

Reading Program for *The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria*, by John W. Kiser

Developed and used as a component of a Religion 100 course by Sister Shawn Carruth of Concordia College in Minnesota

Before you begin to read this book:

This is the true story of the deaths of seven Trappist monks at the hands of terrorists in Algeria in 1996. We read it at the conclusion of this course for several reasons. It can help focus in 21st century terms some of the things we've considered throughout the course, for example, 1) what is shared by Muslims and Christians as children of Abraham 2) the use of sacred texts by the religious communities that adhere to them 3) the character of monasticism and what it has to do with the world as a whole 4) the meaning of martyrdom 5) the interaction between religion and politics 6) the sense in the Algerian Church of occupying the land of Augustine. Secondly, the story as told by John Kiser invites our reflection on some of the very large questions faced by our world in which religious considerations play an important role. The largest of these may very well be: How can different people—especially people with different religious traditions and practices—live together? We may want to add to this: What does it mean to be Christian? What does it mean to be Muslim?

Before you read the book it is helpful to know that Trappists are an order of Catholic monks and nuns, established in 1098 at Cîteaux in France, who follow the Rule of St. Benedict. They consider themselves to have reformed the practices of other Benedictines in order to be more faithful to the monastic life as envisioned by St. Benedict. Kiser includes an account of their founding on pp. 77-78. It would also be helpful to have a general understanding of the chronology of the history of Algeria, especially of the events that are most pertinent to this story. See pp. 305-308.

As you go along with your reading and encounter words and names you don't understand, consult the Glossary on pp. 291-298. There are descriptions of the persons most important to the story on pp. 297-303.

Reading assignments for the book:

Although the entire book is important reading, and you are encouraged to read it all, the constraints of course time suggest that we make selections that we will all read. The following indicates which pages are required reading. Summaries are given for pages that are not required.

Required reading:

Part I

Introduction and pp. 3-28

Introduction:

1. Why does Kiser think the telling of this story is important?
2. How does the significance Kiser gives to this story illustrate the concept that history is told for the sake of the future?

Chapter One:

Why do you think the bishop answers no to the question about whether Christians in Algeria were being martyrs?

Chapter Two:

1. Prepare to comment on Kiser's claim that his story is not that of historians but of lovers.
2. Do you think Christian's friend Mohammed is a martyr?
3. Prepare to comment on the way Christian understands his friend Mohammed's death.
4. Comment on the irony of the nickname of "insolent ones" for those who wanted to practice gospel values in their military duties.
5. From your reading of these pages prepare to comment on the complexities of colonialism.
6. Bishop Duval and Jules Roy represent very different attitudes of Europeans in Algeria. Prepare to discuss these different attitudes.
7. What are your own thoughts on religion and politics?
8. Bishop Duval calls the monastery at Tibhirine "the lungs of the Church of Algeria." What does that metaphor express? Does this metaphor fit what you normally understand to be the place of monasteries in church and society? Why or why not?

Chapter Three

1. What particular attitudes toward humanity, religion, and life were particularly important to Christian de Chergé's parents? How do such attitudes function in a country that has been colonized? In a country with a diverse population?
2. Prepare to comment on the differences between the attitudes of Christian de Chergé and Father Maurice Charles and the influence of Vatican II on Christian.

Optional Reading: pp. 29-43

You have already read pp. 31-33 as an introduction to reading the Rule of St. Benedict.

In this section, John Kiser introduces the reader to Notre-Dame d'Aiguebelle, the French Cistercian monastery that Christian de Chergé entered and describes some of the changes that were taking place as the monastery responded to the post-Vatican II Catholic church. Kiser also describes some of the reasons Christian chose to be a Cistercian (Trappist). Among the reasons are that he thought other orders—the Jesuits and Benedictines—were too intellectual. Christian wanted manual labor. He was also clear that the Cistercians were a way for him to return to Algeria. He told the abbot that he wanted to make his final vows at the Cistercian monastery of Tibhirine¹ in Algeria, a daughter house of Notre-Dame d'Aiguebelle.

¹ Tibhirine is the name of the village where the monastery is located. Very often monasteries are identified this way rather than by their more official names. The official name of the Cistercian monastery at Tibhirine is Notre-Dame de l'Atlas. Look on p. 148 for a drawing of the monastery.

Kiser describes the coming of Cistercians to Algeria in the 19th century (pp. 35-38). Because the Muslims wondered at the godlessness of the French who occupied Algeria from 1830 on, the French brought the Cistercians in. In a way, then, the French intended the establishment of the monastery to contribute in some way to their occupational goals. Kiser notes, “The Trappists received good marks from agnostic French generals and Muslims alike.” (p. 37)

Christian de Chergé arrived at the monastery of Tibhirine on January 15, 1971. But he found the monks there did not share his passion to be friends with the Muslims and “find the notes that are in harmony” between the faiths (p. 40). On p. 40 Kiser quotes a letter Christian wrote to the monks of the monastery to express his reason for wanting to be there.

In the blood shed by this friend, who was assassinated because he would not practice hatred, I knew that my call to follow Christ would be lived sooner or later in the same country that gave me a tangible sign of the greatest love possible.

In the next chapter there is another reference to the significance of the death of Christian’s friend, Mohammed. On p. 49 Kiser reports that Christian’s abbot knew that “Mohammed’s gift of love had become for Christian a kind of epiphany, and that he wanted to evangelize his brothers with the Good News of Islam.”

(If you’ve forgotten this incident go back and read from the bottom of p. 8 through p. 10)

Because other members of the community in Algeria did not agree on Christian’s suitability to remain there, the abbot of the French monastery gave him a two-year leave to study at the Papal Institute of Islamic and Arabic Studies in Rome. At the Institute he studied Arabic and the Quran. Christian’s approach to Islam was deeply influenced by the thinking of Vatican Council II. His teacher described him as “A mystical adventurer who was convinced that the Muslims were saved by their Islam and that Islam had something to tell Christians.” (p. 41) Kiser says of Christian, “His God was big—a unifier, not a separator ... he wanted to know what mattered in God’s eyes.” (p. 43)

Optional reading pp. 44-56 (Chapter 4)

In Chapter 4 Kiser describes Christian’s return to Tibhirine after his studies in Rome in 1974. He was placed in charge of the guesthouse and soon gained a reputation as a spiritual guide among Christians and Muslims. Although a few of the monks in the house liked Arabs and Muslims, none of them shared Christian’s desire to live in spiritual communion with Muslims. In spite of this, with the encouragement of the abbot back in France, Christian gave weekly talks in the monastery on an Islamic point of view on various topics. Because Christian’s own desire was to pursue his quest in community he wondered whether he should join another community or start his own foundation. But Christian returned from a solitary retreat in a remote area far to the south of Tibhirine lasting from November 1979 to January 1980, confirmed in his vocation as a Trappist.

Shortly after his return, a group of Sufis came to the monastery wishing to participate in a group called the Bond of Peace. This group had been started by one of Christian's friends, a White Father² (Père Blanc) named Claude Rault. It gathered Christians from around Algeria who wanted to understand Islam better. This was the beginning of a new Bond of Peace dialogue (*ribat-es-salaam*) that included both Christians and Muslims. Beginning in 1980 the group met twice a year.

On March 31, 1984, at the age of 47, Christian de Chergé was elected the superior of the Tibhirine monastery, a community of eleven monks. Kiser summarizes the history and situation of the monastery on pp. 55-56.

Required Reading pp. 57-68, 69-82

Chapter 5

The first part of this chapter (pp. 57-64) contains the brief reflections of several Christians who came to Tibhirine to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the *ribats*.

1. Based on the observations and reflections of the participants what new reflections do you have of the notions of truth, humility, love?
2. Based on the observations and reflections of the participants what new reflections do you have about the notions learning by experience and by intellectual effort? Include consideration of pp. 66-68 as well as pp. 57-64 here.
3. Based on the observations and reflections of the participants what new insights do you have about people who are different living in peace?

Pp. 64-66 introduce Christophe Lebreton, another of the monks who will die at the hands of the militarists.

Chapter 6

1. This chapter gives a glimpse of life at the monastery of Tibhirine, the way the monks live among their Muslim neighbors, and the way they share their lives. What strikes you in particular?
2. How would you describe the character and function of the Church and the monastery, existing in a Muslim environment, as portrayed in this chapter?
3. Prepare to comment on "Dogma limits. Doctrine limits. What is important is my relations to the other person." (p. 75) and "How can he who believes he possesses Absolute Truth truly be fraternal." (The word "fraternal" means "brotherly.")

You are responsible for a general understanding of the establishment of the Cistercians (pp. 77-78)

You might want to look up the passages that mention Mary, the mother of Jesus, in the Quran.

² The White Fathers (there are also White Sisters) are a Catholic religious order.

Part II

Optional Reading pp. 85-100

In Chapter 7 Kiser describes political and social events and conditions as well as religious movements that were critical and formative of the context of the Trappist monks in Algeria from the 1960s to the mid 1990s. Once Algeria declared its independence from France in 1962, the governing political party was the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale, National Liberation Front). Its policies tended toward industrialization and dependence on the export of oil. It kept many of the French institutions in place and allowed considerable corruption. It resulted in an increasing gap between the elite and the deprived. Social conditions deteriorated and young people were frustrated by the lack of opportunity.

During this time various groups dissatisfied with the FLN's secularized character and its apparent sellout to European interests argued for an Islamic state, for reclaiming an Arab culture. Some of those brought in to teach Arabic argued so strongly for an Islamic prohibition against statues that one of these groups was responsible for the damage to the statue of the Virgin Mary at Tibhirine (see p. 99)

Tension built to a climax with rioting that began among university students in October 1988. Some Muslim leaders sympathetic to the students joined in the resistance to the FLN. Islamic groups gained considerable support and in 1989 a new constitution encouraged the development of more political parties. One of the new parties, the FIS (Front Islamique de Salut, Islamic Salvation Front) won control in 28 of Algeria's 30 largest cities in the elections of 1990. In the areas where they had control the FIS organized to provide needed social services and made great strides in improving the economy. It also made considerable progress in cleaning up the abuses that had prevailed under the previous government. The FIS was also explicitly committed to a theocracy guided by Islamic law. It declared Islam the state religion.

Optional Reading pp. 101-102

Required Reading pp. 103-107

These pages describe a visit in June 1991 to Tibhirine by the Abbot General of the Cistercian Order, who at that time was Bernardo Olivera. Through his eyes we get a few more glimpses of the monks of Tibhirine. Here are translations of some of the French phrases that occur here:

l'homme du contact	the man of contact
l'homme de l'écoute	the man of listening
l'homme de fleurs	the man of flowers
Je n'ai pas compris.	I didn't understand.

1. What would be your own observations about the monks described on these pages?
2. At the bottom of p. 106 there a point is made about the ambiguity of the symbolism of the cross. Prepare to comment on this. And remember it because later you will read about a description of a crucifix Christian commissioned for the monastery chapel.

Optional Reading pp. 107 (middle) – 112

These pages describe the disturbances in Algeria in 1991 that were caused when the leadership of the FIS called for a general strike. The call for the strike made visible the divisions and tensions both in the FLN that controlled the national presidency and the military and the FIS with its push toward an Islamic state. The FIS became weakened by the tensions and the expulsion of some of its leading figures who denounced violence. The FLN was weakened by internal as well as external, international events.

Optional Reading pp. 113-128

Chapter 9

The psalms are at the heart of the daily prayer of monks. In the years since Vatican Council II monks and nuns have been working with different arrangements of the ways the psalms are prayed in common. Another aspect of these same years is that people all over the world are more conscious of the ways people wreak violence on each other. That has meant that monks and nuns worry about the effects on them of using the sometimes violent language of the psalms in prayer. At the beginning of Chapter 9, Christian de Chergé worries precisely about this difficulty. He understands the purpose of the violent passages as a “cry that says, ‘God be just, so I don’t take justice into my own hands. I know I can’t be just when I am angry.’” But he still wonders if praying these psalms has a place in a situation where violence around the monks is increasing.

The Church under the leadership of Bishop Henri Tessier resists the violence by saying that the purpose of the Church in Algeria is to be with people and share in their suffering. The monks value their Muslim friends, especially Mohammed, their watchman.

But the tensions in Algeria continued to result in violence. One casualty was the Algerian president Mohammed Boudiaf, assassinated on June 29, 1992. He was a person who was committed to the unity of all the factions in Algeria. He was not subject to the influence of particular groups. He opposed a political Islam. “He took on the mantle of a severe but just father who spanked all his children. (p. 120) Ironically, Boudiaf was killed while he was speaking to the young people of Algeria about reconciliation and love of neighbor.

In August 1992 the explosion of a bomb in the Houari Boumediene Airport (in Algiers) signaled that the violence had moved into a new form. One of the new opposition movements was known as the Groupe Islamique Armé (Armed Islamic Group—GIA). Early on its test of commitment was killing a police officer, later it was killing a family member (p. 124). The hard line of groups like the GIA highlights the ways in which Algerian Muslims were in danger from one another.

Required Reading: pp. 128 (beginning with the third paragraph)-137

The last pages of Chapter 9 offer some reflection on the interpretation of *jihad* and interpretation of the Quran.

1. There is certainly room to make comparisons and think about the ways Christians wage war against each other, too. Prepare to comment on some of these instances.
2. What do you think are some very important things to keep in mind when interpreting the Quran and the Bible?

Chapter 10

1. Think back to what we learned about monasticism when we considered its 4th century development and when we read the Rule of Benedict. In the light of the origins of Christian monasticism, how does Christian's concept of the place of the monastery show continuity with the tradition?
2. Put in your own words the point of the conversation between Christian and the Sufi about the cross.
3. Prepare to comment on the design of the monastery crucifix commissioned by Christian. Don't forget to go back to what was said about the cross in Chapter 8 on p. 106.
4. What do you understand by the Order's perceived need to develop a "new anthropology?"

Required Reading pp. 138-139, last two paragraphs on p. 144

In these first pages of Chapter 10 we read of the move on the part of the GIA that will eventually result in the deaths of seven of the Tibhirine monks.

1. Look up the word *wilaya* in the glossary to learn the meaning of *wali*.
2. Prepare to comment on Christian's response to the *wali*'s encouragement to accept protection. See also p. 144. Christian's second meeting with the *wali* occurs after some foreigners have been murdered in the area close to them.
3. Comment on the relationship of the monks with the Muslims in their village. Recall the way the monks' differed individually in their enthusiasm for Christian's zeal for the study of Islam.

Optional Reading pp. 140-top of 144

When the ultimatum of the GIA expired on December 1, 1993, they began to kill foreigners. They also attempted to force a highly respected sheikh, Mohammed Bouslimani, to issue a *fatwa* (look up this word in the glossary) legitimating their action. Bouslimani refused to issue such a decree—he didn't have the authority to do so anyway—and was killed for his refusal.

On December 14, 1993, the GIA murdered a group of Croatian workers in the area near Tibhirine. This, of course, brought the violence very near the monastery. The Muslim neighbors of the monks felt humiliated and kept saying, "This is not Islam." They cited the Quran to show it and they grieved for the killing of innocent people and for the violation of hospitality.

Required Reading pp. 145-155

Chapter 12

This chapter describes the first intrusion of GIA militants into the monastery of Tibhirine, the reaction of the monks and the way they came to a decision about whether or not to leave.

1. Note on pp. 147 and 149, the GIA leader, Sayah Attia, claims some common ground with the monks on the basis of both being religious. How does Christian construct that common ground in his conversation with Attia described on pp. 146-147?

2. Prepare to comment on the complexity of the issues and feelings involved in the monks' decision about whether to leave Tibhirine.
3. Prepare to comment on Bishop Tessier's reflection on whether the monks should stay or leave. (Note: A Latin phrase *primus inter pares* is used to describe Bishop Tessier's position as bishop of Algiers. The phrase means "first among equals".)
4. In the previous chapter you read about the *wali*'s encouragement that the monks take some means of protecting the monastery. In the second full paragraph on p. 151, there is talk of a sense of the monastery as protecting the village of Tibhirine. How do the different senses of protection held by the *wali* and the monks compare and contrast?
5. What do you think Benedict would say about the interpretation of the monks' vow of stability?
6. In his letter to Attia, Christian addresses him as brother and believer. How can he do this?
7. Note on p. 153, the reference to the letter Christian sent to his brother in France. On p. 139 you read the opening paragraph of that letter. The full text appears on pp. 244-246.
8. The last paragraphs of this page reflect on the ways violence is justified when the other is called a beast or otherwise label in such a way as to diminish and individual's or group's humanity. How does Christian's thinking undermine this?

Required Reading pp. 156-163

Chapter 13

1. Comment on how the villagers' talk to the monks on p. 156 echoes the words of Bishop Tessier that you read on p. 151.
2. How do the monks bring together the table reading described on p. 156 with their understanding of stability? You might understand the faithfulness of the monks to the daily routines of monastic life as contributing to a sense of stability as well.
3. On p. 157 there is a citation from Christophe's journal. Do you think the notions of Christian values and of the relationship to Christ need to be seen as excluding each other? If yes, why? If not, why would Christophe make a distinction?
4. What role do you think the decision to stay at Tibhirine plays in the changes Kiser notes in the monks on p. 157?

You may read from the bottom of p. 157-the top of p. 160 quickly—or skip over it, if you like. It tells of an earlier incident in Luc's experience when he had been kidnapped by Algerian rebels against the French rule in 1959.

5. Luc, the doctor monk is described on pp. 160-163. He is called *l'homme des contradictions* (the man of contradictions) by Christian. He surprised many when he became a monk. Do you think the complexity of the man is incompatible with the monastic vocation? Why?
6. In his Rule, Benedict tells the monks to keep death daily before their eyes (RB 4.47). How does Luc do this? Are you impressed or put off by Luc's reflection on death? (The French phrase here, *Non, Je ne regrette rien* means, "No, I regret nothing.")
7. Christophe's observation "Christians can be totally attached to Jesus and yet open to the possible divine messages in the other religions." found on p. 165 is in the section for optional reading, but you've read enough to understand why a monk of Tibhirine might

say this. What reasons would you give for agreeing or disagreeing with Christophe's position?

Optional Reading pp. 163-166

The last pages of Chapter 13 describe the deepening friendship between the monks and the villagers of Tibhirine—their increasing sense of solidarity with one another. Consistent with the position of all monks, Luc continues to treat everyone who comes to his dispensary. “A sick person,” he says “is neither a terrorist nor a soldier; he is a sick person.” (p. 164) The monks continue to refuse efforts of the *wali* and the ministry of foreign affairs to post guards at the monastery.

“Shared risk and shared suffering bound the monks and their Muslim friends together.” (p. 164) The chapter describes further how Algerian Muslims not in sympathy with the GIA felt their safety and lives threatened. The chapter closes with the murder of the Christian director of a house for students and the nun who worked there.

Required Reading pp. 167-the top of p. 170

Chapter 14

1. Here are some reactions to the killings described at the end of the previous chapter. Compare and contrast the reactions of Christian de Chergé, Annie Laurent, and Ibrahim Younessi.
2. Reflect on the concept of martyr on these pages. Compare this with the way you thought of Christian martyrdom after reading *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*.

Optional Reading pp. 170-173

This section describes the rise to leadership of the GIA by Jamel Zitouni in 1993-1994 and some of the violence which he carried out.

Required Reading bottom of p. 173-top of p. 177

This section describes the monks' repeated commitment to remain in Algeria and also the effect of the tension on their lives together.

Optional Reading pp. 177-185

On p. 177 Kiser reports the killing by the GIA of two Spanish nuns and plea for forgiveness on behalf of the murderers by the policemen who found the bodies as well as the newspaper editorial written by a Muslim that was critical of the killings. Bishop Tessier's response was a hope that a core of Christians would still remain in Algeria “to be a presence that shared in the suffering of the Algerian people.” (p. 178) Some religious orders did decide to leave.

The concept of total war and the way in which the militarists justified it is discussed on p. 179.

Kiser reports the GIA hijacking of an Air France plane in December 1994 and the subsequent murder of four persons at the house of the White Fathers in Algiers. Most thought that the killing of the White Fathers was an act of retaliation for the deaths of the

Air France hijackers. The deaths of the White Fathers evoked grief from Muslims and Christians alike. Christian de Chergé pointed to a “contrast between a few killers and the immense crowd of their compatriots who refuse to let them steal the meaning of these deaths.”

The remainder of Chapter 14 talks about the founding of the White Fathers in Algeria by Father Charles Lavigerie and their missionary work. Although Lavigerie had instructed the members of the congregation “not to seek converts” there was a certain ambiguity about their work in Algeria.

Optional Reading pp. 186-192

Kiser does some retrospective and summary in this chapter. He points out the role the oppression of colonialism played in the Algerian revolution against the French and then the continued role of oppression by the Algerian government that came to power with independence from the French. Casualties continued as tortured became torturers and partisans of the murdered became murderers.

Recommended Reading, last paragraph on p. 192, a paragraph from a letter Brother Luc wrote to a friend in France.

Part III

Required Reading pp. 195-208

Chapter 16

1. In this chapter there are portraits of several of the monks—Paul, Jean-Pierre, Luc, Bruno. Note the ways in which they are distinctly individuals yet individuals with a shared commitment. The effect of the shared commitment is addressed especially at the bottom of p. 198 and in Christian de Chergé’s comment “Slowly, each of us is learning to understand that his death is a part of this gift, this ministry of living together, accepting our differences, a ministry that is totally unconditional.” (p. 203) Prepare to comment on this in the light of RB 72.8-12 and RB 4.47.
2. Prepare to comment on Paul’s description of a monk on p. 196 along with Christian’s comment about the reasonableness of becoming a monk on p. 203.
3. Prepare to comment on Paul’s understanding of martyrdom on pp. 196-198. Note his question about saving one’s skin at the risk of one’s soul.
4. People commonly referred to the governing by the FLN as “*le pouvoir*”—the power—and many experienced repression and oppression because of the corruption of *le pouvoir*. In Christian Chessel’s reflection on weakness given on p. 199 he talks about power and weakness. Christophe wrote in his journal, “There is only one who does not seek power, and that is God.” Do your own reflection on the concept and use of power. Can you bring in Benedict’s understanding of humility in Chapter 7 of the Rule?
5. Why do you think Kiser calls this chapter “Sorrow and Joy”?

Optional Reading pp. 208-226

Chapter 17

By 1995 many foreign groups and nations were taking an interest in the Algerian situation. A Catholic organization based in Rome, Sant’ Egidio, took an interest in trying

to be a force for reconciliation. Representatives from the various Algerian parties met together in Rome in 1994 and 1995, but achieved no reconciliation.

France worried that a civil war in Algeria would lead to a tidal wave of immigration to its shores. Unemployment in France was already lending support to the ultraconservative party of Jean-Marie Le Pen who also appealed to feelings of racism and xenophobia (fear of the stranger) among the French. France also had high stakes in Algeria's economy.

In the 1995 presidential elections in Algeria, the FLN emerged victorious once again. But the surprise was that the party called Hamas came in second. This party preached theocracy but was also widely known for its opposition to violence.

In 1994-1995 violence by the GIA continued. Although the FLN wanted to portray the GIA as horribly violent, there were other Algerian groups responsible for much of the violence. These groups included the FLN itself as well as local self-defense militias and simple bandits. In the summer of 1995 the first of a number of violent attacks—the killing of Sheikh Abdelbaki Sahraoui as he entered a Paris mosque, occurred on French soil. The GIA claimed responsibility. In his published “Profession of Faith” GIA leader Jamal Zitouni said, “the jihad cannot spare babies, children, and the starving, because the preservation of religion is more important than human lives.” (p. 216)

In 1996 Bishop Tessier asked Christian de Chergé to lead a retreat at the diocesan house. Christian's theme was “The Church: The Incarnation Continued.” He began by saying that the Incarnation is the deepest of all reasons why the monks were staying at Tibhirine. To make this point he referred to the documents of Vatican Council II, St. Francis de Sales, and the Rule of Benedict. Participants called Christian's presentation during that retreat “the five pillars of peace.” The pillars identified by Christian were patience, poverty, presence, prayer, and forgiveness. “Coincidentally, Forgiveness is the first name for God in the Muslim litany of ninety-nine names for the divine—*Ar Rahman*. And the last is Patience—*Es Sabur*. But God is also poverty, God is presence, and God is prayer. This is the peace that God gives us. It is not as the world gives it.” (p. 220)

Early in the morning on Wednesday, March 27, 1996 Jean-Pierre watched, unobserved, as intruders demanded that Christian and Luc do as they were told. He soon learned that he and Amédée were the only monks left. The others had been taken away by the intruders. Phone lines had been cut and the monks' rooms had been ransacked. By 7:15 a.m. Jean-Pierre, Amédée and a priest who was at the monastery for a meeting of the *ribat*, Thierry Becker, went to Medea to report the intrusion and kidnapping to the local authorities. That night, the three slept under armed guard at a hotel in Medea. On Thursday they returned to Tibhirine to put things in order. Then they took what they would need, leaving most things behind, on the assumption that they would eventually return and left for Algiers.

Required Reading pp. 227-256

Chapter 18

The text of the GIA Communiqué 43 is given on pp. 287-290.

1. The title for this chapter is probably taken from Cardinal Archbishop Lustiger's words found on p. 234, "Their death must be a sign of hope, that love is stronger than hatred." Where do you find signs of hope deriving from the deaths of the monks?
2. Responses and reactions in France to the monks' deaths are recounted on pp. 234-237. Compare and contrast these responses and reactions to the sentiments expressed in Christian's testament found on pp. 244-246.
3. Bernardo Olivera's words about the power of forgiveness are recorded on p. 239. Compare this way of talking about power to the reflection on power from Chapter 16.
4. You've been asked to think about an understanding of martyrdom several times in the reading of this book. How does Christian's understanding of martyrdom in his testament connect with your other reflection?
5. At the beginning of this reading guide it was suggested that the story of the Tibhirine monks urges reflection on what it means to be a Christian and what it means to be a Muslim. Articulate some of your thoughts about these questions at this point in the reading.

Chapter 19

1. Prepare to comment on the understanding of protection on p. 251. You will probably recall other places in the book that comment on the protection the monastery offered the village.
2. In this chapter Kiser reviews all the theories that try to account for why the monks were kidnapped and killed. What do all these theories show about the complexity of the Algerian situation? And about what might have been at stake for all of the players? Note what is said on p. 256 about the interests of both the Algerian and French governments.
3. In light of the overall themes of Kiser's book, comment on the parallel deaths of the monks and Mohammed Bouslimani as described on p. 256.
4. In its review of this book *The Washington Post* said, "In the wake of the September terrorist attack on the United States, *The Monks of Tibhirine* gives us an essential lens through which to examine the violent forces rending the Muslim world." Do you agree? Why or why not?

Optional Reading pp. 257-283

Chapter 20

At the beginning of this chapter Kiser describes a visit he made to Algeria in 1999. He was able to say of the atmosphere at that time that Algerians no longer lived in fear. There had been one last murder of a Catholic clergyman in August of 1996 when the Archbishop of Oran, Pierre Claverie, together with his assistant, Mohammed Bouchikhi, were killed by an explosive device. Many people considered the deaths of the monks, especially, as a turning point, the final horror that would end the violence, "the final insult to an already-abused Islam." (p. 258) In 1998 a dying Sheikh Nacer-Eddine Albani along with two others issued a *fetwa* unequivocally denouncing Islamic terrorism against unarmed civilians. In April 1999 Algerians overwhelmingly elected Abdelaziz Bouteflika as president. The new president was committed to healing wounds and bringing about peace. "The strong," he said, "forgive." Algerians had been inspired by the way the weak—the monks and the Church—forgave, as well.

At the time of Kiser's 1999 visit the Trappists had not yet returned to Tibhirine but planned to reestablish the monastery there. The Cistercians knew the importance of monks living among Muslims. "These fellow seekers of God had challenged and stimulated the monks in ways that made them better Christians, simplifying, rejuvenating, and expanding their faith." Four other monks had joined Amédée. They were living in Algiers and drove to Tibhirine to stay in touch with their neighbors. When they came to celebrate Easter in 1999, 50 of the villagers met them and pressed into the chapel to hear the service. The village continued to remain untouched by violence and none of their children had joined the GIA.

Recommended Reading:

On pp. 264-275 Kiser recounts the story of Emir Abdelkader (1808-1883) When the French landed in Algeria in 1830 telling the Algerians that they would liberate them from the Ottomans, Abdelkader became the leader of the resistance. He was called the mystic warrior and preferred study, prayer and reflection to fighting. Abdelkader was not a contemporary of the Tibhirine monks, but Kiser says that his was a big Islam that matched Christian de Chergé's big Christianity. By the end of 1847 Abdelkader realized that his people and the land were being devastated by the killing and the suffering so he surrendered to the French. Although he was promised safe passage for himself and his family through France to the Middle East, he was actually detained in France until 1852. During his time in France he was noted for "his active curiosity about France, broad-ranging mind, generosity of spirit, and lack of bitterness toward the country that had broken its word." (p. 269) Abdelkader settled in Damascus. When fighting broke out there between Christians and Druze Muslims, he was recognized world-wide for his assistance to Christian refugees from the fighting.

In 1858 Abdelkader wrote a document that he addressed to France. Here are some important aspects of his thinking that are expressed in that document.

- He thought that "politics, religion, and science should all work together to serve the same end of glorifying God. Politics is the art of leading people to live in harmony with one another. Religion provides a moral base of shared values to aid in living together and recognition of our common origin in God. Knowledge, if it probes beyond the material world, will lead us to grasp the basic unity of [human]kind." (p. 271)
- Did the West have the wisdom necessary to succeed in its apparent desire to rule the world?
- Could the West foresee the consequences that would come back to haunt it, if it did not proceed with humility and prudence?
- He embraced modernity provided it was not "elevated to a divine principle and turned into an idol, demanding loyalty from cultures that chose to be different." (p. 274)
- He celebrated difference: "*La richesse, c'est la difference* (Difference is wealth.) We learn about ourselves by taking note of the other."

Kiser concludes this section with a comparison of Abdelkader and Christian de Chergé.

“What is it to be a Christian or a Muslim? Christian de Chergé believed that the contemplative life meant constantly pushing out frontiers, redefining and questioning, being willing to depart, like Abraham, for new lands. Abdelkader called this same spirit ‘a continual moving of the mind’s eye’ to different ideas and concepts to find the deeper truths that both unsettle and unite.” (p. 275)

In 1963, the year after the Algerians won their independence from France, Abdelkader’s remains were brought back to Algeria. He is buried in a cemetery with other Muslims as well as with Christians and Jews. Kiser uses his visit to this cemetery to reflect on Algeria itself as home to many peoples over the centuries. Some people see Algeria as “a Mediterranean society, a rich agglomeration of past cultural deposits. . . .another view sees Algeria as a Muslim and Arab country, opposing itself to a colonial inheritance associated with inequality and humiliation.” (pp. 276-277) At this point, Kiser asks questions about “Who is a Muslim?” The two views seem mutually exclusive—the one multicultural, the other monocultural, and such a schema is tempting as an analytical lens. Yet Kiser finds that his encounters with Algerian people resist such neat categorizations.

After a visit to the Basilica of Notre-Dame d’Afrique in Algiers, an encounter with a Muslim policeman in a French uniform hung with Italian, Russian, and American hardware prompts Kiser’s reflection on the meaning of global community.

- “How does a community become open to change and evolution without blurring its identity and losing sight of what it has that is worth preserving? . . . The monks found that their identity as Christians was strengthened, not threatened, by witnessing the message of universal love as practiced by Muslims” (p. 282)
- Is not the act of a Muslim government honoring Cardinal Duval and seven ‘insignificant’ Trappist monks with a state funeral the beginning of something new?” (p. 282)
- “... what are Western moral values if not Judeo-Christian values, values that were born in the deserts of the Middle East and to which Muslims subscribe?” (p. 282)
- “For those who have grown cynical about Christianity, is it not surprising that Algeria is home to a tiny Christian community giving witness to the message of universal love by performing good works and being true friends to Muslims, unto death?” (pp. 282-283)
- In the mid 1970’s President Boumediene had asked Bishop Tessier to teach the Quran to the wives of his ministers. “Was the gesture more of a testimony to Boumediene’s belief in the underlying unity of Muslim and Christian values, sincerely practiced, that in the midst of a campaign of Islamization and Arabization he would entrust the forming of Muslim souls to a Catholic priest, and one from a people who had shown Muslims more contempt than love?” (p. 283)

“One day, those seven monks will be considered saints by Muslims, Christians, and Jews.” (p. 283)

Optional Reading pp. 284-286

Afterword

Kiser does a bit of follow-up in these final pages. The monks' guard, Mohammed had been jailed on suspicion of having helped the monks' kidnapping, but was finally exonerated and released.

Another monk has joined the group still waiting to reestablish the Tibhirine monastery. The reestablishment has been delayed because of an increase in violent attacks in the area.

In June 2000 President Boutflika spoke to the French National Assembly about Abdelkader, the Church in Algeria, the legacy of colonialism, and the importance of international cooperation in fighting terrorism.