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### Church of the Scattered: Navigating Cultural Identity in the Protestant Churches of Senegal

Joy Kirkland  
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Church of the Scattered:  
Navigating Cultural Identity in the Protestant Churches of Senegal

Joy Kirkland

SIT Study Abroad: Dakar, Senegal

## Abstract

Senegal is a country renowned for its peaceful religious pluralism in the midst of turmoil and demographic change in neighboring West African nations. Though the vast majority of the population adheres to Sufi Islam, they seem to live in peace and cooperation with the prominent Catholic minority. Wedged between these well-established groups, Protestantism struggles to distinguish itself. Protestant missions have been planted in Senegal for over a century, but the church remains small with almost no cultural presence, and up to 80% of its members are non-Senegalese. This paper will present some preliminary basic research about this oft-ignored community in Dakar in an attempt to better understand the ways in which an immigrant church navigates cultural identity. In particular, it focuses on the ethic of proselytization in the missional Protestant church and the ways it interacts with and challenges the Senegalese ethic of peaceful coexistence. Literature on the history of Christianity and Protestantism in the region, as well as the current dynamics of global religious growth and the changing landscape of modern missions foreground the discussion. Interviews conducted with Protestants from many different churches, positions, and denominational backgrounds illuminate the place of the Protestant Church in Senegal. Observation of religious gatherings, services, and meeting place supplement interviews in this paper as context. This research will attempt to bring insight into the cultural adaptations beginning to take place in the seed of a national church and the challenges they expose within the ethic of pluralism in one of the world's shining examples of "laïcité."

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	2
Introduction and Research Questions .....	4
Context and Literature Review.....	5
The State of Religion in the World and West Africa .....	5
The Pluralism and Religious Landscape of Senegal .....	7
Brief History and Context of the Protestant Tradition.....	10
History of Protestantism in Senegal and Africa.....	13
Missions in the Modern Protestant Church.....	15
Methodology and Ethics .....	16
Findings and Analysis.....	20
The Makeup of the Protestant Churches of Senegal .....	20
Barriers to Growth.....	26
Persecution and Proselytization.....	31
Solutions from the Senegalese Minority.....	33
Implications .....	36
Recommendations for Further Research.....	37
Conclusion.....	38
References .....	40

## **Introduction and Research Questions**

As the global population of religious believers swells year by year, questions of pluralism and coexistence are ever more central to the world community. In West Africa, Islam and Christianity are carried along in population booms, but religious fervor grows as well, with strains of Islamism and Charismatic Christianity rising in popularity (McClendon, 2017). Alongside these changes comes increased persecution. Senegal's much lauded tolerant Muslim majority and significant Catholic minority, however, have held firm as paragons of peace. Though the country is reportedly 90.7% Muslim, public displays of love and solidarity regularly take place with the urban concentrated Catholic community, including celebrating one another's festivals, gestures of respect between religious leaders, and attendance at one another's religious schools (Buggenhagen, 2013). Particularly in Dakar, these groups live side by side, sometimes occupying the same families.

I entered this environment as an American evangelical, armed with all my reading on the state of Senegal. Shocked by the almost total invisibility of the Protestant churches I sought out, I began to study them for better insight into the real operation of Senegalese pluralism through the lens of a community which is miniscule both in size and cultural presence. Precious little research has been done about the Protestant community here, with nearly all the information I could find describing the church in the Anthology of African Christianity and certain articles of church history. At the first level, this basic research is intended to give provide general information about and some meager visibility to the Protestant community in Senegal. I have also hoped to uncover something of the active progress of the Christian Church's cultural transformation, much talked about as "Christendom" moves to the Global South and the phenomenon of "reverse" missions reaches full swing (Kim, 2011). I soon discovered that the

Protestant churches are roughly estimated to be more than 80% composed of immigrants, sustained by the influx of professionals and refugees pursuing the stability and economic growth of Senegal. In the midst of the waves of evangelical passion for missions, the native Protestant church has refused to grow.

This brought me naturally to the research questions addressed in this paper. Firstly, who are the Protestant churches of Senegal? How do they navigate their positionality as immigrants and missionaries, and all the attendant hindrances in the modern “postcolonial” church? Second, what do Protestant experiences, particularly in regard to conversion, reveal about pluralism in Senegal? The adaptability of the missional church, and the resilience of Senegalese tolerance collide in these neighborhoods and conversations. It is perhaps through this modern church’s attempts to balance diversity and overcome cultural imperialism, and Senegalese society’s response to challenges and blind spots exposed by their evangelical ethic that we can glimpse ways forward in the ever-expanding religious frontiers of the global south. Senegal’s pluralism, like all great systems, cannot go long unchallenged. As such, the quiet persecutions hidden in these slivered percentages of the population present an opportunity for this model nation to be a symbol of hope, for the church and the house of Islam, or a cause for future concern.

## **Context and Literature Review**

### **The State of Religion in the World and West Africa**

From the chilly shores of the West, it’s easy to imagine religion in decline – a bygone system that slowly yields its place to political and ideological affiliations. And in most countries of North America and Europe, it very possibly is, but globally, religion is on the rise. According to the Pew Research Center, unaffiliated persons are expected to, following current trends, decrease as a share of the global population while Islam expands to nearly match the population

share of Christianity by 2050 (Projected change in global population, 2017). These populations will primarily inhabit the Global South. In Sub-Saharan Africa particularly, explosive growth is happening. By 2060, Pew anticipates 4 in 10 Christians will live in Sub-Saharan Africa, and the share of Sub-Saharan Muslims will move from 16 to 27% (McClendon, 2017). This positions the region to become a powerful heartland for the world's two major religions.

These dynamics can be seen with unfortunate corollaries. Pew's 2017 report on religious restriction shows a rising trend of both social and systemic religious hostilities since 2007. Sub-Saharan Africa does not score particularly well, with religious suppression and hostility rising considerably in each category and interreligious conflict remaining stable despite declines in every other region (How religious restrictions have risen around the world, 2019). Political and social instability are undeniably key factors in religious conflict here and elsewhere, but religious growth and diversity nevertheless interact with and affect interreligious conflict and persecution. Diversity can operationally increase tolerance, but in the face of such momentous changes, there is reasonable anxiety about the future of religious conflict, globally and in one of the world's more religiously peaceful regions: West Africa.

Western Africa, 31% Christian and 51% Muslim, is home to many of these diversities and their anxieties. Often considered an enclave of pluralism and religious tolerance, changing frictions in this region have the potential of broad consequences. The decidedly Muslim majority nations of Senegal, the Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Togo, Mauritania and Sierra Leone live beside nations divided more evenly between these two Abrahamic religions (often with substantial or majority populations practicing traditional religion) such as Nigeria, Togo, Benin, Burkina Faso, and the Ivory Coast, and strong Christian majority nations of Ghana, Liberia (Ayegboyin & Fatokun, 2016). The diversity of this region is more than religious, and as

such, civil, interreligious and ethnic conflicts arise. Despite this, West Africa is renowned for its peaceful expressions of Islam and the accomplished coexistence in many of its nations. This makes the slow, pounding growth of religious persecution, primarily in Nigeria, an important anomaly in the region (Religious faultlines in West Africa, 2013). Senegal in particular is often lauded as the most politically stable nation of West Africa, with its touted *laïcité* playing a key role.

### **The Pluralism and Religious Landscape of Senegal**

When Islam arrived in Senegal through trade, it was adopted by kings and cultural elites, spreading eventually between ethnic groups through a mix of conquest and heartfelt conversion. In the century of French colonization, some brotherhoods emerged in resistance while others cooperated constructively with the colonial government. In this period, Islam spread massively and became more deeply associated to Senegalese identity and resistance as French Catholicism asserted itself into the religious landscape (Diagne, 2011). Today's 300,000 Senegalese Catholics trace their faith to the missions established in St. Louis in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While the people of Senegal themselves were slow to embrace Christianity, its force as the religion of the colonizing government ensured an outsized cultural presence and today, many its adherents live in the capital city of Dakar and, to a lesser extent, the old colonial capital of St. Louis (Dossou, 2016).

Despite this divisive history, the tiny, Christian population's outsized prominence is tolerated and respected. It is exactly this interaction between the Catholic minority and the Muslim majority that engenders the oft discussed pluralism of the Republic - and people - of Senegal. Strong *laïcité* is embedded in the constitution, which proclaims in its first article that "Senegal shall be a *secular*, democratic and social Republic" [emphasis mine] (Buggenhagen,



2013, p.55). These values were cherished by Senegal's first president and founding father, Leopold Sedar Senghor, himself a Catholic.

Legal freedoms of belief rest upon a foundation of Senegalese mores, a “soft” tolerance which rises to match the “hard” laïcité of the state, as Etienne Smith describes in his chapter on the cultural and religious pluralism of Senegal (2013). There is first the shared celebration of festivals, with Muslims bringing traditional foods to their Christian friends and neighbors on holidays like Tamxarit and Tabaski and Christians providing the plates during Christmas and Easter, as well as gestures of respect between religious leaders who attend one another's ceremonies, shake hands, and kiss. The Catholic and Protestant Schools of Dakar are full of Muslim children (even the children of Imams, as one of my interview subjects boasted). Citizens and observers often reference Senghor's famous quote – “Senegal is 90% Muslim, 10% Christian, and 100% Animist” – to explain the cultural religious unity which underlies the different faith traditions of Senegal. Continued commitment to traditional ceremonies and blessings, as well as talismans and the advice and administrations of traditional spiritual experts, seem to reinforce the fundamental similarities of all Senegalese religion (Osemeka, 2013).

In daily practice, most Senegalese avoid discussion of religious difference or controversy across borders of faith. Religious pluralism is just one aspect of a profound ethic of peace that affects relationships between families, ethnic groups, and Sufi Brotherhoods as well as between different faiths. To remain connected to one's community is fundamental, and from this flow the incredible little habits of *teranga* that I witnessed each day in Dakar and the interior. The scholars who have studied this issue, though disputing the prominence of these phenomena as the expressions or causes of peaceful pluralism, return to these habits as some of its most important markers (Buckley, 2016). Personally, I found that nearly everyone I spoke to, professionally or

casually, lauded the peaceful pluralism of Senegal when religion was mentioned. From foreign missionaries to native converts, familiar lines about shared holidays and spectacular *teranga* – the Wolof word for hospitality – habitually reappeared. This popular perception, is, to my understanding, much earned and was consistently reinforced by my own research.

However, in academia and in life, there is concern for the future and health of such robust *laïcité*. Many remarks have been made on the increasing power of marabouts and the Sufi Brotherhoods in society and politics. From the outset of the colonial occupation, Marabouts negotiated power with the formal administration, spreading their influence as an essential element of Senegalese representation and governance. Studies have shown that Senegalese youth increasingly consider the brotherhoods as more trustworthy than government, and in response the government affirms their place, with current president Macky Sall saying in 2017, “the state cannot function without religion” (Volk, 2017, p.34). His predecessor, Abdoulaye Wade was the first to trigger serious concern for the relationship between the executive and the brotherhoods when he publicly sought the blessing of his own Marabout, submitting the office of president to particular religious authorities. He went on to give special privileges, such as tax exemptions, to Marabouts, elevating their status as special citizens (Diagne, 2011). While Wade’s actions haven’t created any real subsequent crises, the socio-political power of the marabouts is evidently on the rise.

More than that, Islam in Senegal is changing and intensifying under their supervision. In his article “Heading towards Maraboutcracy? Muslim Brotherhoods and their Influence in Senegal,” Thomas Volk analyzes these apparent changes, pointing to the growing importance of the veil in the lives of young woman, increased social pressure on less devout Muslims’ behavior, decreasing acceptance of interfaith marriage, and Islamist and Salafist movements

attempting to grow by criticizing cultural mixture of Senegal's Islam as false and corrupted (2017). The Senegalese government fights passionately, and successfully, against jihadist rhetoric within the country but are unable to contend with the influence of peaceful purist Salafist and reformer movements which may slowly shift traditional values. As I will later detail in the analysis of my interviews, Senegal's pluralism appears, on closer inspection, to be much more complicated. Laws prohibiting any proselytization to children can lead to Bible school teachers being jailed and are backed by powerful feeling. As I conducted my interviews and examined more critical literature on the subject, it became apparent that the merits of Senegalese religious culture overshadow its failures. The question of whether Senegal's pluralism is truly robust to begin with, and whether or not it can withstand the tides of Islamism and changing religious demographics is, in fact, a very pressing one.

### **Brief History and Context of the Protestant Tradition**

Before moving forward, it's important to clarify the befuddling religious categories that I will discuss in the context of the Protestant church in Senegal. In this environment, where Catholics occupy the only seat marked "Christian" at the table, their doctrinal and cultural disputes with Protestantism are highly significant. I believe the history and modern trends of the churches leave clear fault lines between them. Furthermore, in my experience as a Protestant and through my observation and questioning of church members in Senegal, the operation of this difference is often an intuitive part of life, theology, and ministry. The ubiquitous assumption that Christian means Catholic contributes meaningfully therefore to the troublesome invisibility of Protestant faith. Beyond that, the distinctive ethic and goals shared in common by many Protestant churches in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly in the missional context as in Senegal, are important to understand where the identity struggles and strategies of this immigrant church fit.

While Protestants are in no way monolithic, there are dominant developments, such as the rise of evangelicalism and the charismatic church, which factor into the many shared professions of the pastors, missionaries, and lay persons I spoke with, and allow us to clearly grasp the tenet which interacts most compellingly with the culture of Senegal – that of proselytization.

Protestantism refers to a vast network of faith communities throughout the world, and, without any governing authority among them, it can be defined in many different ways (Graf, 2009). For the practical purposes of this research, it is most simply and frequently used to describe any churches that, as an ideological result of the Protestant Reformation, exist outside of the Roman Catholic Church and the ancient eastern churches which precede the schism, such as the Eastern Orthodox, Coptic, and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches. The Reformation was simply the start of continual centuries of revolution and reform, but the denominations that descend from it share, by nature of common birth, some common ideals.

In defining Protestant belief, it is best to begin straightforwardly, with the stated list of the Reformation's most important theological tenets, the five *solas* (Latin for alone): scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone, to the glory of God alone. While the practice and emphases of these dictums varies between denominations and congregations, they are the commonly accepted foundation of Protestant belief, still affirmed by the world's Protestants today (Scott, 1971). Simply put, in the shared Protestant view, the Bible is the highest authority of truth, inspired by God, through which we learn of Christ's sacrifice, have faith in his substitutionary death for our sins, receive forgiveness and restoration as a totally free gift of grace, and live our lives, in gratitude, to the glory of God alone.

Martin Luther's realization of these *solas*, particularly the central *sola gratia*, triggered what is often described as his conversion. Martin, upon comprehending grace was a gift not

requiring the works and sacraments prescribed by the church, recorded himself as suddenly changed. As a result of his new freedom, he began to interpret scripture in a new light and became skeptical and horrified by some of the most egregious practices of the Catholic Church, the then universal Christian institution in Europe. Nailing his grievances - in 95 Theses – onto the door, Martin Luther sparked the Reformation, the events to which all Protestant churches today trace their ancestry. He would go on to openly defy the Pope in person and witness the development of an entirely new religious (and eventually political) culture in Europe. It is from the leaders of Germany who followed Luther in disobedience to the Vatican, the princes protestant, that the name of the movement is actually derived. In challenging the Pope's authority, Martin Luther and his contemporaries necessarily asserted scripture and personal conscience above structural earthly authority. If a priest could discover that the Pope was not the unblemished mouthpiece of Christ, there could never again be such a figure. The result is the "priesthood of all believers," the equality of each man's conscience before God and subsequent decentralization of religious authority. As the Pope shrank, the Bible was elevated, and the leaders of the Reformation utilized the newly invented printing press to translate and distribute their Holy Book in vernacular languages, as well as theological pamphlets defending the calls for reform (Scott, 1971). This specific value may be the source of so much splintering after the Reformation, as each man's conscience was now ordained and, with scripture in hand, new churches with different reforms arose.

The history of Protestantism and its ideas is full, like most history, with blood, hypocrisy, brutal failure. However, many of these original values and traits from the Reformation can be traced to present day Protestantism where they are still almost universally held, if not practiced. Luther's "conversion" to sola gratia and the conversions of those that followed him are precedent

to the ethic of conversion which developed in Protestantism. Historical revivals, such as the Great Awakenings, have since taken place, emphasizing, alongside moral reform, the passionate conversions of many and a push toward global missions (Mackey, 1946). For many Protestants, a conscious moment of realization and acceptance, a “testimony,” is necessary to be considered truly Christian, even among those raised in the church. Luther’s “priesthood of all believers” remains the strongest unifying element of Protestantism. While church authorities and structure still exist in several denominations, the power of individuals to singlehandedly command the actions of any given network of congregations is never seen. Denominational requirements are usually decided by vote, according to a church charter, of the congregants or of the elders and regional representatives and this principal runs true even in miniature, as many churches vote on new pastors, new members, or even disfellowships of aberrant members. The authority and ubiquity of scripture remains as well. Protestants (particularly evangelicals) today hold individual bible reading and interpretation as an essential element of religious life and formation and consider biblical analysis the only reliable measure of truth or legitimacy (Graf, 2009).

### **History of Protestantism in Senegal and Africa**

Because of the Great Commission, Jesus’ final command to his disciples to “go forth and make disciples of all nations,” Christianity has always been a fundamentally proselytizing religion. The early church was, in many ways, very African, with several early popes and formative theologians residing in North Africa. However, the Protestant church’s evangelistic engagement with Africa was also often entangled with the brutal Trans-Atlantic slave trade until religious reformers, such as the Quakers and Evangelicals of England, pushed successfully for its abolition. The same evangelical revival that fueled abolition popularized missionary societies dedicated to bringing the Christian gospel to unreached peoples. Even after societal opinions on

slavery changed, missionaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century worked with and parallel to colonial invasions (particularly those of Britain and Germany, the major Protestant colonial powers) often mixing the desire to spread the Christian faith and European culture into one endeavor (Keolotswe, 2016). However, in regions where Protestant countries did not rule, evangelists had to operate in less explicitly imperialist ways.

For example, in West Africa, Christianity's growth was inextricably linked to the work of African Christians and theologians. While in some nations, colonial governments effectively spread Protestantism, Christianity gained little traction in most. The establishment of colonies for former slaves at Liberia and Sierra Leone was essential to the progress of Protestantism. Freedmen from the United States and England carried with them the passionate faith of the evangelical revival along with the robust resistance theology of the Black American church. While the cultural imperialism of freedmen settlers was undoubtedly a major problem in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the evangelism of native and repatriated black missionaries was incredibly productive, incorporating styles of worship and thought that were naturally better adapted to the West African context (Ayegboyin & Fatokun, 2016).

Protestants arrived in Senegal in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Eglise Protestante du Senegal (EPS) was founded in 1863 by French missionaries in St. Louis, and gradually gained a small community of converts in the city, with tiny congregations in other areas, but, like most other Protestant churches, spent the decades after the initial planting sitting stagnant, sustained by immigrants from more Christian regions. Today the Protestant churches of Senegal remain miniscule, making up only .3% of the population. Many more denominations started churches in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with none truly attracting Senegalese members but the Lutheran church, whose focus on the rural interior has won communities among the Serer and

Diola ethnic groups (Dossou, 2016). While the modern Protestant community of Senegal has yet to expand, it's neither stagnant; considerable attention and resources are being spent by Christians both in and out of Senegal to find more evangelistic success.

### **Missions in the Modern Protestant Church**

The theology and practice of mission work is changing in the globalized, “postcolonial” world. Concerns about the legacy and continued presence of imperialism have impacted the beliefs and strategies of Christians worldwide. More importantly, the churches of the Global South are growing quickly as the Western church shrinks in size and influence (Kaplan, 1986). An increasingly ethnically diverse and interconnected church community has made the cultural respect and unity a larger priority. Significant research has been done on the phenomenon of “reverse” missions, another result of this changing demographic. As migration flows from the Global South into the Global North, immigrants bring their faith with and serve, explicitly or informally, as missionaries to the increasingly secular West. The most vibrant, large churches are increasingly composed of people of color and immigrants (Kim, 2011). African influence in the church isn't simply about migration. The world's fastest growing churches are Charismatic, a set of Christian denominations that emphasize the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit and engage in more passionate, emotive worship and are innovated by the African Native churches and their cultural expression (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2016). Africanization has taken place in the church at every stage, and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is being newly spotlighted and pursued.

The approximate 13,300 Protestants of Senegal live all of this history today. Regardless of their size, I witnessed the complex chords of these trends and principles at every point of interaction. And, as a yet unsuccessful missional church wilting in the shadow of Catholicism, they are compelled to grapple with these aspects of their identity. Atop a core of Protestant



values to be embraced or neglected sit layers of Western culture, African theology, and immigrant experience. As Islam and Christianity explode in growth, transforming Sub-Saharan Africa into the hearth of faith, and religious persecution continues to climb worldwide, the ways this church expands may have profound importance. For Senegal especially, the leading democracy in the land of Muslim-Christian coexistence, maintaining its much-lauded religious pluralism is becoming more difficult and more necessary. It is because of these intersections that I believe the encounter of this evangelizing church with Senegalese society may provide real insights on the stability and nature of Senegalese pluralism.

### **Methodology and Ethics**

In order to address my questions with the limited time and resources available to me, I decided to perform qualitative research focusing on the experiences of Protestants in Dakar. I conducted 8 interviews with pastors, missionaries, evangelists, and church members. My small pool crossed nationalities, and I was able to speak with multiple francophone African immigrants, Americans, and Senegalese born individuals. In an attempt to have a diverse perspective on the community, each of my participants was affiliated with different congregations and denominations. Each interview was semi-structured and recorded our conversations - with consent - for later reference. Most interviews lasted for at least an hour, and I allowed the participants to guide the interview in unexpected directions in addition to my more focused questions. My questions focused first on the realities of the church – facts about which I found almost total agreement between participants – and second on the subjective explanations for and solutions to the situation.

Informal conversations and observations with religious people throughout my semester in Senegal added more depth and context to the interviews themselves. To further supplement my

interviews, I attended church services and weekday gatherings with 4 different congregations and observed class at a center coupling practical services with evangelism. Through observation, I was able to get a better sense of the worship and preaching styles of different congregations, as well as demographics and ethnic expression.

Prior research on Protestants in Senegal was nearly non-existent. However, though I was unable to find much beyond brief overview on the community itself, I read literature on the religious culture of Senegal, the history and statistics of Christians in the country and surrounding region, and the current trends of the Protestant tradition. Surveying relevant literature and data allows me to better understand the context and ask more pertinent questions. They also helped me reframe and refocus my own preexisting knowledge of the issues.

As a Protestant Evangelical American myself, I've had some special access to this community and their perspectives. I received a Reformed Presbyterian education from kindergarten through high school, and my father is a Baptist minister. More importantly, I went through my own process of conversion two years ago during my entry into college, transforming my years of religious education into heartfelt conviction. These experiences supplied me with intuitive knowledge of church history, denominational distinctions, the bible and the ranges of Christian theology. When interacting with the church and its members, I was able to disappear as a full participant and I easily recognized parallels with other churches I've attended and American Christian culture. As a black woman as well, I occupied an intermediate space as foreigner. By no means could I be considered an insider to Senegalese or West African society, but my relationship to the community was still different than that of my Caucasian peers. I could blend in on first inspection and found many shared cultural traits from the holdovers in the Black American community, and their aforementioned effect on the churches of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Because of these affinities, I felt myself, in many ways, able to speak the language and recognize the thought processes of my interviewees. Concepts that other researchers might spend considerable time learning and defining in dialogue were easily exchanged, and a certain comfort and trust could develop between me and my participants. This was undoubtedly a benefit to me and my research but can also pose ethical and practical problems which I have worked to acknowledge and mitigate. First, I have had to become mindful of the ways in which my familiarity may obfuscate the depth of difference between me and the community I'm studying. I also struggled naturally to perceive the difference between shared reality and shared dogma, especially as regards my bias within different theological beliefs and approaches. Wrestling with these imperatives has actually personally helped me to appreciate the value of deep denominational diversity in the church.

As an anglophone American, there were also vast elements of difference to which I needed to be ethically attentive. I am a French language learner who is far from fluent, but I conducted 5 of my interviews in French, with a translator present for only one. Several of my francophone interviewees spoke some English but communicated more comfortably in French. Here English was only used as a last resort, but the language barrier may have limited participants freedom to respond or caused concepts to be lost in translation. As an American, there are elements of cultural subtext or implication that I have certainly missed, and my presence may have caused participants to reframe their opinions and experiences in a more positive or pleasing light. While I hope my questions left space for free, uninfluenced response, as a first-time researcher I confess my difficulty in avoiding leading questions. The most important and surprising consequences of my positionality were my assumptions about the vulnerability of the Protestant community. Because Senegal is a society with such lauded and

wonderful pluralism, I thought of church leaders much as they are in the United States, holding power over their congregations with little special need for protection. As soon as interviews began, however, I was forced to reconcile with the forms of vulnerability that persist even absent any threats of violence and as a result, and was subsequentially as thorough as possible in protecting the anonymity of church members and missionaries.

Before conducting any interviews, this research project was approved Local Review Board of Senegal for research on human subjects. In compliance with ethical standards, all my interviewees gave consent, in writing or verbally, to have their interviews recorded and cited under a pseudonym. Additionally, I have been careful to avoid associating subjects with specific congregations in any detail and will keep certain evangelical organizations unnamed. Because of the sensitivities of missionary work, I hope to avoid frightening seekers or casting aspersions on any particular projects or organizations. This goes beyond keeping the names of my interviews confidential and requires me to fully acknowledge the limitations and merely suggestive nature of my very preliminary research.

Because my research period was only a month, I was unable to perform the full breadth of interviews and observations necessary for confident conclusions. I found my participants through personal connections, or those of my advisor, a local pastor. With such a small sample size, interviewing any who I could schedule, there is ample room for unrecognized selection biases. I was unable to visit every church or talk to a member of every congregation. Furthermore, I did not interview any Lutherans, the most successfully growing denomination among the native population. Despite interest, I was unable to spend time in any Protestant communities in the interior, and therefore my research is concerned only with the methods of the urban church of Dakar, whose situation is reportedly much different than that of the rural church.

The conclusions of this paper cannot be overstated as tentative, and further research is undoubtedly necessary. For the aspects which are not unmistakable facts told in agreement by interviewees, my analysis should best be understood as a portrayal of a varied handful of perspectives which hopes to intimate larger themes.

### **Findings and Analysis**

Because there was such consistent agreement in the responses of my interviewees, there is much about the church that appears clear. Meaningful disagreement only seemed to appear in regard to theological preference or opinions on solutions to church. Regarding my first question (“Who are the Protestant communities of Senegal?”), answers quickly made themselves apparent, and I found certain questions becoming almost tedious as the responses, though important, were so predictable. These subjects include church size, demographic layout, the relationship between different ethnic communities, factors inhibiting growth, and issues of persecution. The second question (“What do Protestant experiences, particularly as regards proselytization, reveal about pluralism in Senegal?”), was also remarkably consistent, but involved more variety and analysis. For example, participants disagreed about the best way to relate to the Catholic Church, evangelize, and whether or not to celebrate Muslim holidays, according to Senegalese tradition. From the opinions shared we can begin, gently, to understand the unique features and challenges of this tiny community of faith, and, with careful attention to the trends, we may also the weaknesses of Senegalese pluralism through their eyes.

### **The Makeup of the Protestant Churches of Senegal**

As previously mentioned, the Protestant population was .3 percent of Senegal in 2010, about 13,300 people. Beyond their striking size, what is most remarkable about this church of more than a century are the demographics within the congregation. I was told a missionary had

collected the data a few years back and found the church to be 82% foreign, with only 18% Senegalese. Though unable to confirm these numbers, they fit well with the estimates of my participants. They universally acknowledged the church to be immigrant by a vast majority, both in their own congregations and more broadly. One respondent who attends a well-sized church catering to both French and English speakers, realized she could think of only two Senegalese church members altogether. Not all churches have the same imbalance. An American missionary described a small but close-knit minority of Senegalese believers in her church of over 500, and a Senegalese evangelist to Wolof peoples, described his church as half or more Senegalese. This was a pattern throughout my interviews: a generally small Senegalese percentage with some churches being entirely non-Senegalese and a remarkable few being entirely Senegalese.

To the Western tourist, it may not be immediately apparent how foreign these churches really are. In my time visiting Senegalese churches I saw few white parishioners. However, the large majority of immigrants are from francophone African nations with significant Protestant minorities, such as Benin, Togo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, and Burkina Faso. West African anglophones predominantly from Nigeria and Ghana are also a significant presence, particularly in English accommodating churches. While most seemed to reside in Senegal for work or schooling, there is also a substantial number of West African missionaries, sent to evangelize the Muslim nation. All these ex-patriot believers seemed to intermingle fluidly. No participants reported any tension between different non-Senegalese nationalities, a trend which aligns with my own first-hand observations. The churches with whom I worshiped embraced their community as “African” from the pulpit and in practice. Music was often performed in several languages, particularly by youth choirs who included not only French, English, and Wolof but languages from as far as South Africa in their selections.

Though the community of African immigrants is preponderant, the non-African population is disproportionately represented. American missionaries were the only Westerners I managed to interview, but French and European ministers must also be present. In addition to the Americans and Europeans, one missionary told me he's encountered Brazilian and Korean missionaries, indications of the changing demographics of the church and the growing phenomenon of "reverse" missions. While many of these westerners, especially the sizeable group at the English-accommodating church, are here for business or preference, some are missionaries, representing the resource and interests of several denominations and missionary sending agencies. One American missionary, explained to me that there are a handful of small congregations made almost entirely of Westerners, such as his own little group which worships in English. Perhaps because of this, there was a gradient of responses to questions about the relationship between the West African and Occidental church leaders and members. A few described the relationship as entirely unproblematic. One anglophone church, for example, has one African and one American pastor who work well together. Others described subtle frictions or divisions; one West African missionary mentioned disagreement over management style and doctrine, describing some African pastors as troubled by *derives*. For another participant, the white evangelist presence was never felt; only three non-Africans attended, as lay persons, his church. Differences between the strategies and style of the two groups were indicated but seemed not nearly as profound as I had anticipated, perhaps because of the international character of both groups of immigrants.

More than the dynamics between foreigners, the Senegalese minority was important to the missionaries and pastors I spoke with. This sliver of a fraction of a percentage can be further divided by ethnic group. Most Senegalese Protestants are Serer, Diola, Bambara, or Puul. Each

of these groups is Muslim by a large majority, but among them, genuine Protestant growth has taken place, particularly in rural areas. However, the dominant group in Senegal, the Wolof, is extremely resistant to Christianity and remains 98% Muslim. One Wolof evangelist describes the Wolof as very difficult to reach because of their deep dedication to Islam, saying that Christians of other ethnicities are often frightened to share the Gospel with them. In the interior, certain Serer and Diola villages have a large Protestant presence, and many of the Senegalese Christians in the churches of Dakar are those migrating to the city from the countryside. Considering this, the number of urban, Dakarois converts is truly tiny. As mentioned before, these Senegalese are usually the extreme minorities in churches kept robust by a large population of foreigners, but even in Dakar, some attend church in their own small assemblies which speak Serer or translate into Wolof. Relationship between the Senegalese minority and foreign majority seemed considerably more fraught than between immigrant populations. In the Eglise Protestant du Senegal (EPS) there was protracted schism caused by a struggle between Senegalese and non-Senegalese members who struggled for more full ownership. That very church had been named Eglise Protestant du Sénégal et des Disséminés (Protestant Church of Senegal and the Scattered) to acknowledge the large non-Senegalese African presence. The depth of disagreement led to its closure in 1996 and four years of confusion until a pastor was sent by the denomination to revive the church of the Plateau.

Relationships between the two groups now are not nearly so electric, though tensions and disagreements certainly persist. Many of the churches I observed, even with minimal Senegalese populations, were guided by Senegalese pastors, perhaps indicating a priority of local growth. However, immigrants I interviewed consistently reported great difficulty finding Senegalese friends, even among the church. One interviewee had virtually no Senegalese friends to speak of,



Christian or otherwise, and an experienced missionary, who makes consistent concerted efforts to befriend Senegalese nationals, attested her own struggles spanning the gap, but was cautious in repeating some reasons suspected by other immigrant church members who considered Senegalese communities to be tight-knit and closed-off. However, it's difficult to be certain how the imbalance in demographic may affect this perception. One Senegalese convert I spoke to told me he'd intentionally chosen a church with a high Senegalese population, emphasizing the importance of worshipping with his countrymen. Another spoke vibrantly of Christian unity, and told me he had friends of many nationalities in and out of church. Another element which may affect this barrier is the demographic of language.

The churches of Dakar were almost entirely French, with more frequent instances of English translation than Wolof, in my limited experience. While most of my participants were passionate about the creation and expansion of vernacular language initiatives in the church, much progress has not yet been made in those ambitions. Only one church of my participants translated French to Wolof, the true lingua franca which over 80% of citizens speak. I heard of some small all-Senegalese communities which spoke not only Wolof, but Serer or Puul. This is a particularly cosmopolitan issue; Lutheran churches of the interior were described to speak entirely vernacular languages out of necessity, as do the missionaries who labor in them.

Lutherans, the most recent denomination to be established in Senegal, have quickly become the dominant force of Senegalese conversions by focusing on the cities and villages inland. Though they are not focused in Dakar, their presence is felt and they were mentioned in nearly interview. The Lutheran Church is established in six regions: Dakar, Thies, Louga, Fatick, Kaolack, and St. Louis. EPS, the other denomination with a large, coordinated presence, has worship centers in Dieuppel and the Plateau in Dakar, and Khor, St. Louis, both of which I've

visited. The congregation of Khor is dwarfed by that of Dieuppele and the Plateau, less than 20 of the national denominations 1,000 members attend at Khor. This disparity may reflect the strength of the church in Dakar, its regional center, and the much less populous old colonial capital of St. Louis. Outside of these main Protestant denominations, there are a multitude of churches with less widespread reach or international connections. Most of the Protestants of Senegal, fitting into the trend of West African Christianity, ascribe to the broad charismatic movement. Beside the charismatics are a large number of evangelicals (between which there may be overlap).

Cooperation between these churches and denominations, despite their extreme minority status, was described as somewhat infrequent. The *Fraternité Evangélique du Sénégal* (Evangelical Brotherhood of Senegal) is, for example, an interdenominational, cooperative organization. Practically, however, most participants struggled to recount instances of interaction between the churches, remarking that they kept mostly to their own devices, with some very infrequent shared talks or activities. These divisions appeared amicable, but my observation and questioning were not thorough enough to effectively judge. One missionary, for example, disparagingly described the EPS as “religious” – a common deprecation in the evangelical community, describing someone overly concerned with the rules and performance, lacking real heart and faith as the guiding priority. Many respondents mentioned the *derives* of others, usually the general category of “African pastors,” particularly through the outsized elevation of miracles and prosperity. (Frequent as such mentions were, all my conversations and observations indicate that the gospels of prosperity and miracles had no real presence in Senegal yet.) Denominational difference is a natural element of Protestant growth, however, the effect reproduction of the divisions familiar to foreign contexts is curious in an environment of such extreme isolation. One interviewee was particularly concerned with this, repeating the great necessity of unity first

among Protestants, but also with the Catholic Church in order to increase church visibility and reach.

While many would affirm his statement of Protestant solidarity, responses about the Catholic church reveal a compelling spectrum. While some responded first that the Catholic church was an ally, a Senegalese evangelist, spoke of evangelistic concern for Catholics and another participant, acknowledging the possibility of genuine Catholic faith, considered Catholic doctrine that with which she could not agree. Particularly among Senegalese believers, alliance with the Catholic Church was viewed in a positive light. With others, such as one West African missionary, it was counterproductive, an example of the church's failure to stand apart.

Throughout the course of my interviews, a consistent and clear image arose of an international church, full of West African francophones, anglophones, Americans, and several denominations. While work is done to balance all this demographic variety, and peace can certainly be seen between and among them, the unity and cooperation of these groups is far from complete. The Protestant churches of Senegal represent a Christianity in its earliest stages, with almost no present local identity, only the precious seed of a few Senegalese converts persevering in a church branded as foreign. These dynamics are the source of many of the churches greatest difficulties in evangelizing, but the perspective of Senegalese members, pastors, and evangelists may provide, should they be heard, effective and interesting responses.

### **Barriers to Growth**

The churches' great barriers, as estimated by my participants, flow from these demographics. Though they appear obvious when stated, some respondents and churches have not begun steps to address them, for several reasons. The most powerful barrier may also be the most obvious: language. The poverty of vernacular language churches practically excludes large

segments of Senegalese society who do not speak French. Even for francophones, the absence of Wolof, the language of religion in Dakar, reinforces the fundamentally foreign nature of these churches. Before believers can bring seekers to church, however, they have to communicate with them. The majority of members and even a great many pastors and missionaries do not speak Wolof. This shortness of arm leaves sweeping sections of the population unreachable for most Protestants, and those who are reached most abide the sense of living abroad in their own country, speaking a formal tongue.

Even sharing the Gospel in French does not come easily. While most of my participants are highly active and invested in evangelization, that is not the mindset of every individual or congregation. One missionary mentioned the danger of the “holy huddle,” another piece of Christian jargon which refers to the unhealthy tendency of a community to focus inward, not sharing the Gospel but staying cozy and culturally enveloped among one another. This desire is especially understandable for alienated immigrants who’ve had to adjust to an entirely Muslim country. The risk of stirring up discontent, and the sometimes-vast relational distance between immigrants and natives convinces some to enjoy the church as a place of familiarity and solidarity, rather than actively recommending it. This phenomenon shrinks the actionable growth potential of the church dramatically. Certain churches may have struggled more with this problem, such as the English-accommodating church whose American style evangelistic events of passing out pamphlets in the neighborhood once or twice a year, an evidently entirely ineffective method, or another, more liturgical, French-speaking church I attended, which one missionary characterized, alongside the Catholic Church, as religious, uninterested in real evangelism. The pastors of those churches, he said, dressed in their special garments, can always be found in their churches, but evangelicals are always on the streets, trying to bring the church

to the community. The real situation is difficult to see beyond the preferences of my participants, but it is clear from my time and conversation with Protestants in Senegal, that many lack any missional energy or interest. The exceptions to this problem seemed to be pastors and missionaries of all kinds and Senegalese-born Protestants, who were often possessed of enough concern for their countrymen to be active social evangelizers.

For the rare Senegalese seekers who may choose to approach the church, there is another powerful barrier. I was told by every missionary and evangelist that the worship style of charismatics in particular was confusing and alienating to Senegalese worshippers. The churches of Africa, in establishing their own independent branches and asserting their cultural features, helped create, alongside diaspora churches, the wave of charismaticism today, a style which emphasizes the active power of the Holy Spirit, manifesting in miraculous gifts such as glossolalia, healing, and prophecy. In action, Charismatic churches worship with intense passion, dancing, singing, and crying over stirring music each Sunday. For Senegalese people unfamiliar with Protestantism, such carefree singing, dancing, and joyous tam-tam are not sacred, but can be more easily associated to partying. These behaviors, though not as intense, are present in nearly all the churches of Dakar. Worship in the mosque and the cathedral is much quieter and more contemplative; in this particular setting, an environment of reverence and awe requires quietness and awe. The much quieter, more liturgical services of Lutheran churches may be key to their sudden, continued success. While many involved in church ministry repeated this issue, one Senegalese convert attending an extremely vibrant charismatic church saw it as an initial judgment, but not an issue. The largest congregation of Dakar is charismatic, and they will continue to be the fastest growing churches of Africa, and therefore, among the immigrant populations of Senegal. One missionary, attending a quieter, more Senegalese church and a

vibrant, charismatic congregation was stuck between the two. While she admitted the more restrained worship as better adapted to the local community, she expressed a personal need for more freedom in worship and wondered whether a medium might be discovered. Because so many church leaders seemed to consider the distinctive features of the largest churches of the city ineffective, it will be fascinating to observe how these different styles will interact or evolve should the native church in Senegal experience substantial growth.

Another cultural barrier mentioned by almost every interviewee was, atop Protestant invisibility, rampant misconceptions about the church and Christianity. As one recent Senegalese convert told me, when he tells people he's Protestant, they react with skepticism and doubt, considering it a church exclusively for foreigners. Most Senegalese people, even in areas with significant Christian presence, are completely ignorant of differences between the Protestant and Catholic church, necessitating Protestants to explain, almost from scratch, the context and values of their community – apart from Catholicism - while sharing their faith. Though the Catholic Church is much more established and respected, Senegal is still almost entirely Muslim, and the basic precepts of Christianity are confusing for many. One interviewee complained that poorly behaved Christians contributed to the perception that the church was a place for all the vices prohibited by Islam. Other sticking points are merely theological, such as the idea that Christians believe God and Mary had sex to conceive Jesus. One missionary attacks this issue first, reading a section of a sura related to Mary's miraculous conception to begin sharing the Gospel with Muslims. The involved, long, and sometimes startling process of unraveling misconceptions may be part of why immigrant believers, particularly those from Christian majority nations, can be so reluctant to share their faith.

The concepts precluding proselytization go much further than false assumptions, they sink deep into Senegalese religious culture. On this issue, the interviewees were totally united. They each described a deep attachment to familial religion among Senegalese people that caused them to reject conversation about other faith possibilities. Participants agreed that most Senegalese people, when I asked why they believe as they do, will respond saying they were “born a \_\_\_\_\_ and will die a \_\_\_\_\_.” Changes in religious affiliation have not been much witnessed by recent generations, and although most Senegalese families became Muslim in the last century and a half, the religion is regarded almost as culturally ancient and original. For a church whose identity is rooted in the principle of conversion from other faiths and among those raised within the church, this is a major barrier.

More than that, Senegalese culture prides peace and noncontroversy above all, making conversations around ideological difference difficult. One missionary described a conversation where several Senegalese and non-Senegalese students were asked if there’s any value more important than peace, the Senegalese students insisted otherwise, while one West African student contended that in some cases, like World War II, there were values more important than peace. In Senegal, many different ethnic groups have managed to forge one national identity, and their reputation for peace and stability is one of the first things people mention about the country. Robust joking culture between members of different groups, as well as persistent expressions of respect and support between leaders of different brotherhoods, clans, and religions are some of the ways this harmony is maintained and expressed. But for the Protestants I spoke to these actions are more complicated. While some praised mutual celebration and displays of unity with the Catholic church and Islam, it was undoubtedly a source of moral tension. Participating in certain festivals may be, for some, a partial denial of faith, violating New Testament commands

about eating meat sacrificed to idols. Or, on a more practical level, it may contribute to the invisibility and noncontroversy in ways that diminish the importance of the Gospel. For Senegalese believers, these situations seemed easier to navigate; those I spoke to had =relatively few qualms about such participations. However, Senegalese peace culture is not only difficult to navigate for Protestants, its limitations threaten them more directly.

### **Persecution and the Proselytization**

The topic of persecution arose completely unexpected to me. At my first interview, I asked about the greatest difficulty of the church, and was told matter-of-factly that it was persecution. Initially shocked, as I looked closer, I saw signs of potential and active intolerance hidden largely by how tiny the church is. For example, one missionary, who explained clearly that he didn't experience disrespect or abuse for his position, also pointed out that churches in Senegal have difficulty finding land and recalling a lease that was cancelled at the last minute. In one informal conversation with a Senegalese Muslim, I was told of the suspicion and mistrust his community bore regarding a Protestant church in his childhood neighborhood, and that, should the church begin to attract children from the neighborhood, there would certainly be an altercation. Another, an administrator in a Catholic school, informed me that, were his students ever to act on their religious education and attempt to join the church, the neighborhood would not allow it. He calmly anticipated that any real impact would eliminate the comfortable relationship within which Muslim children are sent to Christian schools and cause real hostility between the groups.

The real intolerance, however, is not at all toward foreigners practicing their faith – who pose no real threat or disturbance to Senegalese life at present, poorly integrated as they are – but toward Senegalese converts, particularly from Islam. Everyone reported this, directly or through



association. Converts are habitually thrown from their homes and communities, a situation which feels hopeless for Senegalese believers, having been raised in a fundamentally communal culture with no American individualistic expectation of independence at 18. One interviewee described his family's difficulties finding a place to live post-conversion, and the cruel ways in which his uncles burned their school papers in an attempt to further punish them. Another related the story of a convert who was told that, had her father still been alive, he'd have killed her for abandoning her Muslim faith. The true extent of this difficulty was difficult to weigh with such a small population of converts, and requires further study, but it is indicated to be quite serious. One missionary told me he knew of several converts too frightened to come to church, and many others who, having proclaimed their faith, returned to the mosque when they were exiled and unable to manage on their own. This reality reflects a small community but seems to be a frequent occurrence. The possibilities it presents are profound; when tested by some small measure of religious change among their own families or even in their own neighborhoods, Senegalese communities do not appear to uphold their values of pluralism and tolerance.

These difficulties seem small now, but they reveal not only the continual failures and inflexibilities of the changing, "postcolonial" church, but the critical gaps in Senegalese religious pluralism. Senegalese culture seems to be at odds with the Protestant conversion ethic, but more importantly, where it does take root, it is opposed with worrying intensity and animosity. In communalist West African society, separation from family is the greatest trial. These responses to individuals may be amplified if conversions begin to occur regularly in association with specific churches or organizations. As devotion to Islam changes and intensifies in its own particular ways in Senegal, it is not unreasonable to fear that comparable dynamics among other

religious groups could be a source of conflict, upending Senegal's careful balance, formed more from silence than interaction.

### **Solutions from the Senegalese Minority**

However, looking at these obstacles, the expansion of the Senegalese church seems unlikely. The population of Protestant immigrants will continue to grow, and could conceivably begin to experience persecution themselves, but signs of intolerance toward non-Senegalese Christians are extremely small, according to my interviews. The real possibility for progress lie not with the foreign church but the local church, a sliver of a fraction of a percent of the nation who are Senegalese by birth and Protestant by choice. These individuals were remarkable, and possessed, by study and natural perspective, some of the most compelling approaches and solutions to these problems. Simply by nature as members of this tightly knit community, they were more effective (and often more motivated) evangelists. Their ideas, particularly those of the Senegalese evangelist I interviewed, have the potential to integrate the church into the Senegalese religious community and overcome these culturally specific problems. If the church grows locally, I believe it will be because of their actions – because of their evangelism, because their suggestions take hold. As such they are both a threat and a hope – those with the tools to navigate the church and the culture, improving both, as both insiders and outcasts.

The converts and concerned missionaries I spoke to advocated first more Senegalese worship spaces. While these are naturally available in the countryside, where conversions happen throughout communities, necessarily in vernacular, they are woefully lacking in urban contexts. More quiet, liturgical services, alongside more Wolof only or Wolof translated preaching, is certainly necessary. One missionary told me he didn't want to see any more French only churches opened, and another told me she believed all churches should be translating into Wolof,

even if it was not yet necessary for members. If and when the Senegalese population of believers grows, foregrounding them in existing churches, or forming their own spaces will be inevitable. The more eagerly the church participates in this, the easier it is for local believers to bring guests or respond to claims that they've abandoned their culture for a foreign faith.

More importantly, Senegalese participants outlined more effective strategies of evangelization. Western and African missionaries seemed to have difficulties sharing respectfully and effectively. Good works institutions, such as churches and schools, designed to increase contact with the church and boost its reputation, seem to be admired and respected partially because they are so unproductive in conversion. Other strategies, such as handing out tracts and inviting acquaintances to church, seemed ludicrous to the Senegalese Christians with whom I spoke. One incident, where missionaries handed out pamphlets about the Gospel in the highly religious city of Touba and incurred the scorn and wrath of Mouride leaders, was particularly frowned upon. Instead, Senegalese believers repeated again and again that one must "*aller doucement*" that is, go gently, slowly. The evangelist emphasized to me the many years his father needed to make his decision a timeline consistent with the conversion of Muslims throughout the world. He told me he didn't introduce religion into conversation until people knew him as a neighbor, friend, valued relationship and trusted him enough to introduce difficult ideas. In a society so communal, that community would be the most important ingredient of evangelism seems obvious, but Senegalese converts have a greater capacity to enter it, and, as my interviews seemed to imply, find more results. They emphasized patience, and displayed a greater tolerance for non-evangelizing exchange with Muslims before advocating the Gospel. Should missionaries take on this imperative, they might make their religious professions

secondary to practical ones in context, and spend more time and energy learning Wolof and finding friends than preparing Bible studies.

Senegalese converts and concerned missionaries also emphasized the importance of creating the same communal links within the church and providing converts with homes and family of faith to help them land on their feet. This means clergy must have property to share and the intention to host, as one missionary explained it to me. The Senegalese evangelist passionately described the importance of Christians in many professions, not just as pastors, helping new Christians find a path outside of their former religious community. This lived-need, for not just housing but support, is perhaps most pressing of all. If the urban church and her supporters don't address this with their resources, any growing popularity of the Gospel may be ineffective as converts return home.

The Senegalese believers I spoke to also had refreshing perspectives on persecution itself. While all acknowledged its presence, they were much more confident in the strength of pluralism than the threat of change. As one believer explained, although the persecution had been serious, lasting for years, today he was welcome in his extended family, attending holidays and conversing in the groupchat. The initial shock of conversion wears off eventually, and the bond of family wins out in the end, allowing descendants of the first to leave more freedom to choose. Their hope comforted me, though I couldn't help but wonder whether these speculations were more rooted in reality or mythology, the strong rhetoric of pluralism I heard on everybody's tongues. Senegalese pluralism is not, after all, ancient. The total dominance of Islam and the presence of Catholicism are fairly recent, and the relationship between them even more so. However, these Christians believed strongly that the value of tolerance would certainly adapt, and the communities which have converted together at the interior seem to live well in peace.

Looking at this, the potential of growth these Senegalese believers represent may further prove and improve the religious tolerance of their home.

## **Implications**

The picture painted by this research is one of an increasingly diverse church, both locally and abroad, which struggles to overcome cultural imperialism of a new sort. While it may not be primarily white faces leading worship or insisting on their own interpretations, churches remain divided by the denominational associations of the West, preaching in the colonizing language. More significantly, it is the culture of other African nations that, although stripped of European imperialist connotations, crowds out local interpretation of the Gospel. As they work against this, the Senegalese converts reveal the failures of the missional church and the blind spots of Senegalese pluralism. The freedom to believe, to practice, to celebrate is deeply embedded in the religious culture. Catholic families and religious officials move freely and garner respect, even exchanging handshakes and meals on Muslim and Christian holy days. However, because Islam is so deeply tied to Senegalese identity, alongside noncontroversy, the freedom to convert is far too weak. The toleration of Protestant institutions appears to rely on their impotence, and, should that condition change, there are reasons to believe peace may weaken.

Christianity begins in earnest at Pentecost. It is most unlike its predecessor, Judaism, because it was sent to the gentiles, meant to spread to each tribe and tongue and nation. As such, the freedom to evangelize and to convert is, for the Christian, the freedom to believe. It is the freedom to obey the central command of an exclusive religion. Islam as well considers proselytization to be a high responsibility, something which cannot be neglected entirely by the faithful. As these two largest faiths grow and collide, in Sub-Saharan Africa most of all, the key to balance cannot be stagnation, it cannot be inactivity. In this context, the freedom of conversion

appears obviously imperative. West Africa has long held the banner for Islamo-Christian interaction; we hope that it will continue to be its innovator. These failures of pluralism in Senegal may be the places where such trailblazing begins.

This research implies the changing direction of Christian demographics, but also that cultural imperialism is not so simply discarded. The conscious rejection of familiar categories, comforts, and styles are necessary, or churches will continue along their paths until forcibly reinvented by native populations. I became increasingly aware that the most helpful task was often to get out of the way and let the Senegalese take charge of their space, something the missionaries I spoke to seemed to see clearly. It also highlights the need for deeper tolerance among communities of faith. No matter how joyfully the Muslims and Christians of Senegal celebrate one another's holidays, if converts face exclusion and discrimination, religious conflict may very well be one the horizon.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

My time and insight into Senegal were limited, and before I can speak confidently on the subject more research must be done. While my interviews were able to provide a limited portrait of a largely unmapped, unstudied community, comprehensive interviews and survey should be taken of the churches of Dakar, collecting more modern data on the size and demographics of the church in respect to nationality and denomination. The rural church in particular is an important topic of study. Because I was unable to spend time beyond the coast, my conclusions are limited to the urban church. However, the rural churches, as the fastest growing local form of Protestantism, may hold the keys to all these questions. Not only do rural churches have more Senegalese believers, they seem to experience less persecution. As most urban Senegalese Christians tend to come from these churches, they are themselves the seed, the dandelion, whose

practices could bear powerful insight into the adaption of the church and of pluralism to changing dynamics.

Less relevant to my research question, but perhaps more compelling, is the issue of spirituality in the church. Mentions of spirituality and fetishism occasionally appeared. I had been told by many that all Senegalese, Catholic or Muslim, participate in animism though they do not admit it. One convert I spoke to confessed his own attachment to animism as totally normal when he was Catholic, but insisted that now he found such things repulsive and unnecessary, saying that other church members didn't seem to bother with them. Many have speculated that the ubiquity of traditional religion is key to the pluralism of West African nations. How Protestantism, particularly the Charismatic tradition, addresses Senegalese spirituality, and whether it inhibits engagement with talismans and spirit mediums could be interesting and helpful research to understand how this faith may disrupt or meld into the existing landscape.

## **Conclusion**

The Protestant churches of Dakar are indeed scattered. Through my reading, experience, and interviews, I encountered a community of immigrants, disconnected from the native populations of Senegal except for a thin cord of converts, Senegalese believers who link the Protestant faith to its surroundings. For the missional church, these dilemmas present a challenge, exposing the ways in which new demographics reenact the cultural difficulties of the past. In a society where Protestants are so miniscule, gaining visibility may rely on seeking more unity among many different denominations. Local growth will certainly require more adaptability, a willingness to foreground the perspectives of Senegalese believers, and to rethink Protestant approaches to pluralism and proselytization. These lessons are not only for the church,

however, should Protestants successfully evolve, Senegalese pluralism will have to grow immensely. My interviews indicated the disturbing presence of persecution in the few cases where individuals did convert and implied that, should church institutions begin to win new followers, communities may cease to tolerate them.

These possibilities cannot be taken lightly; they have the power to impact not only Senegal, but the region and the world it inhabits. Peaceful Islamo-Christian relations are essential to the future, and as Sub-Saharan Africa becomes the heartland, West African pluralism may feature increasingly in the spotlight. We may wish, at first, for the church to simply stay small. If the Protestants continue to fail in their pesky proselytization, Senegal can maintain its comfortable status quo. However, to assume that conditions will hold, even as Christianity and Islam become more dynamic in the region, with more Arab strands of Islam and the Charismatic movement expanding, to rest our hopes on stagnation would be foolish. More fundamentally, the freedom to convert is essential to the freedom to believe. For the people of Senegal to live out the robust religion they so cherish, they must be able to confront ideological challenge within their communities peacefully. The challenge that Protestants bring, therefore, is one that not only troubles but informs us, bringing us closer to imagining the necessary world of religious diversity that we must now begin to build.



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