

A Call from... France

Jean-Paul Rempp, LCJE Coordinator for Europe

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ.

I pray that the Lord will use the facts I will expose to you concerning France, to make you hear His call for France.

It seems important to me to remind you that France is a Catholic country,¹ with 66 million inhabitants who have a strong tradition of secularism and of which only 1 % are Evangelical among around 2 % Protestants. Still today, French Evangelicals, even though they have noticeably grown in number over the last 40 years, encounter the same difficulties as those met by religious minorities. Therefore it is in this kind of framework that we seek to bring the Gospel to the more than 700 000 French Jews. May I remind you that the French Jewish population ranks 3rd in the world, following the USA and Israel. The need is great indeed.

The number of Messianic Jews in France is estimated between 500 and 600, which is less than 1/1000 of the French Jewish population.

95% of these Messianic Jews are integrated into normal evangelical Protestant churches or assemblies. The other 5% are affiliated to the few often small existing Messianic assemblies.

What difficulties do we meet as we seek to reach Jews in France?

They vary in nature; today, I shall just briefly mention them:

- First of all, we encounter the common misconception (as Stan Telchin makes clear in his book *Betrayed*), which has developed as a result of two thousand years of history, that when a Jewish person becomes a disciple of Messiah Jesus they betray their ancestry, their roots and their family.
- Secondly, there are the difficulties linked to the *Shoah* in the European and French context in particular. During World War II, the French Authorities and French Policemen handed thousands of Jews over to the Nazis, 76,000 of whom died in deportation. In March last year, the film “*La Rafle*” (the Raid) came out. It tells the story of the roundup of thousands of Jews in Paris on July 16th 1942. It is the first time that the French population is faced in this way with what proved to be the most painful and tragic episode of Jewish deportation out of France. President Jacques Chirac has officially acknowledged the French State's guilt in this matter. Apart from the strictly theological questions connected with the Shoah, there is the psychological impact of it on Jewish people.
- Thirdly, we have to overcome the traditional biblical and theological differences between Judaism and Christianity. The Jewish people with whom I am in contact reflect the varied forms of Judaism in France. In my discussions with Jewish people, particularly with observant or believing Jews, I am increasingly struck by the general tendency on their part to deny the radical reality of sin as it is revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures and is received in evangelical Protestantism.
- Fourthly, there are the difficulties in connection with Post-Modernism. Nowadays, in general, it is increasingly difficult to speak of the uniqueness of Messiah Jesus as the one and only way of salvation. This is true also in relation to the various currents within present day Judaisms, which tend to be universalistic and, in some cases, syncretistic.
- Finally, there are Jewish ways of thinking that tend to be linked to Sephardic Judaism, which is the most influential current of Jewish religion in France. In the opinion of

Jacques Guggenheim, the Sephardic mentality is one of the most severe barriers to Jewish evangelism in France.

This Sephardic way of thinking, at least as one perceives it in France, tends to be emotional and psychological and anti-rational. The result is that many Sephardic Jews are gullible and superstitious, and are therefore open to New-Age ideas and Eastern mysticism.

Having said that, some affinities do exist between the Jewish and Protestant communities in France, not least because they have a common history of persecution and many similar reference points.

The recent work by Patrick Cabanel, *Jews and Protestants in France, Elective Affinities, 16th-21st Century*,² shows very clearly that these affinities between the Jewish and Protestant communities clearly exist. Two examples of this: During the infamous Dreyfuss Case (1894-1906) French Protestants expressed solidarity with the Jewish community, the Protestant population of Chambon-sur-Lignon saved the lives of 5,000 Jews during the Second World War.

This kind of privileged position is an asset for promoting the gospel. That is why I think it is important for me to be more and more involved in associations such as the International League against Racism and Antisemitism (LICRA), and in developing contacts with other societies mostly composed of Jewish people. This includes participation in various commemorations or cultural (historical, artistic, intellectual) events. This gives me opportunities to extend my sympathy to the Jewish people and show solidarity with them. It is a form of Christian love for one's neighbour.

Complementary to the form of witness I just mentioned are endeavours like the outreach « The Living God and the People of the Book », that we organized in Lyon for eight days in May 2007. This remains a reference because these meetings were particularly adapted to welcome Jewish people in the most appropriate way possible. In fact, we thought rather to awaken an interest and gain the trust of people, in view of going deeper later on at a personal level with those who wished, which seems to us increasingly important in the present French situation. It is no use having too high a profile and then shocking needlessly from the start, if no-one turns up and therefore there is no-one either with whom to discuss matters!³

At any rate in Lyon, and in Christian Witness to Israel (CWI) in France, we continue to think about such appropriate outreaches, as well as to promote and organize them.

The Call

In 1970, there were only 760 Evangelical churches in France, in 2005 there were 1850, and today there are 1900.

Do we observe the same progression in Jewish evangelism? We don't, I'm afraid! Truly we can speak of stability; I don't notice much real progress. That is why we are ready to carefully consider any external help which could support and develop our testimony to the Jewish population in France. And here is the call: The Ninth European LCJE Conference last November in Krakow has shown that there is a potential for more networking in Europe. I claim here that there is also a potential for more networking at the international level. Who will help us respond to the needs of the third Jewish population in the world?

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¹ Let's note that France is the only European country which, its elite having been touched by the Reformation, nevertheless remained Catholic, so terrible and long lasting were the persecutions in those days.

² Fayard, 2004, 351 p.

³ In order to deepen the content of such meetings, and the convictions grounding them, please see my article:
« Outreach “Dieu Vivant et Peuple du Livre” », *LCJE Bulletin*, n° 88 (June 2007), pp. 4-5.