

## Anti-Semitism in France, Again?<sup>1</sup>

It looks like anti-Semitism in France is on the up again. The Israeli under-minister of foreign affairs, Michael Melchior, commented on this at the start of the year. « The multiplication of acts of aggression and anti-Semitic incidents in France, he said, reached 312 last year... (2001) we feel there is a hesitation on the part of the authorities to put a stop to this. » He is proposing financial assistance to any Jews wanting to leave France or South Africa for Israel.

The president of Roman Catholic bishops in France, Mgr J.-P. Richard concurred : « I don't think its fanaticism, but it is a social fact... the graffiti you can see on some synagogue walls are intolerable. » He was referring to « BLJ », seen on some walls, meaning « Burn the Jews », if not something more vulgar.

The French minister of the interior had already commented on the problem at the start of December, adding the cold comfort that there were less incidents in 2001 than the previous year. M. Jospin, the Prime minister, has said that he would be as strict in condemning anti-Semitism as for other racist acts directed against minorities.

On the first Sunday in January, the widely read *Journal de Dimanche* created shock waves by quoting M. Melchior as saying that « France is the worst country in the west for anti-Semitism » and by running a disturbing report on the problem.

There is a long history of intolerance towards Jews in France, probably related initially to the fact that the Roman Catholic majority was oppressive for any religious minorities, as Protestants know too well. More recently, the French have been trying to digest the unholy alliance of the Vichy government with fascism during the last war, under the leadership of the treacherous Laval. During that period in France, no Church body officially condemned anti-Semitism in a way comparable to the *Barmen Declaration* in Germany (1934), apart from a small group of a fifteen Protestant pastors who met in the south of France in 1941 and produced the « Theses of Poméyrol » which affirmed the identity of the Jews as God's chosen people and rejected anti-Semitism. This group included Roland de Pury, a friend of Karl Barth and Pierre Courthial, later to become first dean of the Reformed Seminary in Aix-en-Provence in 1974. Its actions were supported by Marc Boegner, the then president of the Protestant Federation of France.

After the war, and more recently, the embers of anti-Semitism have been kept glowing by the extreme right who accused the Socialist party of being run by « Jews and Protestants », and by some of its revisionist historians, who argued that the holocaust is a myth. This undercurrent has been rejected virulently in the media and in academic circles on the basis of tolerance and « republican principles ». In fact, recently the extreme right faction has split into camps which are pro-Israel and anti-

---

<sup>1</sup> Article published in the Dutch daily *Reformatisch Dagblad* in 2002.

arab or the opposite. The first are nationalistic and consider the Islamic population in France to be the biggest threat to the *patrie*, while the second are pro-arab, because they are above all anti-Semitic, and consider the US foreign policy to be manipulated by Jewish conspiracies in favour of Israel and global capitalism.

The people of France are not generally anti-Semitic today, but it is suffering from a new type of hard-core anti-Semitism, rooted in developments which are a bigger threat to law and order, and to the Jewish community, than the extreme right. It is the appearance of hotbed suburbs, which ring the major cities, Paris, Lyon, Bordeaux, Strasbourg or Marseilles. In these semi-ghettos, youths, often of North African immigrant background, form gangs intent on mayhem. Jean-Pierre Chevènement, a socialist outsider in the presidential race, has had the courage to call them « sauvages », savages. Their culture features defying authority, rap music, and drugs.

Last November, M. Jospin sat stone-faced as youths invaded the pitch in the Stade de France and stopped the friendly match between France and Algeria, after having drowned out the *Marseillaise* with whistles. In Strasbourg on New Year's eve, 45 cars were burned as the police struggled to contain mob violence. The following week, a gang from Le Havre, which has known « troubles » over the past months, invaded a posh ski resort in the Alps and did pitched battle with local residents. In recent months a Jewish school was burnt in Marseilles, an oratory in Créteil and a synagogue in Goussainville, to say nothing of desecration of Jewish sections in cemeteries. And this is the tip of the iceberg.

The question which is difficult to answer is whether this anti-Semitism is motivated by Islamic extremism. There is little proof of this, and the Islamic establishment in France has kept a low profile since September 11th and made an effort to distance itself from terrorism in all forms. However, it cannot be ignored that before that fatal date, at the infamous conference in Durban, islamists and anti-globalisation movements joined forces in invective against America, Israel and capitalist economy. These strange bedfellows could, in the future, provide ideological underpinning for anti-Semitism. But happily, that point has not yet reached, even though there is a rich seed-bed to cultivate for would-be manipulators.

In France the new anti-Semitism seems rather to be part of a larger climate of civil disobedience, which has found a focus since September 11th. There is a new form of barbarism which finds expression in an anti-everything attitude, which was well portrayed in a film about the suburbs a few years ago entitled *La Haine* (Hatred). A generation of delinquents aged between 10 and 30, alienated by social order, is proving to be uneducable and will be unemployable. The climate is anti-teacher, anti-police, anti-France and because of pro-islamic affinities, anti-American, anti-capitalist, anti-Israel and anti-Jew. The future looks bleak, particularly from the viewpoint of many respectable citizens who live in the suburban ghettos. Is the balkanisation of France inevitable ?

What of the republican values, fraternity and tolerance, for which France prides itself ? Experts tell us that more education is needed. But values cannot be educated into people where the will is absent, and will is absent when there is no conviction that these values are right and good. The problem is a spiritual one, and the truth is that France, like western Europe in general, is spiritually and morally bankrupt. But perhaps more so, because France vaunts its non-religious secularity. Is it too soon to forget that France got references to Europe's « Judaeo-Christian heritage » knocked out of the social contracts signed by the European Community at Nice ?...

How should we as Christians view these events ? Perhaps in a similar way to the early church, which named Attila the Hun « the scourge of God » for his attacks on the corrupt Roman empire. Could it be that by the barbarity we are witnessing in public disorders, we are being gently reminded that no nation can continue for long in refusal of God without knowing judgements which follow ?

What can the Church do ? Do we have a clear message as to the meaning of the events happening around us since the Twin Towers of September 11th ? « If the trumpet has an unclear sound, who will get ready for battle ? » (1 Co 14:8)