

Paris Evangelical Missionary Society Archives 1936-1947

Département Evangélique Français d'Action Apostolique (DEFAP), Paris

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The evangelical revival movement that had earlier given birth to the London Missionary Society and the Basel Mission did not leave France untouched in the early 1820's. In fact, English and Swiss evangelists were at work in that country and were instrumental in the founding on 4 November 1822 of the *Société des Missions Evangéliques chez les peuples non-chrétiens à Paris* (SMEP) (known in English as Paris Evangelical Missionary Society). Although its goal was to propagate the gospel among pagans and other non-Christian peoples, the SMEP itself did not at first think of sending missionaries to foreign shores. By 1829, however, the Society sent its first three missionaries to Southern Africa at the urging of J. Philip of the London Missionary Society, who had been campaigning in that area for the improvement of the condition of the black population. After some initial difficulties a station was eventually founded in what is now Lesotho, where the missionaries Casalis and later Mabile were to become close advisers to the Basuto king Moeshoeshoe for many years. After 20 years of service in Basutoland, the missionary Coillard led an expedition north to found a new

mission on the Zambesi river in the territory of the Barotse people where he served until his death in 1904. In 1863 the SMEP started a mission in Senegal, a French colony, and later in the colony of Gabon where they replaced American Presbyterian missionaries ill at ease with the French administration. After the first World War Germany had to abandon its missions in Togo and Cameroon which were also taken over by the SMEP.

In the Pacific Ocean English-French rivalry eventually led to the annexation by France of New Caledonia, Tahiti, and the Loyalty Islands, where missionaries of the SMEP replaced their English colleagues of the LMS. In France itself the Society undertook to propagate its missionary work through a series of speaking tours conducted by missionaries on leave from their assignment in the field. The pioneer E. Casalis undertook the first of these tours in 1850 and they became a regular institution. Auxiliary committees were set up and aid was solicited from interested parties in France and abroad. The Society founded its *Bulletin* in 1825 and the next year saw the publication of the *Journal des Missions Evangéliques*, which has continued without interruption until the present day.

Throughout the 19th century the Society pursued its work of teaching the gospel, while also paying attention to the needs of better sanitary and agricultural techniques. It is fair to say that, although the missionaries believed that gospel would help the indigenous population emerge from the "shadows" and appreciate the benefits of Western civilization, they were not without an attentive eye to local customs and beliefs.

The body of documentation on the auxiliary and home activities of the SMEP will provide interesting information not only for the study of this Missionary Society itself, but also for the study of Protestantism in France in the 19th and early 20th century.

With the creation in 1971 of the *Communauté Evangélique d'Action Apostolique* (CEVAA) and the *Département Evangélique Français d'Action Apostolique* (DEFAP), the SMEP as such ceased to exist. Its archives, however, have been retained by the DEFAP in the *Maison des Missions* on the Boulevard Arago in Paris, which has been in use since 1887.

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