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Editorial

Pierre Berthoud

A landmark and a tribute

With the publication of this first issue of 2016, we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the European Journal of Theology (EJT). We are thankful to all those who have made this possible, especially to the successive editors of the Journal: Nigel M. de S. Cameron, J. Gordon McConville, Mark W. Elliott, Jamie A. Grant and presently Pieter J. Lalleman. We very much appreciate their commitment and investment without which the Journal would not have been published during a quarter of a century. The audience of EJT has remained modest over the years but its contribution to theological thought from an Evangelical perspective has been and is still significant.

Prof I. Howard Marshall, Professor Emeritus at the University of Aberdeen, was a major contributor to EJT. We were saddened to learn that he passed away at the age of 81 on 12 December 2015. Among other things, he was formerly the chair of the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical and Theological Research; he was also president of the British New Testament Society and chair of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians. As a leading and influential New Testament Scholar, Howard Marshall contributed significantly to the recognition of Evangelical scholarship and theology. On the occasion of the FEET Conferences many of us had the privilege of getting to know him. We remember him for his academic excellence, his thought-provoking and stimulating insights as well as his interest in initiating personal relationships and discussions. He was both a colleague and a friend who will be sadly missed by many. We thank the Lord for his life, his ministry and the quality of his Christian witness.

When times are evil consider, ponder and reflect!

In 2015 Paris witnessed two major terrorist attacks: on 7 January the massacre of 14 people in the offices of the satirical newspaper, *Charlie*

Hebdo, followed by the killing of 4 hostages at the Kosher Grocery Store and a police officer in *Montrouge*; on 13 November, the vicious slaughter of 130 people at the *Bataclan* concert hall, at the *Carrillon*, the *Petit Cambodge*, *A la Bonne Bière*, *La Belle Equipe*, *Le Comptoir Voltaire* (all restaurants and cafés of the city) and at the *Stade de France*, which left the French population utterly shocked and stunned. For days people remained confined to their homes, not daring to walk the streets of Paris. The declaration of the state of emergency by the President, François Hollande, contributed significantly to the paralysis of cultural events. Theatres, concert halls, museums... were closed!

It is worthwhile to compare the reactions that followed these two terrorist attacks, for they were different. The gatherings that followed the dramatic events of January 2015 – expressions of national unity and solidarity – were more formal and political. Thus, for example, on 11 January almost 4 million people protested in the streets of 265 French cities. In Paris alone, 1.5 million people took part in the *Marche Républicaine* led by 44 heads of states. These gatherings represent a record in modern French history. The aim of the demonstrations was to emphasise the centrality of the Republic and of freedom in our democracies, the freedom of conscience and more specifically freedom of speech, including the freedom to blaspheme. The weekly satirical newspaper, *Charlie Hebdo*, sacrilegious at times and not widely read before the events, is the symbol of absolute freedom of speech. Such a right to blaspheme goes back as far as the Enlightenment, Voltaire being its emblematic figure; it thus already existed under the *Ancien Régime*. The blasphemy law actually ceased to exist as the Republic emancipated itself from the Catholic Church between 1789 and 1830. The present radical concept of freedom became effective in 1830 with the abolition of the law on blasphemy and was confirmed in 1905 when the legislation on the separation of Church

and State was adopted, giving rise to the specific French notion of *laïcité*.

When the question is considered carefully, even our democracies do have limits to freedom, but the point being emphasised presently is that the terrorist acts touched a very sensitive spot. They were taken as an attack on what the French cherish most, their freedom of conscience and of speech, which even allows the possibility to blaspheme. Thus the slogan “*Je suis Charlie*” (I am Charlie) became the incarnation of the spirit of resistance and rebellion to all forms of political and religious power and oppression, much as had occurred under the *Ancien Régime*, which was seen as a threat to human emancipation and freedom.

Of course, as Christians we are co-belligerent, but with some reservations, for the spirit of the Age is an expression of a purely horizontal and humanist philosophy that has no interest in transcendence and in an infinite personal God who communicates truth and wisdom. Thus we militate for freedom, recognising that there is no such thing as absolute freedom. As responsible beings, we are first accountable to the God who exists, then to the authorities and to our fellow creatures. As we practise freedom we are bound by the love of God and our neighbours. We are to honour the Lord and to respect the dignity of all human beings, whether in authority or not.

The terrorist attacks of November were just as devastating as they, in some ways, took the French by surprise. This time the terrorists aimed at the French lifestyle: enjoying a Friday evening meal with friends on the terrace of a café or in a restaurant, going to the movies or to a concert (the *Bataclan* where the provocative group, “Eagle Death Metal”, were performing), or attending a football match at the *Stade de France*. In the largest stadium of the country, 70,000 fans had come to watch the French team play Germany, the World Champions of 2014! These devastating acts touched on what the French are most proud of and famous for: the quality of their individual and community lifestyles. They were deeply wounded and distressed by the outrageous, cold-blooded killing of ordinary people who after a week’s labour were enjoying entertainment, friendship and the mundane pleasures of life. They needed an understanding presence, compassion and healing even if this wasn’t openly acknowledged.

With this in mind, it is most interesting to note that the first tweet with the hashtag “Pray for Paris” appeared on Friday night at 10.20 pm, exactly

one hour after the first explosion at the *Stade de France*! This slogan was repeated 6.7 million times and within 10 hours the messages on social media were far more numerous than the slogan “*Je suis Charlie*” had been in 5 days. A few days later, when I visited the ophthalmologist in Aix-en-Provence, I was surprised to see on the front door of the shop a poster carrying the hashtag “Pray for Paris”. At the same time an amazing patriotic fervour, symbolised by the presence of the French flag everywhere, spread through the country and beyond. There were no big gatherings because of the state of emergency, but many built shrines depositing flowers and candles in the horror-stricken places in memory of those who had died so dramatically. The sympathy was actually worldwide and the French population was moved by these expressions of solidarity.

As the new slogan spread, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association immediately sent a team to Paris, specially equipped to handle traumatic events, which worked hand in hand with French teams (Protestant, Evangelical and Roman Catholic). This discreet and compassionate presence of Christians was appreciated by many as they gathered and mourned at the different “shrines”. One person who miraculously avoided the worst said that he would have to reconsider his agnostic mind-set. An elderly woman wished to pray but didn’t know how to do so since she had forgotten The Lord’s Prayer that she had learned as a child! In the midst of a secularised cultural environment, in this most dramatic situation, and notwithstanding the scepticism and despair of many, the triune God in his goodness, kindness and justice was ministering and healing bewildered minds and broken hearts!

Disastrous events, whatever one’s stance or outlook, are invitations to reflect. As Ecclesiastes says: “When times are good be happy, but when times are bad consider” (lit. “look”; Ecc 7.14a). When times are evil, it is the time to observe, to consider, to ponder and to reflect on what is actually happening; to consider the dignity, the fragility and the wickedness of heart found in every human being. We are in the midst of a major cultural crisis. Secularised France and Europe, not to mention the West, are confronted with the unexpected challenge of the Islamic faith with its coherent political and religious world-and-life view.

After being far too lenient before the tragic events, the French government has now taken a strong and decisive political stance both in its mili-

tary action against ISIS as well as in combatting the terrorists within France. It has also emphasised the importance of both education and social care, especially in the neglected neighbourhoods of many large cities. The French are also aware of the cultural challenge, but they totally underestimate the impact religions have on the mind-set and the moulding of societies. In fact, this is not surprising, for in considering religious faith at best as unreal, as a speech event and as fiction, humanism neglects an important aspect of reality. It is thus ill-equipped not only to understand Islam, but also to respond to it appropriately. Yet the cultural challenge does have a spiritual dimension. That is why it is of paramount importance for Christians to get involved in this spiritual warfare which includes the question of truth, of personal divine truth and how it enlightens and bears on all aspects of life in society.

The German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, understood this dynamic very well when she gave a lecture at the University of Bern in Switzerland in September 2015. In response to a middle-aged woman who rose from the audience to ask what the Chancellor intended to do to prevent “Islamisation” “with so many Muslims entering the country”, Merkel rightly emphasised that “fear has never been a good advisor, neither in our personal lives nor in our societies”. She went a step further by saying that “cultures and societies that

are shaped by fear will without doubt not get a grip on the future”. She also added, and this was both unexpected and amazing, that the answer really is in our “courage to be Christians, to be able to create dialogue (with Muslims), to return to Church and to read and study the Bible”.

Thus the arrival of many refugees on European soil and the debate this provokes are the occasion “to reconsider our own roots”. If we want to dialogue and speak of ourselves, we must know and understand ourselves. The answer to the challenge of “Islamisation” is indeed related to the renaissance of the Christian Faith both in France and in Europe, without which there will be no significant and lasting revival and reformation. As we conclude these thoughts, let us remember the apostle Paul’s exhortation:

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for all people – kings and all those in authority – that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:1-4).

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