

# Rise of French evangelicals puts secularism in a spin

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## **Belief in the gospel truth is spreading.**

AS THE piano strikes up, the congregation sways, fists in the air, murmurs of hallelujah punctuating the music. Pastor Franck Lefillatre, bathed in the spotlight on his podium, intones into a microphone.

"Let out the words that are in your heart," he urges. His whispers crescendo to booming rhetoric. Behind him, emblazoned in gold lettering, are the words: "Jesus Christ: the same yesterday, today, eternally."

As evangelical services go, this gathering on a rainy Sunday is nothing unusual. In countless churches across the US and many countries, it would be a staple means of Christian worship.

But this is not the American Bible Belt. It is the Church of Paris-Bastille, and this congregation is one of a growing number of evangelical communities spreading through France and prospering in spite of its secular - and Catholic - traditions.

From a postwar population of about 50,000, French evangelicals are now estimated to number 450,000 to 500,000. According to the Evangelical Federation of France, the number of churches has risen from 800 in 1970 to more than 2200 today.

Last week, the boom made headlines when thousands of evangelicals descended on Strasbourg to turn the 500th anniversary of Calvin's birth into a huge media-covered event.

On paper, France would seem one of the least likely places for this branch of Christianity to gain a foothold. For centuries, Protestantism was the embattled minority in a country Catholics liked to call the "eldest daughter of the church" because of its strong ties to Rome. That minority still makes up just 3 per cent of the population.

More importantly, ever since France wrote a separation of church and state into the constitution, the country has worshipped at the altar of laïcité - the concept of a secular state.

So the emergence of evangelicals as a force has raised eyebrows, with some critics questioning whether their beliefs are compatible with the values of a secular republic. They are associated in many minds with the politically powerful movement of the US religious right.

Jean-Francois Colosimo, a writer and religious historian, provoked a furious backlash from evangelicals when, after it emerged that France's intelligence services had launched a "census" of the domestic population, he said: "Everything in France would seem to ban a politico-religious mixture. But laïcité is fragile and temptations are present" - a direct reference to the evangelicals.

These arguments are rejected as irrelevant by French believers. Just because they have the same faith as the Americans and a similar style of worship, they say, it does not mean they share the same politics. But Henri Tincq, a religious commentator, said issues such as abortion and homosexuality were creeping up the agenda.

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