

Fall 2013

"Reflections on My Experience of Interreligious Dialogue in Algeria"

Raymond Gonnet C.S.Sp.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons>

 Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gonnet, R. (2013). "Reflections on My Experience of Interreligious Dialogue in Algeria". *Spiritan Horizons*, 8 (8). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol8/iss8/19>

This Lived Experience is brought to you for free and open access by Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spiritan Horizons by an authorized editor of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.



**Raymond Gonnet,
C.S.Sp.**

I received the Lord's call to the missionary life and was able to answer thanks to my Christian training, the prayers of my mother, and the orientations of my god-father, Father Nicoud. After my ordination in 1969, the Congregation sent me to Algeria to our agricultural installation in Misserghin. It was in Misserghin that the Spiritan Brother Clement in 1892 invented the delicious fruit which has carried his name, hence Clementine mandarin oranges. There the Spiritans ran a famous agriculture and technical college where they trained disadvantaged boys from the area, but which was nationalized in 1975. At the moment, the Congregation is working in two places in West Algeria: Sidi Bel Abbès and Mascara, and with only four confreres in all. We need volunteers to help sustain this small and fragile remnant that is however high in signification and hope.

Muslims and Christians are able to meet, become accustomed to each other, and progressively let fall the walls of distrust and fear, the set views we have of each other.

REFLECTIONS ON MY EXPERIENCE OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN ALGERIA

I have been in Algeria for forty-four years. I spent many of these years educating orphans and the handicapped and as professor. Since twenty-two years, I have been pastor of Mascara, a village of 130,000 inhabitants, all Muslims. And for twenty of these years, my only parishioners were the community of religious Sisters and one lay woman. Our urge has been the desire to live for the Muslim community in a spirit of fraternity, dialogue and service, and without any spirit of proselytism. It was for this reason that we created what Peter Claverie, our bishop assassinated in 1996, called a "platform of encounter." We fitted out the church building for educational and cultural activities: library, tutoring lessons in French and English, conferences, courses of formation and culture for women in cuisine, embroidery, patchwork, macramé and so on; there is also a small dispensary and reception facility for people in difficulty. It needs be said that these arrangements were made between 1994 and 1996, the period of the martyrdom of 19 members of the church: religious sisters, monks of Tibhérine, and our bishop. For this reason we named the place Centre El Amel, that is, Center of Hope. And, thanks to God, the Center has become a true beehive of activities where people from all sectors and all social situations mix. Thus Muslims and Christians are able to meet, become accustomed to each other, and progressively let fall the walls of distrust and fear, the set views we have of each other. We are creating bonds of friendship and trust, learning mutual respect and love of each other in the respecting of our differences of culture and religion. In thus working together, we are conscious of living a privileged time of the reign of God, confident that the Lord is present in each of our meetings. As our Holy Father, Francis I, has said, we ought to cultivate this "culture of encounter." Besides, has not the church of Algeria always defined itself as a "church of encounter"?

The church of Algeria has been strongly marked by the spirituality of the Foucauld Fathers which is to live simply and poorly among a people: the life of Nazareth, live the Incarnation. That entails progressively becoming a child of the country, one who takes the time to master the language, the customs, the history, and the religion of the other. This incarnation demands also the time to root oneself deeply in the rhythm of life and the family events of people, with their joys and trials. Thus I very often participate in funeral wakes and burials. People would say, "Father, thanks for thus sharing our joys and especially our sorrows, pray for us." I too

*Father, thanks for thus
sharing our joys and
especially our sorrows,
pray for us.*

*For me, interreligious
dialogue is thus not
something I practice
in the course of
a colloquium or
conference, but a state
of spirit, an interior
attitude, which puts me
always in a situation of
dialogue...*

would ask them to pray for me, especially as one of them goes on pilgrimage to Mecca. What joy to hear it said, “you are one of us, you are part of our family, you are more Algerian than us,” even when one sometimes adds “a pity you are not Muslim!” When I see the attention full of love and humility that Leila, our cook, gives to all who present themselves at the door, the patience and love of Yamina for Miloud, her husband suffering from Parkinson disease, the honesty and work ethic of Hayet and Souad, the professional conscience of Samia and Faïza, the faithful love of Mohamed, the piety and openness of spirit of Moktar, the devotion of Bachir to all challenges, I no longer think, “a pity they are not Christians,” but thank God for these marvels. To the Christian community and in each of our Eucharists, I witness that the Spirit of God is at work beyond borders, that we should all collaborate with the coming of this kingdom of fraternity, each one where the Lord has planted them.

For me, interreligious dialogue is thus not something I practice in the course of a colloquium or conference, but a state of spirit, an interior attitude, which puts me always in a situation of dialogue, interreligious and intercultural. I strive to understand why this person reacts in a certain manner or how he would feel about this or that. I ought to accept that he/she does not see social life or religious practice the way I do, even though quite a few attitudes and behaviors trouble me and make me sense some of them to be in the throes of a ritualism that I reject for myself or as marked by a fearful attitude towards God.

We live in a milieu where religion is everywhere and pervades all manners of thought and action. So a meeting will never be fixed for 4 p.m., but after the afternoon prayer that varies each day. Although after 44 years I feel myself at home in Mascara and well integrated into the community, I still always feel myself a stranger, a guest, one invited by the Muslim community that by the fact of its practice of the religious law excludes those who are not members. This in itself is a rare opportunity for witness; being always perceived as Christian I ought without cease in every gesture, word, and attitude to search myself, “am I in conformity with the Gospel, am I faithful to the spirit of Jesus?” “Are these people able to see Jesus through me?” Of course, I do interreligious dialogue of a kind when I meet an Imam or a Muslim prayer group, but also when I buy the daily newspaper or my vegetables, when I take administrative actions, when I jog with friends, in my manner of walking, speaking, driving the car, when I receive people in material difficulties or those who have need of confiding in someone. What opportunity to be at every instant in a situation of witness and watchman.

*What opportunity to
be at every instant in a
situation of witness and
watchman.*

*We wish to become
Muslim Focolari.*

In October 2010, we had the joy of receiving some fifteen students from the Congo, Cameroun, Guinea, Ivory Coast and Madagascar who arrived to study at the University of Mascara. They are very fervent and have need of formation, of time for prayer, listening and sharing. They are the presence of the Church in the University and bear testimony to their faith in the midst of our Algerian youth greatly influenced by diverse religious currents. Since last year I visit prisoners from sub-Saharan Africa at Mascara and Saïda. Some are living a true journey of conversion. When we pray and sing to the Lord, they too bear witness to their faith within the prison milieu. Since these visits, their relations with the personnel in particular have greatly improved.

Other Congregations work in Algeria, each according to its proper charism. The Focolare Movement has been in Tlemcen forty years now. They too have sought to create bonds of friendship, though with families, in the form of Mariapolis groups. These live together for a week in friendship and joy, sharing the “Word of Life” of Chiara Lubick, the foundress of the Movement. They also gather during the course of the year. With the passing of time, some men and women called “Friends of the Focolari” have demanded to become an integral part of the movement. They said, “we have found in your manner of living, in the gospel itself, the words of Jesus that enlighten us in our family and professional life ... but we are Muslims with our cultural and spiritual riches that we nevertheless wish to conserve. We wish to become Muslim Focolari.” After years of agonized reflection, Rome gave the green light. Thus many men and women have made the commitment which allows them to be Associates and “Muslim Members of the Focolare.” Farouk, a famous surgeon and Muslim worshiper told us that few of his friends understand the meaning of this step he took. Fayçal too has even become the deputy bursar of the diocese of Oran, a good example of trust and communion among believers, prophetic action of a new world about to be born, emerging silently in the brouhaha of arms. But, as the proverb has it, “A falling tree makes more noise than a growing forest.”

To write these few lines I went under the shadow of two olive trees over against a small Muslim country sacred place to which many pilgrims come this Friday to make their devotions to Sidi Ali and profit, as myself, of the marvelous landscape which recalls Palestine in Spring. With the smell of candles and incense, not to speak of the perfume of lavender, ideas have come to me spontaneously. I explained to my friend, El Hadi Mekki, the gardener of the sanctuary, what I have come to do—write reflections on our living together, Muslims and Christians. He took the opportunity to invite me to the feast of Sidi Ali to take place soon. We hold no grand theological discourses; we can reach

Raymond Gonnet, C.S.Sp.

no mutual understanding through these. But we have much respect for each other. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them," says the Lord.

As illustration, here is an email that I just received.

I would be delighted to participate in every action and work of your community that may help you, your brothers in the faith, and humanity in Mascara.

Salem alikoum: Peace be with you. I am delighted to find your email address on the internet site of the Catholic Church of Algeria. I present myself. I am from Mascara, at the moment living in France. I am a free Imam. I left Mascara now thirteen years. I recall that you had a small citroen car. I am a man of tolerance and dialogue. I would be delighted to participate in every action and work of your community that may help you, your brothers in the faith, and humanity in Mascara. I am grateful to the West and to France for this climate of liberty that I live in, I and all Muslims. It is the least I can do to have good relations with you. Again, I am delighted to be able to contact you. May God help us all to do good and preserve his creation.

Ahmed.

Free Imam, Tourcoing.

Translated from the French by James Chukwuma Okoye, C.S.Sp.