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La formation des provinces synodales protestantes dans la France moderne

The first Protestant churches in France appeared from the 1540s onwards and soon started to develop a structure with 'provinces synodales' and 'colloques'. The chosen boundaries of the 'provinces synodales' (or merely 'synodes') were those of the 'gouvernements', that is military and political districts, and not those of the Catholic dioceses. There were twelve 'gouvernements' in the second half of the XVIth-century, but they did not correspond to the setting up of the churches. Thus, some 'provinces synodales' joined several 'gouvernements', like Poitou-Saintonge (part of the gouvernements of Orléanais and of Guyenne), or Anjou-Touraine-Maine-Bretagne (part of the gouvernement of Orléanais and the gouvernement of Bretagne). There were only eight 'provinces' in 1563.

The number of 'provinces' grew quickly during the last years of the XVIth-century : they were sixteen from 1614 on. Several 'provinces' were divided, because there were too many churches. The difference between the 'provinces' and the 'gouvernements' became greater. For example, a province of Vivarais appeared before 1572 and there was never a 'gouvernement' of Vivarais. It was the same with the province of Cévennes in 1614. The new boundaries were drawn pragmatically: territories were divided (Languedoc became Haut-Languedoc and Bas-Languedoc), joined (Champagne with Île-de-France) or delimited according to the number of churches and ministers. The boundaries of the 'provinces synodales' were sometimes very different from the boundaries of the 'gouvernements': only Brittany, Normandy, Dauphiné and Provence were both 'synodes' and 'gouvernements'. Yet there were not as many changes during the XVIIth century. Many attempts at change failed because the Huguenots wanted the territories to be fixed, if it was possible.

There were not only new 'provinces', but also changes within the 'provinces'. Very often churches asked to move into another 'province', or two 'provinces' contested one or several churches, especially the Western and the Northern 'provinces', where there were not so many ministers. Sometimes the conflicts could last for dozens of years. If there were not enough ministers in a district, a church could belong to another district. So the 'provinces synodales' were not sacred territories, as the Catholic dioceses were; they were rather an adaptation to circumstances. We can conclude that a 'province synodale' was not an abstract space, but a network of relations between churches: all the churches whose ministers were given by a 'province' belonged to that 'province'.

In 1685 public Protestant worship was forbidden in France. But the underground 'Église du Désert' (Church of the Desert) was soon born again. The first new 'provinces synodales' were in the South-East (Languedoc, Vivarais, Dauphiné, Cévennes), as soon as 1715-1721. It was here that the Huguenots were most numerous, and where the ministers educated in the underground seminary of Lausanne first came. The 'provinces synodales' expanded slowly to the South-West (Haut-Languedoc, Haute-Guyenne in 1740), then to the West (Normandy,

Poitou in 1744). In 1763 there were thirteen 'provinces'. At last a new 'province' was born in 1779, with the big 'synode' of Thiérache, Picardie, Cambrésis, Orléanais and Berry. But on the whole France had no 'provinces synodales': there were no more churches in Brittany, Burgundy, nor in the Massif Central, and so there was no 'province synodale' there. This differed to the XVIIth-century, when the whole France was divided into 'provinces synodales'.

Nor were the boundaries the same as in the XVIIth-century. They depended on the places where the ministers originated, on the facility to go from a place to another, and on the opportunity to escape to the surveillance of the authorities. There was a real adaptation to the new geography of the churches and to changing political circumstances. More so than in the XVIIIth-century, a 'province synodale' was not really a space, it was a list of churches served by a network of ministers. And it was certainly not a sacred space, because there was a great capacity to adapt to circumstances.

It remains to be seen whether these territories made sense for the Huguenots, especially where the changes were numerous. It is very difficult to answer this question: when the Huguenots married in places of exile, it was often with a man/woman of their 'synode'; but in France, many people preferred to marry a Catholic of the same village than a Protestant who lived further away in the same 'province'.