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FRANCE: Covid-19: Scapegoating an Evangelical church in Mulhouse

By Willy Fautré, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (19.05.2020) – Since the outbreak of the Covid-19, the pastor of an Evangelical church and his congregation in Mulhouse, a city in the north-east of France, have been scapegoated by some politicians and media. State authorities have been silent, in violation of France's legal and political obligations to defend religious freedom and promote tolerance.

A law-abiding Evangelical church before the Covid-19 tsunami: a timeline

Following its tradition, on 17-21 February 2020, the Evangelical church “La porte ouverte chrétienne” held its annual international gathering of fasting and prayer in Mulhouse. About 2000 Christians, including families with children, from France and neighboring countries, but also from French Guyana in South America, participated in the event, Pastor Peterschmitt told French television France 2. As he clarified in the 21 April interview with France 2, at that time all churches, bars and restaurants across the country were open, there were all sorts of sports events, including football matches, and there were no restrictive measures. Pastor Peterschmitt became aware that something serious was happening in his congregation when 23 members of his family got sick and 19 of them were tested positive. This was the first visible cluster in France, not far from the German border, but where was the virus coming from?

The cluster could have started anywhere else but it was never investigated how and when the virus reached our gathering, he said. The pastor and his son, a physician, and other parishioners tested positive. Twenty-nine people of the congregation died from the Covid-19, France 2 concluded at the end of the interview.

On 18 February, President Macron was at a public meeting in Mulhouse, getting a crowd bath and shaking hands with people, only 300 m from the Evangelical church.

On 21 February, doctors in France received a first official circular letter informing them that there were 12 confirmed cases of Covid-19 in the country but there was no active chain of transmission in France.

On 22-29 February, the annual Agricultural Show in Paris, which President Macron and high-level politicians attended, took place as usual and just closed its doors one day earlier because of the possible threat of the virus.

On 29 February, the French government announced that it had decided to take some precautionary measures such as forbidding gatherings of more than 5000 people.

France was then unaware that it was on the eve of an unprecedented health catastrophe which still acutely persists at the time of writing this paper (15 May).

On 1 March, the Regional Health Agency (ARS) contacted Pastor Samuel Peterschmitt and told him that one of his faithful and her two children had been tested positive. The mother had not attended the mass gathering but her children had taken part in side activities. The ARS asked for the list of the 295 children who had participated in the recreational activities of the church at the mid-February gathering. The pastor did it without delay and posted a message on the website of his church telling his parishioners that they should contact the ARS. His parishioners followed his recommendation.

Political and media stigmatization

On 15 March, Ms. Josiane Chevalier, the recently appointed *préfet* (regional high representative of the state) of the *Grand Est* and *Bas-Rhin* region, announced the governmental decision to close non-essential shops and malls but clearly stressed that it was not a confinement.

On 17 March, she declared on France-Inter radio station that *“the pandemic started from an Evangelical gathering which took place in the Haut-Rhin, with more than 3000 people and no respect for the restrictive measures. In short, everything that cannot be done and we pay a high price for this disrespect of basic measures.”* **But this accusation, scapegoating the Evangelical event, was baseless.**

Again and again in her contacts with the media, she stigmatized the Evangelical Church as THE cluster that had infected the whole region, saturating for months all the intensive care units of the region to such an extent that many people needing hospitalization had to be transported to available medical facilities in Germany and other regions of France.

French media reproduced her declarations without checking the facts and hereby further stigmatized the Evangelical church.

On 5 April, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the charismatic leader of a left-wing political movement and a member of the national assembly, incriminated the Evangelical church at the RTL Grand Jury, a prime time political show.

On 6 March, the leading national newspaper *Le Figaro* dramatically amplified the wave of stigmatization by writing: "This issue sheds a harsh light on the community « Porte ouverte chrétienne » (Christian Open Doors) created on the model of Pentecostal megachurches and headed by Samuel Peterschmitt, who is surrounded by a team of 'pastors' and about 20 employees." And the newspaper quoted an unnamed elected person in an unidentified state institution as saying that the pastor had not managed "to be get the recognition of the official Protestant Federation of France (FPF)."

Further suspicions about the church were sowed with references to proselytism (sharing one's faith with others), laying on hands, warm hugs, tears, emotions, a special focus on healing by faith and miracles, fasting, and so on.

Such connotations are not insignificant in France. They echo state-driven campaigns warning against so-called cults and the defamation activities of anti-cult associations over the last three decades. The article of *Le Figaro* purposefully characterizes the Evangelical church as a manipulative and rich cult, pastor Peterschmitt as a guru exploiting his faithful, and the other pastors as alleged pastors, apparently because such hysteria boosts the newspaper's sales. All these clichés are well-known by scholars in religious studies and religious freedom defenders. Stigmatization of law-abiding religious groups largely sponsored by the state in France has been repeatedly denounced at the UN and the OSCE for many years.

It must not be forgotten that 29 members of the Evangelical church died from Covid-19 and that many others were tested

positive and hospitalized. Moreover, the scapegoating campaign of some media and some politicians resulted in insults and anonymous threats addressed to the leaders of the church and some parishioners. Someone even received a message that his house would be burnt down if he did not move out. The church building had to be protected for some time by the police.

Deaf and mute authorities about the stigmatization

On 25 March, the Evangelical church requested a meeting with the local state authorities but there was never any answer. The National Council of the Evangelical Churches in France (CNEF) asked to meet President Macron who happened to be again in Mulhouse on 25 March to meet the health staff, but again there was no answer.

There was no public word of compassion for believers who were victimized twice, first by the Covid-19 and second by the public stigmatization and scapegoating.

The prejudice and opportunism on display in this tragic incident are shameful, and show that freedom of religion is on very shaky ground in France.

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