Paul-Auguste Issartial (1890-1915). At the end of the 1910s the (U.S.) Methodist Episcopal Church launched a mission to France which proved popular among French Methodists even though the suggestion (which apparently originated among the U.S. Methodists) that the French Church should come under the supervision of the M.E.C. was rejected⁶². This phase of transition, as U.S. Methodism was launching a friendly takeover of Continental European Methodism, was to bode ill for an independent French Methodism.

In their respective books on Methodism, Claude-Jean Bertrand and Théophile Roux both insist on the fact that French Methodism never had a large following. For C.-J. Bertrand: “it was spread too thin, it was too poor in funds and in men. Converts abandoned it when they married. Many sympathizers did not want to break with the Reformed Church”⁶³. As for T. Roux, he notes that the Methodists “generally only gathered very small audiences” (“*ne réunirent que de très petits auditoires en général*”)⁶⁴. The tiny size of the French Methodist Church is shown by the small number of men who served as Ministers: Théophile Roux can thus allow himself the luxury of naming almost all of them in his History of Methodism, and finds there were nineteen of them between 1834 and 1852⁶⁵. He also notes that, during the eighteen years preceding the creation of an autonomous French and Swiss Conference, only seven ministers were ordained⁶⁶.

⁶² Bertrand, *Le Méthodisme*, 270.

⁶³ “[E]lle était trop dispersée et trop pauvre en argent et en hommes. Ses convertis abandonnaient les sociétés après leur mariage. Beaucoup de sympathisants ne voulaient pas rompre avec l’Église réformée”, *ibidem*, 270.

⁶⁴ Roux, *Le Méthodisme*, 27.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, 56-62.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, 76.

All these elements probably explain why, when the majority of French Protestants decided to unite inside the Reformed Church of France in 1938, the Methodists followed them⁶⁷. Methodism's traditional Arminianism does not appear to have been a problem and only a handful of congregations refused to follow the movement. For all of them, however, 1938 signalled the end of an independent French Methodism: the Reformed Church's kiss of death to the Methodist brethren condemned them to dissolve in a confession with different traditions and references. The congregations choosing to remain behind petered out: a generation later, in 1970, there were only eleven Methodist societies, of which three in Alsace (under the Switzerland-based U.M.C. Bishop), two in Greater Paris and six in Gard⁶⁸. Today, as already noted, the *Union de l'Église évangélique méthodiste de France* is under the supervision of the U.M.C⁶⁹. Still involved in French Church life, the UÉEMF is a member of the *Fédération Protestante de France*⁷⁰ since 2014⁷¹ and a founding member of the *Conseil national des évangéliques de France*⁷² created in 2010.

To conclude on this brief history of French Methodism, I'd like to quote the man who was entrusted, nearly eighty-five years ago, with writing what he called the “funeral oration” of French Methodism⁷³:

⁶⁷ Bertrand, *Le Méthodisme*, 270.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, 269.

⁶⁹ Union de l'Église évangélique méthodiste de France, “Communautés”, <<http://ueem.umc-europe.org/>> accessed 13 November 2018.

⁷⁰ The FPF is the umbrella organisation of French Protestant Churches or bodies created in 1905 when Church and State were officially separated in France, see Fédération protestante de France, “La Fédération protestante de France – Nos missions”, <<https://www.protestants.org/page/635454-federation-protestante>>, accessed 23 May 2022.

⁷¹ Union de l'Église évangélique méthodiste de France, “Accueil”, <<http://ueem.umc-europe.org/>>, accessed 23 May 2022.

⁷² On this organisation, created to make the voices heard of the French Evangelical Churches inside and alongside the FPF, see Le Conseil national des évangéliques de France, “Les 4 missions du CNEF”, <<https://www.lecnef.org/page/509713-missions>>, accessed 23 May 2022. The CNEF is born of a common grievance that the FPF was too much in the hands of the “historic” Protestant Churches, i. e. Lutheran and Reformed.

⁷³ Roux, *Le Méthodisme*, vi.

When speaking of happy times, and letting the reader understand that rich spiritual benedictions fell upon the work of God, one should not exaggerate the meaning of those words. When all is said and done, French Methodism was always poor in men and in financial resources. It seems, moreover, that its activity had been spread over a too great portion of the country, so that it was impossible for Methodism to gather together its spiritual forces and its adherents. Also, because of members moving out, becoming isolated, and because of Catholic or irreligious friends or family, those who had been put on the way of the truth, the liberty and the light [John 14, 6] through Methodism, were ultimately lost to it.⁷⁴

IV. Methodism in French Protestantism: an invisible presence? (1939-)

Despite the efforts of the various writers on French Methodism, notably Théophile Roux and Matthieu Lelièvre (1840-1930), the history of this Church remains in France a confidential subject, and this despite their being part of a world-wide confession. Two main reasons may probably account for this:

* The fact that for a long time, French Methodism was dependent on the (Wesleyan) British Conference. This situation seems to have precluded French Methodists from having a more efficient organisation. Also, the links with the U.K. can have raised suspicions about this “English” Church, before the *Entente Cordiale* set in, at the beginning of the 20th century. As

⁷⁴ “En parlant d’années heureuses et en faisant entendre que de riches bénédictions spirituelles reposèrent sur l’œuvre de Dieu, il ne faudrait pas s’exagérer le sens de ces expressions. En définitive, le méthodisme français a toujours été pauvre en hommes et en ressources financières. Il semble aussi qu’il ait dispersé son activité sur une trop grande étendue de pays, au point qu’il lui ait été impossible de grouper ses forces spirituelles et ses adhérents et qu’il a très régulièrement perdu, par les déplacements et la dissémination de ses membres, leur entourage catholique ou irrégieux, ceux, qu’avec la grâce de Dieu, il avait mis sur le chemin de la lumière, de la vérité et de la vie.”, *ibidem*, 157-158.

late as in 1905, the Fashoda crisis made it seem possible that war should break out between the two Colonial Powers, so one should not underestimate the liability that the historic and organisational links with Britain could represent.

* French Methodism also appeared constrained geographically. It took it a long time to go beyond Normandy, and when it did, Methodism essentially gained ground in traditionally protestant regions. Given that Protestantism was always a minority in France and that the French tend to see Protestants as a uniform bloc whose singular feature is that they are not Roman Catholics, Methodism faced an uphill battle to demonstrate in what they differed from other Protestant confessions and to make headways beyond already Protestant audiences.

More generally, we may wonder whether Methodism had landed at the wrong time in France? My country was then in a painful transition as it cast away the yoke of the Bourbons and moved slowly towards democracy as she experienced eight different regimes between 1789 and 1939.

Although very small, Methodism has nonetheless left a hidden trace in France... even in my own region of Auvergne (which is seldom mentioned in Methodist History), a priest in my parish told me that in one of his previous parishes he had been told: “the Protestants here are very particular: they used to be Methodists”. My late friend, Prof. Bernard Cottret (1951-2020), who wrote one of the few academic books in French written on John Wesley, told me once that the Methodists were like Trotskiists – very few people confess to be one, but their influence is everywhere⁷⁵. Dr Prunier wrote something very similar – although less provocative – when he observed that “one can’t name another country where this great Protestant denomination

⁷⁵ This he told me on July 1st 2011 when I defended my PhD.

disappeared by merging with another one – the Reformed denomination – while fertilizing it in the process⁷⁶.”

Afterword: A Bibliography

This final section is devoted to the bibliography of Methodism in French. What written sources does the French-speaking reader have at their disposal? They would be well advised to turn first to Théophile Roux’s *Le Méthodisme en France*, subtitled: “*Pour servir à l’Histoire religieuse d’hier et d’avant-hier*” (“to serve the religious history of yesterday and the day before yesterday”) and published in 1940, it never went into a second edition⁷⁷. Even though the book – as its subtitle alas made it clear – was essentially preoccupied with the past of Methodism, it remains a useful and readable source on the history of the confession until 1938.

One should then turn to Pastor Matthieu Lelièvre’s works, such as *La Théologie de Wesley* (1924)⁷⁸ (one edition only) or *John Wesley, sa vie et son œuvre*, first published in 1868⁷⁹ and which went through five editions. The third edition was augmented to 500 pages, and the last one was published in 1925. M. Lelièvre’s books were clearly aimed at French Methodists to allow them to better know their Church and its founder. Much more recent is Patrick Ph. Streiff’s “Le méthodisme francophone : aperçu historique et bibliographique⁸⁰”.

The French-speaking reader wishing to go further could read the books published by the *société d’études du méthodisme français* (“society for the study of French Methodism”) created in Montpellier in November 2011. The society is academically inclined and is composed of

⁷⁶ “On ne connaît pas d’autres pays où cette grande confession protestante mondiale ait disparu en fusionnant avec une autre, la confession réformée, tout en la fécondant (...).”, Jean Louis Prunier, *Le Méthodisme français (1791-1940) : Étude socio-historique du méthodisme wesleyen britannique présent dans l’espace francophone européen et africain*, (unpublished PhD thesis), Montpellier: Institut protestant de théologie, Faculté de Montpellier, 2018.

⁷⁷ Roux, *Le Méthodisme, passim*.

⁷⁸ Matthieu Lelièvre, *La Théologie de Wesley* ([Paris?]: Publications Méthodistes, 1924).

⁷⁹ Matthieu Lelièvre, *John Wesley, sa vie et son œuvre* (Paris: Librairie évangélique, 1868).

⁸⁰ Patrick Ph. Streiff, “Le méthodisme francophone : aperçu historique et bibliographique”.

amateur and professional historians. The proceedings of two conferences held in 2014 and 2015 have been published as *Facettes du méthodisme français* (“aspects of French Methodism”) by Ampelos éditions in 2016⁸¹. A third volume devoted to Methodist Missions is still due to be published, following a conference held in 2017. The theology of Methodism has also been developed in Patrick Ph. Streiff’s *John Wesley : le prédicateur et sa pensée théologique d’après ses sermons*⁸². The reader can also consult Jean-Louis Prunier’s books: *Le réveil méthodiste dans les Cévennes vignaises* (2019)⁸³ and *Le Réveil dans les Cévennes du Nord* (2020)⁸⁴. Turning to unpublished material, one can note that Dr Prunier is the author of a PhD thesis which he defended in 2018 at Montpellier’s Protestant Faculty of Theology: *Le Méthodisme français (1791-1940) : Étude socio-historique du méthodisme wesleyen britannique présent dans l’espace francophone européen et africain*.

Finally, a few books have been published in France on Methodism as a world-wide confession. Thus *La Sanctification dans le méthodisme*, published in 2013 as the proceedings of a conference organised by the *société d’études du méthodisme français*⁸⁵. One should also read Bernard Cottret’s exciting *Histoire de la Réforme protestante : Luther, Calvin, Wesley, XVIe-XVIIIe siècle*⁸⁶ which confronted the lives and spiritualities of the three great figures of European Reform⁸⁷. Prof. Cottret’s book has been re-issued as a paperback by Perrin in 2010.

⁸¹ Jean-Louis Prunier & Jean-François Zorn (eds), *op. cit.*

⁸² Patrick Ph. Streiff, *John Wesley : le prédicateur et sa pensée théologique d’après ses sermons* (Charols: Excelsis éditions, 2016)

⁸³ Jean-Louis Prunier, *Le Réveil méthodiste dans les Cévennes vignaises* ([Maisons-Laffitte]: Ampelos, 2019).

⁸⁴ Jean-Louis Prunier, *Le Réveil dans les Cévennes du Nord* ([Maisons-Laffitte]: Ampelos, 2020).

⁸⁵ David Bundy, André Gounelle, Jean-Louis Prunier *et al.*, *La Sanctification dans le méthodisme*, Société d’études du méthodisme français (ed.) (Maisons-Laffitte: Ampelos, 2013).

⁸⁶ Bernard Cottret, *Histoire de la réforme protestante – Luther, Calvin, Wesley, XVIe-XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Perrin, 2001).

⁸⁷ Prof. Cottret confided to me that his initial project was to write a biography of John Wesley. However, he turned this into a triple biography of John Calvin, Martin Luther and John Wesley for fear of the book remaining on librarians’ shelves since the object of the book would have been totally unknown to the vast majority of French readers. The fact is that many people appear to have bought the book out of interest for the first two figures and so discovered John Wesley (private information).

A useful complement would be Claude-Jean Bertrand's *Le Méthodisme* (1971)⁸⁸ which went through only one edition.

The reader can then see that the French-speaking reader can learn more about Methodism both in France and as an international confession, even though the immense majority of sources would be available in English. Much remains to be done to improve the French readership's knowledge of this Church, as some academics actively try to do at present. The question is what is the appetite of French readers (and even Protestant French readers) for such a confession which – when known at all – is too often perceived as either an alien Church, or (as evidenced by the parish priest's phrase quoted earlier) as a distant memory of a bygone era of Protestantism.

⁸⁸ Bertrand, *Le Méthodisme*.