

MONASTIC LIFE, INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE, AND OPENNESS TO THE ULTIMATE

A Reflection on the Tibhirine Monks' Experience

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During the night of 27-28 March 1996, seven monks of the Cistercian Monastery of Our Lady of Atlas, near the village of Tibhirine in Algeria, were abducted by Islamic fundamentalists. A radical faction of the GIA (Groupe Islamique Armé) claimed responsibility, and on 23 May sent a further message announcing that the monks had been executed on 21 May. They were buried in the cemetery of their monastery at Tibhirine on 4 June 1996.

OVER THE PAST DECADES, monastic life has become more and more sensitive to the theology and spirituality arising from the encounter between religions. It has made its own distinctive and precious contribution to some significant progress. Some twentieth-century monastics were pioneers in this regard: one thinks of Thomas Merton or Henri le Saux. And plenty of others who are less well known, both living and dead, have all played a part. It is against this background that one needs to situate the Tibhirine experience, an experience that is quite distinctive, not least because of its having occurred in a Muslim country.

The Church needs monastic life in order to sustain its engagement in interreligious dialogue and to develop gradually a Christian theology of religions, something which is still in its infancy. In its turn, religious life is already receiving great benefit, and might receive a great deal more, from opening up to other believers and other religious traditions.

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The Tibhirine Monastery

How, then, can interreligious dialogue enrich monastic life? And, conversely, what is the role of monasticism in interreligious dialogue?

In saying something about these questions, I should like to begin from the experience of the Tibhirine monks. Monastic life, indeed the whole Church, can learn much from this. What we know remains limited, but the monks' writings are gradually becoming available, giving us access to their distinctive experience.

It is certainly true that the Tibhirine experience was unique. Nevertheless, it has wider significance. The experience of interreligious dialogue tells us that we can learn a great deal from our predecessors, whether from centuries past or from more recent times. We need to resist the temptation to regard such people merely as pioneers and to stress their originality and distinctiveness so much that we exempt ourselves from receiving their message. It is surely much better to think of the Tibhirine experience, among others, as a sign of the ever new life of the Spirit, a precious gift to the Church. This gift, like any other, becomes a gift in the true sense only after it has been received.

The Tibhirine Experience

Before, however, I address the general question of the links between monastic life and interreligious dialogue, it would be good to highlight some features of the Tibhirine experience, so that the reflection remains rooted in reality.

Dependence

The Tibhirine monks were foreigners in Algeria. Even after they had taken their vows of stability, they had to renew their residence permits regularly. Such was their situation of dependence that most of them, who were not Algerian citizens, could have been expelled at a day's notice. Moreover, there had always been something precarious about their situation once Algeria had gained independence. In 1963 the Abbot General took the decision to close the monastery, for the good reason that there were only four monks left—a decision which incurred the wrath of the then Archbishop of Algiers. Both the Abbot General and the Archbishop were at Vatican II at the time, but the Abbot General died the following night, and the next year two abbeyes each sent four further monks. Its precariousness was part of what gave the community its identity. But the fragility and the small numbers did not prevent them from responding to a request from the Bishop of Morocco to found a new community in Fès, and it was this community that took in the two survivors of the dramatic events of 1996, Brother Jean-Pierre and Brother Amadée. The inspiration of Tibhirine continues with them; and the Moroccan foundation, which is perhaps not very sensible from a merely human point of view, continues the Tibhirine experience. Precariousness has not prevented this community from bearing fruit—fruit that may well indeed last.

Though it is often unacknowledged, precariousness is the lot of many monastic communities, and indeed of many dioceses. What is strange is that such precariousness is rarely considered as a form of evangelical poverty, something which offers a chance of greater gospel authenticity. After all, in the book of Revelation, the only two of the seven churches that are not criticized, Smyrna and Philadelphia, are the precarious ones.

The monks of Tibhirine took the decision not to engage in social and educational work, and in so doing they differed from many apostolic orders in Algeria and Morocco. Immediately after



Christian de Chergé

the community maintained a special link with the local Church; one does not often find monasteries so closely linked to the life of the diocese. In 1994 they wrote:

Our vocation holds us close to Algerian Christians who must make their own the hidden life and the gospel, even as they remain within the crowd.¹

One expression of this closeness was their relationship with their local ordinaries: Cardinal Léon-Etienne Duval² and later Archbishop Henri Teissier. Both were very attached to the monastic life and showed a great understanding of it.

What is being said here is all part of the same reality: the monks' situation of dependence—on the country, on the political authorities, on their neighbours, and on the local Church. They were living among people who were poor and simple. Tibhirine and Fès were the only Cistercian monasteries located in areas that were absolutely non-

¹ *Sept vies pour Dieu et l'Algérie*, edited by Bruno Chenu (Paris: Bayard, 1996), 71.

² Cardinal Duval died on 30 May 1996, a few days after the monks' murder. His coffin was alongside theirs at the funeral mass in the cathedral on Sunday 2 June.

independence, they did begin some enterprises of this kind, such as a primary school, but they soon gave them up. In saying this I am not forgetting that Brother Luc was a doctor; but the monks did not justify their presence by offering some kind of help or service to the local population. They were simply living with the people. Their agricultural work was part of a co-operative organization in involving the local people around them. Moreover,

Christian. Christian de Chergé, the prior of the community, once pointed out that even the Indian foundations were in places where there existed at least a nucleus of Christianity. For its own renewal, the community was dependent on other monasteries. There was no possibility of vocations from Algeria or from Morocco.

It is understandable that people in the Cistercian order questioned whether the community had been established on a proper footing. One Abbot General used even to say that 'the Order cannot afford the luxury of a monastery in the Muslim world'. Christian used to tell the story, not without a smile, of a dream that Dom Bernardo Olivera, the present Abbot General, had when he was passing through Tibhirine. A Cistercian from somewhere else grabbed hold of a monk from Our Lady of Atlas by the throat, and said:

Firstly, you're wasting your life in front of this Muslim world that is asking nothing from you and is mocking you, while there is so much to do elsewhere, so many peoples who are just waiting for your witness so that they can approach the contemplative life and come to expand your community Secondly, you poor thing, our Order really has no reason to make a foundation like yours. What a dead weight!

In his dream, Dom Bernardo responded and defended the Tibhirine foundation. Once he woke up, he made a point of writing down his response.³

In short, the fact that they were foreigners in this quite distinctive way forced them to let others take the initiatives. This was a good situation for dialogue.

Dialogue with Islam

It would have been possible for the monks to have lived in a Muslim milieu without this in any way affecting their monastic life. So it probably was in the monastery at Staouéli, founded in 1843, from which the Tibhirine foundation was descended—although further study is needed to establish this, and one must beware of anachronistic judgments. There are plenty of examples of such an approach. Pierre Claverie OP, Bishop of Oran, who was himself murdered along with his

³ *Sept vies pour Dieu et l'Algérie*, 83-84.

driver on 1 August 1996, once wrote of his colonial childhood in Algeria:

I did not go near the Muslim world. When independence came, my head was full of images of 'Arabs' massacring the world in which I was born.⁴

Even within the Tibhirine community itself, not all the monks had the same sensitivity or the same degree of openness. All the same, there were some basic conditions which had to be there for this experience, which was fundamentally a community one, to take on life.

One of these conditions was a willingness to be haunted, at least to some extent, by the question of the place of other religions—specifically Islam—in the design of God. One possible answer to this question involves saying that in a given religious tradition there are certainly some good things, but that it nevertheless remains inferior: it is no more than a preparation for the gospel. In that case, we are saying that whatever good there may be in that tradition is already present in our own. If, by contrast, we hold open the question about the place of a given religion in God's design, then we are opening ourselves up to the possibility of encounter, and accepting the possibility that we ourselves may become displaced:

I am carrying within myself the existence of Islam as a nagging question. I have an immense curiosity regarding the place it holds in God's mysterious design. Only death will provide me, I think, with the response I am waiting for. I am sure that I will be able to fathom it, dazzled, in the paschal light of Him who presents himself to me as the only possible instance of Islam—submission—because he is nothing but yes to the Father's will.⁵

Any initiative in dialogue demands a profound fidelity to who one is in oneself. If one is truly oneself, one can be transformed by the encounter; it becomes a source of enrichment from the other. The Abbot General's message to the community was explicit:

⁴Pierre Claverie, *Lettres et messages d'Algérie* (Paris: Karthala, 1997), 17.

⁵Christian de Chergé, 'L'échelle mystique du dialogue: journées romaines de 1989', *Islamochristiana*, 17 (1997), 1-26, here 6.



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The Tibhirine Brothers in 1994

You have a mission to inculturate the Cistercian charism ... so that the manifestations of this monastic commitment can be enriched by what you will have gleaned from the local culture This inculturation may provoke a reaction of fear, fear that you will lose your monastic identity. In order not to experience this fear or to liberate yourself from it, the first thing you need to do is to deepen your monastic culture.⁶

One has to recognise the richness of Islam, the presence of the Spirit within it. The Church has clearly affirmed in that it 'rejects nothing that is true and holy' in non-Christian religions, whether in 'ways of conduct and of life' or in 'precepts or teachings'.⁷ In one of his talks, Christian took the Church's reflection further, recognising the religions as rungs on the one mystical ladder:

The gift of oneself to the Absolute, regular prayer, fasting, the sharing of alms, the conversion of the heart, the constant sense of presence, trust in providence, the urgent need for boundless hospitality, the call to spiritual combat, to interior pilgrimage In all this, how can one fail to recognise the Spirit of holiness, of

⁶ *Sept vies pour Dieu et l'Algérie*, 88.

⁷ Vatican II, *Nostra aetate*, n. 2.

which it is said that one does not know where it is coming from or where it is going, where it is descending from or to where it is ascending? Its role is always to bring about birth from on high.⁸

The Tibhirine experience may have been profoundly marked by a situation of dependence; but it was equally shaped by the monks' experience of dialogue with Islam. Monastic interreligious dialogue has so far developed principally with Far Eastern religions, notably Buddhism, starting from the monastic structure held in common. But the fact that there is no communal structure with a monastic form in Islam should not deceive us. The links between monastic life and Islam are not just on the surface.⁹ One needs only to look at the role of obedience in Islam—which means submission—and in the Benedictine Rule, or at the divine office and the *salât*, the regular Muslim five-times-daily prayer, to say nothing of fasting, hospitality and the like. Indeed, the links between monasticism and Islam are so strong that, as Cardinal Duval of Algiers once put it, it is monasticism that is best placed to help Islam understand what the Church's deepest instinct is. In this context, the Tibhirine experience cannot be ignored. It represents an invitation to monastic life not to abandon the Christian-Muslim dialogue. Monasticism has a contribution to make to this dialogue and an enrichment to receive from it, in the name of the whole Church.

How Interreligious Dialogue Enriches Monastic Life

The more one explores the foundations both of monastic life and of interreligious dialogue, the closer the connections between them appear. Both are fundamentally eschatological, fundamentally concerned with what is ultimate.

Interreligious Dialogue and Eschatology

As soon as you take another religion seriously, as soon as you begin to consider it as something positive and recognise that Christian faith must see it as carrying seeds of the Word or rays of the Light, a question arises. What is the place of this religion in the Father's

⁸ Christian de Chergé, 'L'échelle mystique', 11.

⁹ Christian de Chergé, 'Dialogue intermonastique et islam, 1995', in *L'invincible espérance*, edited by Bruno Chenu (Paris: Bayard, 1996), 205-212.

design? Christian expressed the question very strongly in various writings, including his so-called 'Testament':

Finally, my most nagging curiosity will be allowed to roam. Look how I'll be able, please God, to immerse my gaze in that which is the Father's, and thus contemplate with Him His Muslim children just as He sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ¹⁰

The question here is not a theoretical one but something we live. It does not admit of any immediate answer. It is a matter of faith in the Father's love for all His children, in His saving design, in His desire to be 'all in all'. It links up with God's final plan to gather at the table of the Kingdom all humanity in its different affiliations, languages and cultures. The Father's ultimate design is one of unity, a unity which invites believers' faith.

It is this design for unity that grounds interreligious dialogue. The unity may be apprehended in different ways: the unity of humanity in its origin and destiny, the unity of salvation, the unity wrought by the Spirit.¹¹ From the standpoint of Christian revelation, the Father's design is the unity of all humanity. It is therefore the Father who establishes interreligious dialogue; the Father also sets it within an eschatological horizon. But 'eschatology' here is not to be understood merely in terms of the 'last things', as has too often happened in theology. For God is not simply the God who was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be; God is the God who is, who was, and who is *in the process of coming*. Eschatology is a matter of God's coming, a coming that is taking shape here and how, even if in ways that are yet hidden. A theology of interreligious encounter has to be grounded in the Father's ultimate

¹⁰ Christian de Chergé, 'Testament', in *L'invincible espérance*, 223—this version draws on the English translation in Jean Olwen Maynard, *Christian de Chergé and the Atlas Martyrs* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2003).

¹¹ Compare the 1991 document from the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, n.28: 'First comes the fact that the whole of humankind forms one family, due to the common origin of all men and women, created by God in His own image. Correspondingly, all are called to a common destiny, the fullness of life in God. Moreover, there is but one plan of salvation for humankind, with its centre in Jesus Christ, who in his incarnation "has united himself in a certain manner to every person" (*Redemptor hominis* n.13; see *Gaudium et spes*, n.22). Finally, there needs to be mentioned the active presence of the Holy Spirit in the religious life of the members of the other religious traditions. From all this the Pope concludes to a "mystery of unity" which was manifested clearly at Assisi, "in spite of the differences between religious professions".'

design. There can be no Christian theology of religions which is not fundamentally also a theology of hope.

Monastic Community and Eschatology

The monastic vocation too makes no sense apart from this eschatological perspective, this sense of ultimacy. At the deepest level, a monastic community is a community of hope—not just because it is directed towards the final end of humanity, but because it is living out of a sense that the ultimate end of things is already here, a sense of realised eschatology. This sense of course characterizes Christianity as such, but the mission of monastic life is to provide a radical sign expressing this reality:

If a monk thinks he has anything to say here, it's less in the role of an efficient builder of the human city (even though he might do much on this level ...) than as a resolute adherent of a way of being in the world that is senseless apart from what we call the ultimate ends—the eschatology—of hope.¹²

One will notice that Christian de Chergé is speaking here not just of the 'ultimate ends', but the 'ultimate ends of hope': in other words, the ultimate ends in so far as they are already latently present. It is the ultimate ends of hope that shape a way of life in the world—a sign which everyone can see, whether or not they believe in heaven. Monastic life makes no sense apart from the hope which grounds it.

The monastic community is a sign of the Kingdom, a sacrament of the ultimate, eschatological reality that it anticipates and of which it is the seed. It bears witness to the heavenly Jerusalem. It signifies the communion of saints. The monastic community's vocation is not just to be a sign of the visible Church's unity; it also signifies a communion of saints that transcends frontiers and religious affiliations. A community of consecrated life is, by virtue of its vocation, a sign of communion: the communion of the Church, the communion of all God's people, dedicated in Christ to show itself as a mystery that is still coming to be, the mystery of the communion of saints, in which the community will dissolve just as the stream loses itself in the ocean.

¹² Christian de Chergé, 'L'échelle mystique', 3.

And the communion of saints is the redeemed people as such, not just the gathered Church:

From this mystery of unity it follows that all men and women who are saved share, though differently, in the same mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ through his Spirit. Christians know this through their faith, while others remain unaware that Jesus Christ is the source of their salvation. The mystery of salvation reaches out to them, in a way known to God, through the invisible action of the Spirit of Christ. Concretely, it will be in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious traditions and by following the dictates of their conscience that the members of other religions respond positively to God's invitation and receive salvation in Jesus Christ, even while they do not recognise or acknowledge him as their saviour.¹³

There is therefore a convergence between a theology of interreligious encounter centred on the oneness of the Father's design and its ultimate, eschatological realisation, on the one hand, and, on the other, a monastic community that makes no sense apart from the 'ultimate ends of hope'. So it is that interreligious dialogue, which can take a variety of forms, presents any monastery with an opportunity for growth, by opening it up to other believers and through them opening it up to the Father's mysterious design. Opening up to other religious traditions gives the community life, and reminds it constantly of how its monastic calling is set against the eschatological background of the communion of saints. Precisely because the monastic community believes, in common with the Church as a whole, that Christ's mediation is unique, it renounces the illusion of thinking that Christ is its possession. Instead it is constantly discovering a Christ ever greater. The Church is still a child; and the Christ in whom it believes is immeasurably greater than it can ever imagine. But at the same time, the monastic community can be a sign of this reality. It can signify the unity of the human race within the heart of God, within the salvation in Jesus Christ that far surpasses what we can conceive of it. The monastic community becomes a sacramental presence of this mystery of unity.

¹³ 'Dialogue and Proclamation', n. 29, referring to Vatican II's *Ad gentes*, nn. 3, 9, 11.

All this obviously becomes the more vivid when the diversity of religions impinges on community life. So it was in Tibhirine, which was in Muslim territory. The monks regularly heard the muezzin's call to prayer; they met regularly with the Alawis, a Sufi confraternity; they lived on a daily basis with Muslim neighbours. But in monasteries at large, the reality can also be lived out in many other ways, perhaps less radical in form but none the less significant for that.

The Mystery of Unity

A monastic community lives out this mystery of unity in and through its very existence. On 27 December 1994, four Missionaries of Africa were murdered in the Algerian city of Tizi-Ouzou. What Christian said to the community shortly after that occasion applies also to a monastic community:

Those whom God had united in one single consecration of life have not been separated by death. The sign which they leave us remains an expression of the ultimate meaning of any religious community: that of anticipating the communion of saints. And the sign is such all the more telling when we recognise the variety of origins, temperaments, and also ages of our four brothers.¹⁴

The moment one advocates unity in opposition to difference, the mystery of unity being evoked here is immediately lost. What makes the community sacramental is not its unity but its unity in difference. The more this difference is accepted, deepened and loved, the more the community is a sign of unity. Now, interreligious dialogue forces one to address the fact of difference with radical seriousness. Religious difference has something about it that is as radical and foundational as the difference between man and woman:

What if difference takes its meaning from the revelation that God makes us of what He Himself is? Nothing then could prevent us from accepting difference in the way we accept faith, that is as a gift from God.¹⁵

¹⁴ Christian de Chergé, *Dieu pour tout jour* (published privately by the Notre Dame d'Aiguebelle Monastery, 2004), 429. The source is a chapter talk given on 18 February 1995.

¹⁵ Christian de Chergé, *L'invincible espérance*, 112. Subsequent pages references to this book are given in the main text.

In this perspective:

... one would attribute a quasi-sacramental function to the differences between Christians and Muslims, regarding these as dependent on a reality that is vaster, more secret, this union for which all people carry within themselves a nostalgia (p. 113)

Difference here is being thought of as a sacrament of unity, a unity vaster than anything of which we can conceive today. If difference has this quasi-sacramental role, then a believer must take it also as an invitation 'not to become closed within one's difference'. Difference forces us to leave 'the familiar landscape of our certainties and of the language in which we express them', so that we can 'converge together towards the same resting place' (p. 117). Difference in this sense is not an expression of different realities, nor of a difference regarding God; it is rather the difference through which the self-expression of the One and Only is accomplished. 'To see different things does not mean that one is not seeing the same things.' And the point applies not only to the perceptions that different people have of the mystery, but also to the reality of God's self-revelation in itself:

When God expresses Himself in another way, he is not expressing himself as something other, but as the Completely Other: in other words, something other than all the others. (p. 127)

Thus the mystery of divine oneness expresses itself through difference. It weans different parties off,

... the constant temptation of reducing the community assembled for Himself by the Eternal One to the communities that our temples made with human hands, whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim, can somehow or other group round themselves. We will always have to be entering into a vaster design that is constantly making us leap over the poor boundaries of our hasty barriers and our intransigencies, because *God really does want all human beings to be saved.* (p. 147)

Difference is a sign of unity, but a unity both deferred and differentiated. A unity deferred, because it is not yet completely manifest; a unity differentiated, because this single unity is expressed in different ways by different people. It is faith in this unity precisely amid believers' differences that grounds hope:

When the elect are finally drawn together into communion, it is our belief that those who were once 'Muslims' or 'Christians' will be able to embrace each other in the same movement of the heart as brothers and sisters, sharing *in actual fact* the one joy of God—this after having lived, until their deaths, an authentic fidelity to different norms of faith. (p.164)

Interreligious dialogue eventually reconnects monastic life with one of its foundations: that of being an eschatological community. A monastic community stretches out towards the coming of the Kingdom, towards the communion of saints which it is being called to signify sacramentally. Thus it shows forth, even within the present, the reality which is to come, and it lives out this mystery as something already here. It lives out this mystery by being itself a community assembled in Christ and united by God from out of an abundance of differences. For the secret joy of the Spirit 'will always be to establish communion and to re-establish likeness, playing with differences' (p.221). If a community undertakes interreligious dialogue actively and with full conviction, this will take the community beyond its boundaries, and will give it a powerful reminder of its ultimate horizon.

How Monastic Life Enriches Interreligious Dialogue

But what does monastic life bring to interreligious dialogue? What it brings to the dialogue is nothing other than what it receives. Mission is often like this: what one takes to other people is precisely what one can receive from them.

Monastic life approaches dialogue as essentially a spiritual enterprise. Dialogue cannot be rooted primarily in conferences or social engagement, nor even in peacemaking; such approaches today risk making interreligious dialogue a means to political ends. Too often the dialogue between religions is presented as the means for constructing peace. But peace is a fruit, not the goal. Peace is not an acquisition we somehow arrogate, but rather a gift made to us, a gift that can only be received in faith and hope. What we need today is a genuine theology of interreligious encounter that is centred on an authentic spirituality of interreligious encounter.

Obviously such encounter has its risks, in particular the risk of relativism. Some of the more developed theologies and soteriologies today are accused by some of being unacceptably pluralist, and of

relativising Christian revelation. The risk is a real one, and we need to ask why some theologies of religions are indeed sliding towards relativism in this way. But there is also another risk: that of being content with simply stating what Christian revelation affirms without drawing the consequences. To affirm that Christ is the sole mediator between God and humanity is essential to the Christian faith. But this statement of faith is calling us and committing us, even as we make it, to recognise and accept the face of Christ that is present in other religious traditions.

In reality only a theology of interreligious dialogue that is also a theology of hope can preserve the theology of religions from arriving at one of two dead ends: that of the relativism often denounced by the Church's teaching authority, and that of fixation on the statements of faith. The latter temptation is no less frequent. If the theology of interreligious encounter is not to succumb to the drifts of relativism or dogmatism, it must be situated against the backdrop of hope. It is eschatology that is the centre of gravity both for monastic life and for a theology of religions. Every monk, then, is a sign of this hope, and a privileged agent of interreligious dialogue. And this applies even if they never actually meet any adherents of other religions. After all, Thérèse of Lisieux had a profound significance for missionary work even if she was never a missionary herself.



Brother Jean-Pierre, one of the two survivors from the Tibhirine community

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