

# Islam Through the Years - Part 3

The following short articles are part three of the series 'Islam Through the Years'.<sup>[1]</sup> This part consists of 'Some Notes on Algeria', 'The Meaning of the Presence of White Fathers in the Maghreb and in Situations of Danger' and 'The Testament of Dom Christian de Chergé'. This is a further attempt to shed light on why there is hope when people of 'good will' who wish to continue an inter-religious dialogue, even in the most difficult of circumstances. Often those who carry out this work do so in full awareness of the dangers involved and a full knowledge of the historical background of the situation

## Some Notes on Algeria

By Fr. Bill Turnbull W.F.

### THE WHITE FATHERS IN ALGERIA

The White Fathers were founded in 1868 by Cardinal Charles Lavigerie, who was the then Archbishop of Algiers. The Society has been in Algeria since 1873 and the country was the starting-point of much of its work and from where it has spread to twenty-three African countries.

The first White Fathers' caravan set out from Metlili (20 miles south of Ghardaïa) on 14th. January, 1876, in an attempt to reach the 'French Sudan', in West Africa. It consisted of Fr. Alfred Paulmier, Fr. Pierre-Loui Bouchand, Fr. Philippe Ménoret and El Hadj ben Beker (a Chaamba). All were killed by Tuaregs a few days later near El-Golea. Five years later, on the 21st. December, 1881, another caravan set out. This time they, Frs. Louis Richard, Gaspard Morat and Alexis Pouplard, were killed between Rhadames and Timbuktu.

Over the years since then the White Fathers have always been present in Algeria. They were involved in education, such as technical schools which were nationalised in 1975. At present there are thirty White Fathers in Algeria. They are involved in the cultural and social fields, the pastoral care of the local Christians and in inter-faith dialogue.

### TRAGEDY AT TIZI OUZOU

On the morning of the 27th. December, 1994, an armed band broke into the White Fathers' house at Tizi Ouzou, about sixty miles east of Algiers. They shot dead the four priests who were there. Those murdered were Fr. Christian Chessel (36), Fr. Alain Dieulangard (75) Fr. Jean Chevillard (69) and Fr. Charlie Deckers (70).

Fr. Alain Dieulangard had been in the Kabylia region since 1950.

Fr. Jean Chevillard arrived in Algeria in the 1950s, and had been the Superior of the White Fathers in Algeria for six years.

Fr. Christian Chessel had made his final commitment to the White Fathers Society just three years before his death.

Fr. Charles Deckers, from Belgium, was based in Algiers and had spent most of his life in Algeria. He arrived in the Kabylia region in 1955 and was just visiting the community.

### THE CISTERCIAN-TRAPPIST AT TIBHIRINE

On the night of 26-27 March, 1996, seven monks were abducted from the monastery of Our Lady of Atlas at Tibhirine, seven kilometres south of Médéa. They were kidnapped and held by the GIA who wished to exchange them for prisoners. On 21st. May the GIA announced that they had killed the monks, but their bodies were not found for several days (30th. May).



The monks were Fr. Christian de Chergé (59), Br. Luc (Paul) Dochier (82), Fr. Christophe Lebreton (45), Br. Paul Favre-Miville (57), Br. Michel Fleury (52), Fr. Bruno Lemarchand (66), and Fr. Célestin Ringard (62). All of the monks were well aware of the danger they faced since guerrillas had already raided the monastery in 1993.

Fr. Christian de Chergé was the Prior of the monastery, which he had entered in 1969. He was certainly familiar with joys and sorrows of Algeria as he was born into a French family and brought up in the country. Fr. Christian even did his National Service there during the Algerian war of independence. He studied the

Arabic language and culture with the White Fathers, at PISIA in Rome, before beginning his work in Islamic-Christian dialogue.

**Br. Luc (Paul) Dochier** was a medical doctor and he arrived in Algeria in 1946. He was born at Bourg-de-Peage, in the Drôme region of France, and joined the Cistercians after being a military doctor during the war.

**Fr. Christophe Lebreton** was from Toussaure, Drôme, France, and was the subprior and novice master. He arrived in Algeria in 1987 and had also done his National Service in Algeria where he taught and helped out with handicapped children. It was during this time, 1970, that he first visited Tibhirine.

**Br. Paul Favre-Miville** went to Algeria in 1989. Br. Paul helped in a local farming co-operative and had set up an irrigation system.

**Br. Michel Fleury** entered the Bellefontaine Abbey in 1980 and arrived in Algeria in 1984. He was born in Pontchâteau (Loire Atlantique) and became a machine-worker in Marseilles before joining the Brothers of Prado. At Tibhirine he worked in the kitchen and around the house.

**Fr. Bruno (Christian) Lemarchand** was superior of the annex house in Fès, Morocco, and was only visiting at the time of the abduction, though he has been based in Tibhirine before. His knowledge of Algeria began in his childhood. His father was an army officer who had been posted to Algeria.

**Fr. Célestin Ringoard** arrived in Algeria in 1986. He too had a long standing knowledge of the country and had served in the Medical Corps during the Algerian war. He was the organist and choir master at Tibhirine.

#### SIGNS OF HOPE

Some sources estimate that as many as one hundred thousand people have been killed in the violence since 1992. In comparison to this the deaths of Church personnel may seem

insignificant, but one death is one too many. Those who have died, as may be seen in the following pages, would not have wished to have been picked out for praise. They would rather be remembered for their efforts to witness to the Gospel of peace and as signs of mutual understanding in bringing unity to a divided Algeria.

An attempt at 'national reconciliation' has taken a step further forward with the government declaring an amnesty. This has meant that several thousand people were freed in the first days and, eventually, possibly up to twenty thousand, who have been jailed for political offenses. In broad terms the people covered by the amnesty are members and supporters of the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS), which is the military wing of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), those who do not have 'blood on their hands', and possibly those 'extremists' who are still at large. Mr. Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the President of Algeria, announced the amnesty to coincide with the 37th anniversary Algeria's of independence - 3rd. July, 1962.

The FIS and the AIS have called a ceasefire and agreed to stand by the outcome of a referendum to decide the country's future. FIS were on the way to win the National Assembly elections in 1992 when they were annulled. President Bouteflika described the cancellation of these elections as an "act of violence" against FIS. So far, July, 1999, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) have not yet joined in the process. They have also threatened to carry out acts of terrorism in Belgium and France if their imprisoned supporters are not included in the amnesty.

Hopefully this move by the government will bring the seven-year civil war to an end and give Algeria's people peace for the start of the new millennium.

## The Meaning of the Presence of White Fathers in the Maghreb and in Situations of Danger

By Fr. Etienne Renaud W.F.

The theme originally suggested to me was, 'Why do the White Fathers stay in Algeria?' I thought however that instead of limiting my reflection to the straightforward question of staying or leaving, I might enlarge the topic somewhat. It is also good to bear in mind that it is unfortunately not only in Algeria that White Fathers live in great insecurity. It was the case in Beirut, in Uganda in the 1980's, and in 1994 in Rwanda, where two of our confrères were killed. <sup>[1]</sup> The repercussions of the Rwanda conflict continue to be felt in the widespread instability of the whole of the Great Lakes Region, where our confrères [White Fathers], the Church and all the people are obliged to live in a climate of danger which puts a great strain on everyone's nerves.

Although our main concern is with Algeria, in the background will always be all those other situations of risk. I would also like to place our concern with Algeria in the wider context of our presence in the Muslim Maghreb, the region in which our Society was born and which will always remain for us a land of predilection.

It might be felt that there is something vaguely improper about someone who is living peacefully in Rome venturing to offer opinions on faraway situations of danger. That is why I have tried as far as possible

in this talk to listen to those directly involved, and especially to those who have given their life for Algeria.

#### NO READY-MADE SOLUTIONS

On 20 January 1995, less than a month after the murder of our confrères, <sup>[2]</sup> the General Council addressed the following message to all the White Fathers in Algeria: 'We have been deeply moved by the courage you have shown in your response to this dramatic situation ... You continue as free men to follow the road of friendship and solidarity. In the face of all the threats, you are naturally torn



Sources: 'A Heritage Too Big For Us', 'Cardinal Lavigerie - Churchman, Prophet and Missionary' by François Renault W.F., *The Times* (Sunday & Daily), *The Telegraph* (Sunday & Daily), *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *Voice of America* and various Wire Services and Web Sites

A family in the Kabylie region



between the wish to remain with those who have welcomed you as brothers and what seems 'the reasonable decision' to leave ... Through you we still remain present in Algeria. After much prayer and reflection in the General Council, we confirm your choice. At the same time it is important that each feel free to decide his own situation for himself.' ('Petit Echo', 1995/3, pp. 114-6) It should be noted that everyone is involved in this reading of the situation. It strengthens the cohesion of the group, not only at the level of the White Fathers but at that of the whole local Church, which in such circumstances re-forms itself around its pastors.

There is never any question of seeking martyrdom. As a Cistercian Abbot remarked: "The Order does not need martyrs but monks."

There can be moments in which circumstances seem to take our decisions for us, obliging us to make changes and re-groupings.

In short, we have to respond to a situation which is in permanent evolution and which calls for flexible decisions. There are no final responses, applicable to all circumstances.

#### IN THE SPIRIT OF THE INCARNATION

It was important to clarify this point at the beginning. We may now consider the deep reasons which lie behind our willingness to face risks. The inspiration of every missionary life is the Incarnation of Christ who united himself with mankind even unto death. A fortnight before his death,<sup>13</sup> Father Christian de Chergé said to a group of Christians in Algiers: "We must find in the Incarnation the real reasons for our paschal presence in Algeria." ('Sept Vies pour Dieu et l'Algérie, Bayard/Centurion, Paris, 1996, p. 205)

One theme of which the local Church has gradually become more and more aware is the Biblical concept of 'covenant'. The General Council of the White Sisters wrote to the

Sisters in Algeria on 4 September 1990: 'Thank you for the covenant you have made with the Algerian people in the name of your faith in Jesus Christ. It is a covenant which, through your presence, we sign with you.' When the monks of Tibhirine decided to remain in their exposed situation in the Medea region, they found a further reason for their decision in their vow of stability, referred to by the Abbot General of the Trappists, Dom Bernard Oliviera. The previous year, Bishop Claverie<sup>14</sup> had written in the same sense: 'We are neither prophets, nor fanatics, nor heroes, nor slaves. But we have forged with the people of Algeria relationships which nothing, not even death, can dissolve. In this we are no more than disciples of Christ.' (Claverie, 'Lettres et Messages d'Algérie', Karthala, Paris, 1996, p. 172)

This covenant knows no limits and is given free. Let us listen again to Bishop Claverie: "We are like people sitting sad and helpless at the bedside of a sick person, unable to do anything more than hold his hand and sponge his forehead. We give time, during the last moments of life, simply to be present, with no other aim but to say: The feast is over, but I am with you still. I wish to be present at your suffering. It is a useless presence, you may say, but it is the gift of true love. It is the proof that the Church is not here for its own benefit."

At the centre of all this, there is Christ, defenceless before all the violence unleashed upon him: "In his flesh, he has killed hatred." The weakness of the apostle was meditated upon by our confrère Christian Chessel some months before his death: 'Christ was never more Saviour than on the Cross. It was in this extremity of weakness that he saved the world. It is for that same purpose that he asks us to follow that same path. It is because we are ourselves weak that we are able to see with different eyes those who come to us in their weakness. We are able to receive them and

listen to them. They look to us for understanding, and once they have the sense that they are understood, they know that they are loved. This is what is asked of us: to be attentive and respectful witnesses of the drama taking place around us. Because we live our weakness with those others, because we are not afraid of being weak, we are able to bear witness to the faith which animates us. We show forth the strength dwelling in the midst of our weakness, the strength which relies on God.'

#### THE CHURCH PRESENTS ITS LETTERS OF CREDIT

The Algerians recognize all this: "You have chosen to be on the side of the oppressed." It is perhaps cause for astonishment that at no moment in its history has the Church given such a clear witness of what it should be, the bearer of the Christian message in all its purity.

In the midst of trial, the Church finds both its legitimacy and its credibility. As Archbishop Teissier of Algiers said: "As a result, there are many Algerian friends for whom we have now become the Church of Algeria."

In his will Father Christian de Chergé speaks of the forgiveness granted in advance to 'the last-minute friend who did not know what he was doing.' I felt in these words an inspiration which did not come 'from flesh and blood' but

from somewhere much higher, from the innocence of creative love. Forgiveness is truly at the heart of the Christian vocation.

We read in a letter written by an Algerian mother to Archbishop Teissier: 'After the tragedy, after the sacrifice lived by you and by us, after the tears and the message of life, of honour, of tolerance, bequeathed by our brother monks to you and to us, I decided to read Christian's will aloud to my children. I read it with a full heart, for I felt that it was addressed to us all. I wanted to tell them about this message of the love of God and men. Christian's will is more than a message, it is an inheritance. She concludes: 'Our thanks to the Church for being present among us today.'



## A WITNESS IN MUSLIM TERRITORY

In our Society, we hear less often these days: “What are you doing in North Africa? Why are you wasting your time, when there are no conversions? What is the point of it all?” The Council has been a great help in opening our minds, in making us realize that dialogue with other religions is an integral part of the Church’s mission. God takes no account of the barriers which men erect between themselves, and the mission of the Church is to bear witness to the universal love of the Father. How can the Church then refuse to take an interest in a billion human beings on the grounds that they are Muslims?

I would like to invite you to look beyond the militant Islam which makes the headlines and which I call ‘Islam of the Trumpet’. Behind this façade there is a much more subtle reality. We may deplore the hardening of Islam, but we should realize that many Muslims deplore it no less than we do. Interesting developments are beginning to take place, and I would like to mention a few.

The Church’s work is directed above all to changing people’s consciousness. In the face of violence, she has borne her own witness of non-violence. But changes are also perceptible in more peaceful situations. In Tunisia, for example, ‘Mediterranean culture’ has become the fashion. People speak of their Punic origins, of St. Augustine as a North African thinker. The development in communications has been important here, especially

in University circles. Renewal and openness are to be expected more among the graduates and students of the modern University than in the ranks of the traditional establishment.

Here are some facts:

- A Father from IBLA <sup>[5]</sup> was consulted concerning the revision of history school textbooks and of the religious syllabus. The authors wanted to know whether the presentation of Christianity was satisfactory.
- A Christian-Islam Research Group is continuing its efforts to explore common themes.
- I had the opportunity last year of taking part in a televised debate in Morocco on dialogue between monotheistic religions.

Meanwhile there are all the friendships which harvest the fruits of long years of presence and sharing.

## RENEWED FIDELITY

I would like to conclude on the note of fidelity, for it sums up the whole attitude which the Church in the Maghreb is seeking to make its own. Fidelity in times of trial is called for not only in Algeria but also in Rwanda, Burundi, Congo. This fidelity refers in particular to the insights of Cardinal Lavigerie concerning our vocation as witnesses in the Land of Islam.

Like yourselves, each time I hear of the violent death of a missionary I am reminded of my own duty of faithfulness. Solidarity with our brothers summons us to daily faithfulness in our own lives, in this particular corner of the vineyard where the Lord invites us to participate in the construction of the Kingdom.

## FootNotes

This article originally appeared in ‘Petit Echo’, 1999/1, pp. 19-23. Fr. Etienne Renaud W.F. is a former Superior General of the White Fathers and spent many year in Yemen. At present he is teaching at the Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d’Islamistica (PISAI) in Rome.

[1] The two White Fathers killed in Rwanda were Fr. André Caloone (at Ruhuha on 7th. April) and Fr. Joaquim Vallmajo (at Byumba at the end of April). [2] See pages 4-6; [3] See pages 4-6; [4] Mgr. Claverie, Bishop of Oran, was killed by a bomb on 1st. August, 1996; [5] IBLA is the ‘Institut des Belles Lettres Arabes’ in Tunis.

## The Testament of Dom Christian de Chergé

When an “A-Dieu” takes on a face.

If it should happen one day - and it could be today - that I become a victim of the terrorism which now seems ready to engulf all the foreigners living in Algeria,

I would like my community, my Church, my family, to remember that my life was given to God and to this country.

I ask them to accept that the Sole Master of all life was not a stranger to this brutal departure.

I ask them to pray for me - for how could I be found worthy of such an offering?

I ask them to be able to link this death with the many other deaths which were just as violent, but forgotten through indifference and anonymity.

My life has no more value than any other.

Nor any less value.

In any case it has not the innocence of childhood.

I have lived long enough to know that I am an accomplice in the evil

which seems, alas, to prevail in the world, even in that which would strike me blindly.

I should like, when the time comes, to have the moment of lucidity

which would allow me to beg forgiveness of God and of my fellow human beings,

and at the same time to forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down.

I could not desire such a death.

It seems to me important to state this.

I do not see, in fact, how I could rejoice if the people I love were to be accused indiscriminately of my murder.

To owe it to an Algerian, whoever he may be, would be too high a price to pay for what will, perhaps, be called, the ‘grace of martyrdom’, especially if he says he is acting in fidelity to what he believes to be Islam.

I am aware of the scorn which can be heaped on Algerians indiscriminately.

I am also aware of the caricatures of Islam which a certain islamism encourages.

It is too easy to salve one’s conscience

by identifying this religious way with the fundamentalist ideologies of the extremists.

For me, Algeria and Islam are something different: they are a body and a soul.

*The statue of Notre Dame d’Afrique in the Basilica of the same name in Algiers.*



I have proclaimed this often  
enough, I believe, in the sure  
knowledge of what I have  
received from it,  
finding there so often that true  
strand of the Gospel,  
learnt at my mother's knee, my  
very first Church,  
already in Algeria itself, in the  
respect of believing Muslims.  
My death, clearly, will appear to  
justify  
those who hastily judged me naive,  
or idealistic:  
"Let him tell us now what he  
thinks of it!"  
But these people must realise that  
my avid curiosity will then be  
satisfied.

This is what I shall be able to do, if God wills -  
immerse my gaze in that of the Father,  
and contemplate with him his children of Islam just as he sees them,  
all shining with the glory of Christ,  
the fruit of His Passion, and filled with the Gift of the Spirit,  
whose secret joy will always be to establish communion  
and to refashion the likeness, playfully delighting in the differences.  
For this life lost, totally mine and totally theirs,  
I thank God who seems to have willed it entirely  
for the sake of that **joy** in everything and in spite of everything.  
In this **thank you** , which sums up my whole life to this moment,  
I certainly include you, friends of yesterday and today,  
and you, my friends of this place,  
along with my mother and father, my sisters and brothers and their families,  
the hundredfold granted as was promised!  
And also you, the friend of my final moment, who would not be aware of what you were doing.  
Yes, I also say this **Thank You** and this **A-Dieu** to you, in whom I see the face of God.  
And may we find each other, happy good thieves, in Paradise, if it pleases God, the Father of  
us both. Amen. (In sha 'Allah).

Algiers, December 1, 1993 - Tibhirine, January 1, 1994.

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*The picture above is of the roof tops at El Oued*