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Dear Dave,

On a cold sunny day in Paris, after the bloodbath of November 13, I set out to learn the Parisian reaction to it. Starting at the Bataclan Theater, where 89 of the 130 who died were slaughtered by three ISIS terrorists "one by one" in cold blood. I started talking with a mixed group of Parisians gathered across the street in a candle lighted vigil adorned with flowers. The air was charged with emotion, especially when an elderly lady sang the Marseillaise. There were as many European media personnel as Parisians, but the atmosphere was intense and authentic enough.

Afterwards, I visited three of the restaurants where the same vigils took place. At La Bonne Bière safety glass windows were riddled with AK-47 bullets and at the Place de la République a sizable crowd was gathered around a statue of Marianne, symbol of the Republic. I talked with a few. I heard a chant, "Touche pas à la douce France" (Don't touch my sweet France) that was probably a response to the antiracist slogan Touche pas à mon pote (Don't mess with my buddy). One of the more dramatic sights was a blindfolded young man with an Arab scarf whose arms were spread with a sign inviting anyone to embrace him. A lot did. Gutsy guy.

Since then I have continued inquiries throughout Paris, meeting with more than 40 Parisians across the political, economic, religious and cultural spectrum, including the police, Muslims and a Frenchman who converted to Islam. I talked with people who had grown up in the "banlieus sensibles" (the "sensitive suburbs", PC for "No Go Zones") where the police are regularly "caillassés", stoned and occasionally fired on. I spoke with a cross-section of Parisians; my American accent opened the door, since it's classless and charming to the French. Think Maurice Chevalier singing "Thank Heaven for Little Girls" in reverse (Well, maybe not quite that far).

Paris has gradually returned to normal life with cafes filled inside and out. By pursuing pleasure, Parisians think they are doing their part to protect "The Values of the Republic" and "Our way of life", even though the country is in a security lockdown and three month state of emergency. Most people anticipate future attacks, but, on the surface, an odd calm prevails.

The recent massacre is hauntingly reminiscent of the Charlie Hebdo attack on January 7. These brutal killings should have stayed on the radar screen and didn't, despite an outpouring that included a 1.5 million person demonstration, millions of "I am Charlie" signs in the name of free speech and a rousing National Assembly speech by the Prime Minister with a spontaneous singing of The Marseillaise.

So far, this time, under the surface, younger people, especially, remain anxious and wary. A young woman told me that on her way home in the Metro to Laumière in the 19th Arrondissement, a Non-European man with a Maghrebin (North African Arab) appearance started shouting Arabic into his portable phone as the train

approached the station. All passengers charged off the car; including all the passengers in the other cars. Who can blame them? People connect the dots, especially, “when we see a Maghrebin carrying a bag.”

It is illegal to keep statistics on race or religion in France, because the Vichy Government in WWII kept files on its Jewish citizens, with over 75,000 sent to Nazi death camps. Consequently, there are no statistics on how many Muslims live in France; the estimate varies from 5-6,000,000 out of a total population of approximately 66,000,000. After Catholicism, however, it is by far the largest religion, both growing and vibrant. The mosques are overflowing, while the churches are empty or turned into libraries and concert halls. One group predicts that in 50 years Muslims will outnumber non-Muslims.

I had started out thinking that socio-economic problems have caused the rise of militant Islam in France. Instead, it's a complex question of identity. “UCLAT”, the United Movement Against Terrorism, claims that “67% of young Jihadists come from the middle class with 17% from the upper middle class”. Lengthy conversations, especially with Muslims, reveal that the fault line lies between their perception that Muslims live by a religious moral code while the non-Muslim French live in a Godless society with no moral compass. One Muslim told me: “At least, you Americans have ‘In God We Trust’ ” on your money.

State secularism, Laïcité that outlaws religious expression in public places, flows from the Law of 1905 that separated Church from State. It, along with The Rule of Law, is the unifying principle of the State. It stems from the De-Christianization of the country during the French Revolution when Church property was expropriated, priests were turned into civil servants and thousands of them imprisoned or killed.

The law was promulgated with Catholicism in mind and, in fairness, never contemplated a massive Muslim integration to France from former colonies. There is no compromise in the State's position on this law that has hardened in the face of growing Muslim public expression of their faith, such as women wearing a veil, praying every few hours, and eating halal in schools. The issue is one of identity, with not much Fraternité in sight.

The killings on November 13 sounded an alarm. The political elites from both the left and the right will have to stop papering over cultural differences with slogans like “diversity”, “multiculturalism”, and “universal man” that mean little without the civic virtues of “reciprocity, modesty, self-rule and restraint”.*

As an American in Paris, I intend to keep asking questions here because the answers can impact us in the United States and elsewhere.

Ever,

Nick

* Michel de Montaigne