

The revolutionary ethic and the evangelical church in France



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Children of the revolution

“Just remind me what year we’re in. Is it still 1789?” The journalist sitting next to me smiled and assured me that we were still in the year 2000. Yet the scene that I saw before me that night 6 years ago could have come straight from that turbulent year when the Revolution changed the face of France. One of the town’s deputy mayors was chairing a neighbourhood meeting to discuss local grievances. It was a noisy affair. Men shouted, wept, gesticulated, rallied others to their cause. There was no sign of deference to authority. The deputy mayor is, after all, one amongst equals. That is one of the legacies of the French Revolution. “No master, no God”. Bow the knee to no man.

1789, a year that changed the world

The events in France in 1789 and the years that followed shook the complacency of other European states. The groundwork had been done earlier in the century in what has come to be known as ‘the Enlightenment’. This very term is not without significance, implying that all that went before was darkness and ignorance. Philosophers such as Rousseau, Voltaire and Diderot published works that lit a flame in men’s hearts. “Man was born free and is everywhere in chains”. What a call to action! What’s more, Rousseau’s Social Contract gave men a plan to restructure society along radically new lines. Legitimate political authority and freedom in civil society he argued can only come from a social contract agreed by all the citizens.

With the Revolution royal authority was overthrown and symbols of oppression were destroyed. The grim fortress of the Bastille was razed to the ground, the palace at Versailles abandoned and on 22nd September 1792 the 1st Republic was proclaimed. The revolutionaries believed they were starting something completely new and of great significance. Their boldness must have horrified neighbouring states. 1792 became Year One in their new calendar. The names of the months were changed reflecting a desire to return to nature – Thermidor, the hot one, Brumaire, the misty one, and so on. There was an attempt to replace Christianity by a religion of nature. It was a violent time. There were purges. The Reign of Terror (1793-4) saw over 40,000 executions in 9 months. Before long the violence consumed those who had unleashed it. The Revolutionary experiment came to grief after just 16 years and on a cold December day in 1804 Napoleon was crowned Emperor of the French.

The Revolution through French eyes

The seeds sown in those Revolutionary years however took root. In France it set a sort of precedent for how change comes about. Other revolutions followed. The column in the centre of the Place de la Bastille commemorates not the events of 1789 but the July revolution of 1830. Another followed in 1848. The Paris Commune of 1871 was a failed revolution after France’s humiliating defeat by the Prussians. May 1968 saw barricades on the Paris streets once again. The recent violence in French cities in protest at the government’s employment reforms showed that even immigrants have adopted the French way of initiating

change. There have been 5 republics in France since 1792. There is talk now about a 6th. If past history is anything to go by there's no promise of a smooth ride for the future.

The idealism of the Revolution is firmly rooted in the French mentality. The French are proud of being a republic. It was interesting to note the number of times that President Chirac referred to "the Republic" when he spoke to the nation on TV during the recent troubles in French cities. In difficult times when they need to bring people together again leaders can't waste time talking about peripheries. They have to go for what's important. The Republic is a basic part of French identity and affects much of what people think and do.

Quite recently in a Christian conference I heard the main speaker, an Englishman, repeat the claim that the Wesleyan revival saved Britain from a French Revolution. That would make no sense to many French people. Firstly they have never heard of Wesley and secondly why should France have wanted to be saved from something that lies at the very heart of its character today, something that put liberty, equality and fraternity at the head of the agenda. It's not insignificant that the national day is 14th July, the anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, that the national anthem is "La Marseillaise" written in 1792 as the war song of the French Rhine army, and that many roads in France bear Diderot and Rousseau's names. True there were some regrettable incidents in the Revolution but doesn't the end justify the means? Wasn't it worth paying a price to strive for Liberty, Equality, Fraternity?

Everyday examples

There's no need to look far for proof that the revolutionary ethic is still alive and well in France. Here are a few examples:

To obey or not to obey

On a warm spring day earlier this year I sat outside a small backstreet café in the very heart of Paris, just a few yards from a bar that 250 years ago counted Diderot amongst its customers. At the table next to me 2 students were engaged in a passionate debate about philosophy. To my right a group of locals were gathered around a sign which that day had made its first appearance at the entry to a passageway. It read "No cycles beyond this point". There were hoots of derision from the crowd. "Something else that's banned in Paris," one of them called out.

It is estimated that there are more laws in France than in any other country in the European Union. This could well be a hangover from the revolutionary past. Revolutions can change situations but leave men's character untouched so they have to resort to laws to try to remould society. Yet revolutions are supposed to be about freedom so it's not surprising that citizens don't like them or refuse to obey them.

A woman in a church where I was pastor told me that a verse in Paul's Epistle to the Romans was causing her problems. "It's where he tells us to obey the authorities," she said. "He can't be serious!"

"I would carry on driving even if I lost all my points," a friend protested. "The government is exceeding its powers in confiscating a driving licence."

Freedom of speech

“A man should always have the right to say what he thinks” is a sentence that is often heard and regularly put into practice. It means that liberty and equality can sometimes be uneasy bedfellows with fraternity but public meetings are rarely boring and often very vocal affairs.

“If you want evidence of the revolutionary ethic at work,” said a local pastor, “come to one of my church meetings.”

Church and state

“Is it right” a local politician asked me recently “that in an état laïc like France public holidays should coincide with religious festivals?”

It’s important to understand what it means for France’s identity when it calls itself an “état laïc”. It’s a phrase that’s not easy to translate. “Secular state” doesn’t really do it justice. It describes the strict separation that there is in France between state and religion. Religion is a private affair. If a man chooses to believe in God that’s his affair. The state can only be involved in the public domain. So it would be unthinkable for a French president to talk about his faith in the same way as say George W. Bush does. At local level this separation has very practical implications. A church cannot hire a school hall for its Sunday service.

Such practical issues are manifestations of a way of thinking that pervades French society. Its origin is focused on the 1905 law that put this separation into the statute books so as to put an end to the bitter conflict going on at the time for the hearts and minds of French people. This struggle is often characterised by representatives of the opposing camps – the local priest, traditional, conservative, rooted in the past, versus the local schoolmaster, atheistic, republican, firmly attached to the inheritance of the Revolution and zealous to rid the country of what he considered to be superstitious nonsense. The 1905 law calmed the situation eventually and while the village cure has lost much of his influence the schoolmasters have left their mark.

The notion of the separation of state and religion is a subject of debate at present. The authors of the 1905 law dealt with a specific situation belonging to their epoch. The significant proportion of Moslems in France today has changed that. Some are asking if the law needs to be modified, adapting the basic principle to today’s challenge. Whilst the details are open for debate few would envisage any radical change in what is in effect one of the foundation stones on which life in republican France is built.

The evangelical response

The ministry of Jesus

Palestine at the time of Jesus was a hotbed of political activity carried out in God’s name. The memory of the Maccabean revolt still inspired extremists who sought to rid the country of the Roman oppressors. In the Dead Sea scrolls there is mention of a holy war. Bar Kochba’s revolt in 70AD led to the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus must have been a big disappointment to a good many of his compatriots. He didn’t fit into their mould. He didn’t match their expectations of Messiah. Even John the Baptist had his doubts. “Are you the one to come,” his disciples were sent to ask Jesus, “or should we expect another? Jesus did not get involved in the politics of the State. Instead he preached the Kingdom of God.

Revolution attempts to change things from the outside; the Kingdom of God works from the inside firstly of the individual and then of his community. Revolution is dramatic and often violent. God's Kingdom is likened to yeast transforming dough. Revolutions are generally godless affairs exalting man, reason, nature or whatever. Jesus told his disciples to put God's interests first.

The ministry of the apostles

So how did the first generation church under the leadership of the apostles go about seeking God's Kingdom? One of the themes that runs through the Acts of the Apostles is that of Christians being good citizens. Paul says to the guards in Philippi, "We were not found guilty of any crime." In Corinth the governor Gallio dismisses the case brought against the Christians before even hearing Paul's defence. In Ephesus the town clerk defends the Christians before an agitated crowd. Governors Felix and Festus have a problem with Paul in that they have difficulty formulating a charge against him.

Paul takes up this theme in his letters. To the Thessalonians he writes, "Make it your aim to live a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to earn your own living... In this way you will earn the respect of those who are not believers". To the Romans he wrote, "Everyone must obey the state authorities, because no authority exists without God's permission, and the existing authorities have been put there by God." Yet it was said of these early Christians that they had turned the world upside down. The Christian gospel is a revolutionary message but it works in a strange way within existing structures to transform rather than to replace.

The ministry of evangelicals in France today

In 2004 there was a big 9 page spread in the *Nouvel Observateur*, an influential French weekly magazine, under the title "Evangelicals: the sect that wants to conquer the world". It's not difficult to imagine the sort of message that conveyed to the French public who tend to believe that all that George W. Bush does is automatically endorsed by evangelicals the world over. It's the fear that Evangelicals are coming out of their private sphere and operating as a group in the public domain. That goes against one of the founding principles of the Republic. There lies the tension. This concept of the separation of church and state, of the public and private domains of life is not easy to grasp, especially for those of us who grew up outside of the French system. Yet as the New Testament shows, the Christian's role is to seek God's Kingdom, to transform things from the inside and not impose anything from the outside. Structures don't need to change. People do.

Evangelicals have been a tiny minority in French society for a long time. Sustained growth since the 1960s has however given them more confidence. The visit of interior minister Nicholas Sarkozy to the annual general meeting of the French Evangelical Federation in 2004 was recognition that evangelicals have a role to play in society and need to play it to the full. What is surprising is that a country with such a militant history has not produced more militant leaders in the Christian church and in the evangelical wing in particular. That may be a result being small in number but it may also be a reflection on the proportion of church leaders made up of American and British missionaries with their more deferential approach; It takes a long time to learn a language and even longer to understand a culture. Yet evangelical missionaries in France have every interest in doing that if French churches are to play their role in transforming French culture rather than attempting to impose a model imported from elsewhere.

Biography of the author

Steve Cox graduated from Exeter University with a degree in Politics and Economics. He trained for the pastorate at Moorlands Bible College and spent 5 years pastoring a Free Evangelical church in England. Since 1991 he has been working with European Christian Mission in the Centre region of France in church development ministry.

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