

## France: A Mission Field

Paris and its suburbs are home to more than 10 million people. It is France's jewel. It is known for its Sorbonne University, already famous by the year 1200 AD., the Grand Louvre, one of the world's greatest museums of art and culture, the Arc de Triomphe, built for the emperor Napoleon – a symbol of French history and power, and the Eiffel tower. But France is also known for its anti-Americanism.

### Anti-Americanism

In the current war against terrorism, France claims that if there is a danger, it can only come from America and Israel. It refused to support United States in its war against Saddam Hussein. France's President, Jacques Chirac, vetoed sending NATO's new rapid-reaction force to Afghanistan. He also spearheaded the vetoing of any NATO troops going to Iraq. Michael Moore's film *Fahrenheit 9/11*, which is highly critical of President Bush's administration before and after September 11, 2001, was given the Palme d'Or (first place) at the Cannes Film Festival in France. This firebrand of the American left produced his film with the sole aim to prevent the re-election of President Bush for another four-year term.

France's anti-Americanism has deep roots. It believes it has a mission to "civilize" the world. It is a land of culture. It has provided a generous quota of great names in the list of the world's celebrities in almost every sphere. For centuries, French was the language of diplomacy and educated people throughout the world looked to Paris for inspiration. The magazine *Le Point* asked: "Could the Americans have an inferiority complex toward us? Could they be jealous of our culture, our sophistication, our taste, our subtlety?"

For centuries, the rooster has symbolized France. It crows a great deal. In *Mission to Civilize The French Way*, Mort Rosenblum asserts that this is fitting enough. In any barnyard, the rooster determines the pecking order and moves as far up the line as he can manage without grievous injury to himself. A French textbook from 1926 tells fourth graders: "France is one of the world's greatest powers...Heroism shown and services rendered to humanity have enriched its national patrimony and radiance." Charles de Gaulle (1890-1970), a fervent nationalist in pursuit of French greatness, pronounced in 1958: "France must fulfill her mission as a world power. There is no corner of the earth where, at any given time, men do not ask us what France has to say. It is a great responsibility to be France, the humanizing power *par excellence*." De Gaulle was fiercely opposed to American domination of the West and suspicious of Britain's close links with the United States. Fearing that it was a Trojan horse for American influence and would undermine the Franco-German axis, he twice vetoed Britain's application for membership in the European Community. De Gaulle also developed an independent French nuclear deterrent. And until this day the French remain convinced that their lives depend on their nuclear shield. They are prepared to take extreme measures to defend

their nuclear capacity. At a conference held in Versailles in May 1981 to discuss European civilization, the neo-pagan writer Alain de Benoist denounced the American model. He said that it results "in making happy robots. It provides hell with air-conditioning. It kills souls." When President Mitterrand visited the United States in 1984, he told the Americans: "France is a much older nation and to us the United States is still quite young. I believe that our civilization carries a message that is not for us alone, that it can be understood and accepted by the greater part of humanity." In 1986, the French closed their airspace to U.S. F-111 aircraft en route from Britain to attack Libya. They had forgotten that they were happy to see American war planes overhead to liberate them from the Nazis. When the French refused over-flight permission and obliged U.S. aircraft to add 2,600 miles to their assault on Libya in April 1986, President Reagan was acid. "I see no justification for this," he said. Across the United States people fumed. One veteran noted that he was happy France allowed Americans landing rights on the beaches in 1944. American families cancelled their welcome for French foreign exchange students. Today, France's anti-Americanism is an attempt to court the Muslim and Arab world. President Jacques Chirac's ultimate vision is a France that is a mediator and a bridge between America and Islam.

## **The French Revolution**

Anti-Americanism is more than politics and nationalism. France still breathes the spirit of the 1789 Revolution which, starting as a reform movement, ended by abolishing the monarchy and executing the king. But far from weakening the state, the Revolution and its aftermath strengthened it and gave it a new basis. The revolutionary doctrine of popular sovereignty that all power derives from the people, allied with the doctrine of nationalism, which insisted that the French people are a single entity, laid the basis for a stronger and more centralized power. The French Revolution is more than a historical event; it is a symptom, an idea that took hold of people. God no longer has a place in public life. God is no longer the Lawgiver. It found its sharpest expression in the words: ni Dieu, ni maitre! Neither God, nor master! This principle puts man in the place of the almighty God. It is the principle that no longer wants to hear about God or obey Him. It dethrones God and enthrones man. This spirit expects everything from this world and increasingly looks to the state for help. It speaks of rights but is not too eager to hear about responsibility. This revolutionary spirit greatly contributed to the de-Christianization of France.

## **The de-Christianization of France**

The bloody French Revolution stripped away the Roman Catholic Church's power. She lost her grip upon the people and never regained her authority. In 1943, French Roman Catholics were shocked by a book by Henri Godin and Yvan Daniel entitled *La France: Pays de Mission?* which said that at least a fourth of the population of France was atheist and that the entire working class suffered from almost total lack of religion. The authors maintained that only a tenth of the adult population of the country were practising Roman Catholics.

Cultured and sophisticated France is reaping the barren fruits of 200 years of secularization. Even large sections of rural France, once solidly committed to Christianity, have been de-Christianized. Their religious practice varies from nearly one hundred percent to almost nil, while in the cities it is usually extremely low. Today, 80 percent of the people are Roman Catholic, but only 13 percent regularly attend mass. The decline of the influence of the Roman Catholic Church is reflected in French values. Although the RC outlaws contraception and abortion, the state legalized the former in 1967 and the latter in 1974. One in four marriages ends in divorce. There are 22 abortions for every 100 births. Almost a one-sixth of the population is over 65, and France is on the way to becoming a country of the elderly.

De-Christianization in France is more obvious than anywhere else in Western Europe. France has become a pagan society born out of the rejection of Christianity. It is far tougher and more resistant to the Gospel than the pre-Christian paganism, which missionaries have been in contact with in Asia and Africa. Alain de Benoist said, "Paganism has never been far away from us, both in history and in the sub-conscious mind, as well as in literature, and so forth." Christianity is attacked as a life-denying faith, repressing the natural instinct of human beings, spoiling the joys of human kind. There is no sin in the program of neo-paganism. Struggle for life is natural, and the survival of the fittest is the rule of life. American missiologist, Professor Herbert Kane (1910-92), referred to France as "the most pagan country in Europe." France is a mission field. This is the opinion of both Roman Catholics and Evangelicals alike – though this idea would horrify most French. It is a mission field not only for Christians, both Protestant and Roman Catholics, but also for Muslims, Buddhists, and the sects and cults. In France's spiritual vacuum, numerous false cults find a happy hunting ground among the unchurched masses. Paris abounds with fortune-tellers and other charlatans. In France, fortunetellers have a thriving business. The French are known to spend millions per year on sorcery. Already in 1974, there were 40,000 indigenised home Bible studies through which the French Jehovah Witnesses established a solid base for expansion. Barriers to the Gospel are many – intellectualism, rationalism, widespread involvement in the occult, individualism and a nodding acquaintance with institutional Roman Catholicism. France is not only spiritually needy, but also hardened to the gospel. Today, the nonreligious are estimated at just over 19 percent; almost 8 percent are Muslim. Though over 70 percent claim to be Christians, the church attendance rate is only 13 percent. Less than 2 percent are Protestant, just over half of which are evangelical. There are numerous Christian missionaries from North America, the United Kingdom, Holland, Germany, Scandinavia, and Switzerland serving in France. Many of the newer evangelical churches in the metropolitan areas are being founded with help from missionaries.

### **France and Islam**

France has strong ties with the world of Islam. It was for a long time the dominant influence in the Middle East. The impotence of the Islamic world, when confronted with Europe, was brought home in a dramatic form in 1798, when the French revolution, in

the person of General Napoleon Bonaparte and his expedition, arrived in Egypt, and for the first time subjected the heartlands of Islam to the rule of a Western power and the direct impact of Western attitudes and ideas. According to most historians of the region, the modern history of the Middle East begins with Napoleon's conquest of Egypt. In *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*, Bernard Lewis comments, "The French revolution was the first movement of ideas in Europe that was seen as non-Christian or even anti-Christian, and some Muslims therefore looked to France in the hope of finding, in these ideas, the motors of Western science and progress, freed from Christian encumbrances." He notes that it is only in comparatively recent times that Muslim religious thinkers of stature have looked at secularism, understood its threat to what they regard as the highest values of religion, and responded with a decisive rejection.

During the 19th century, France built her empire in Northwest Africa, Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. It was also involved in Syria and Lebanon. Consequently, France persisted in regarding itself a Muslim power, mainly in view of its North African possessions. But the dissemination of French revolutionary ideas in the Islamic world was not left to chance, it was actively promoted by successive French regimes, both by force of arms, and, much more effectively, by translation and publication. The penetration of Western ideas into the Islamic world was greatly accelerated when, from the early nineteenth century, Muslim students were sent to institutions of higher education in Europe in increasing numbers. Although France is no longer a colonial power in the Middle East and Africa, it continues to take pro-Arab positions on various aspects of the Arab-Israel conflict. This includes support for Palestinian-Arab rights to participate in any negotiations, to self-determination, to a "homeland" or a state, and pushes the other countries of Europe in the same direction. France also supported the admission of the PLO to various United Nation bodies. Among Europe's leading statesman the French were the first to meet with Arafat and other PLO leaders, and France was among the first European countries to allow the PLO to open an office (1975).

France is one of the Arab nation's major arm suppliers. In 1969, De Gaulle sold 110 Mirage fighters to the new leader of Libya, Colonel Muammar Qaddafi. Chirac, then prime minister, visited Iraq in 1974. He negotiated a major exchange of arms for oil under terms that were not made public. The French also built a nuclear power plant for Saddam Hussein, which was later bombed by the Israelis. For Muslims, France has been a haven of refuge. Mort Rosenblum comments, "For Islamic politicians, businessmen, warlords, and terrorists who feel hemmed in by stern lives of East and West, Paris is a secular Mecca. It is the capital of live and let live - or not."

History takes its twists and turns. France, the Middle East's invader is now experiencing its own invasion. By the mid-1990s, approximately 4 million Muslims lived in France. But Muslim communities have not been integrating into their host culture and show few signs of doing so. Despite the ban on Muslim dress for school girls, neither French authorities nor Muslim parents are likely to accept a compromise. We must keep in mind

that the Muslims did not leave their religion behind when they left their homelands. They also don't seem to appreciate France's close ties to the Arab world and its anti-Americanism. What is secularism to the Muslims in France and their militant leaders? It is for them the code of a debauched society that wishes to impose on Islam's children – its young women in particular – the ways of an infidel culture. What loyalty, at any rate, is owed to France? The wrath of France's Muslim youth in the suburbs is seen as a revenge on France for its colonial wars.

The growth of Islam has been mainly through immigration and a higher birthrate. One out of every three babies in France is a Muslim baby. It means that France will eventually have a majority Muslim population. Furthermore, there may now be as many as 60,000 to 150,000 French who have become Muslim – mostly through marriage. The most thorough transformation has been in French cities like Marseille, which have acquired a strongly North African flavour. North Africans are almost entirely Muslim, few ever having heard the Gospel. The majority live in large low-cost housing areas in larger cities. The growing hostility and racism of French "Christians" have both antagonized them and provoked a strong, well-organized movement that complicates Christian outreach to them.

## **Conclusion**

France's anti-Americanism should be understood within the context of its nationalism, de-Christianization, the rise of neo-paganism, and the political and social tensions as a result of the influx of Muslim immigrants. The spiritual needs of France should lead to greater missionary efforts and prayer support by Christians who understand their times.

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