

# An Algerian Microcosm: Monks, Muslims, and the Zeal of Bitterness<sup>\*</sup>

by

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The author's book, *The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria* touches many broad subjects: the Benedictine Rule and its relevance to the problems of people living together in a community, the different ways Christians and Muslims live their faith, and the challenges of preserving one's identity and yet being open to change and growth. But there is one overriding question that envelopes the story: how can religion be the cause of both so much good and so much evil in the world? The author finds answers in the wisdom of Saint Benedict, answers that are as relevant today as they were fifteen hundred years ago.

In this story of friendship and sacrifice, of abduction and savagery, the argument is made that the monastic way of life represented by these monks of Tibhirine is a common thread between the Muslim and Christian worlds, one that provides a window into the communal values of Islam and the importance of faith as a defining source of identity. Religion, a source of terrible conflict when lived in an exclusionist way and fueled by anger and hatred, is also the source of hope and healing when lived in the spirit of brotherly love and service to an inclusive God. The monks' experience, and more broadly the French experience in Algeria, gives hope to the unifying force of faith when lived sincerely and with purity of heart. Islam, warts and all, deserves to be considered as much a part of the Western tradition as Judaism and Christianity. And it has the power to heal itself, as evidenced in Algeria.

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<sup>\*</sup>This article is based on a talk given by the author in January 2003 at the Alliance Française in Washington, D.C., to a mixed audience of Alliance members, Algerians and Europeans, and representatives of the United States intelligence community. Asked to talk about his book, *The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria*, he spoke relating this dramatic story of love and horror to the turmoil within the Arab/Muslim world and to an American response that could benefit from the French experience in Algeria.

Introduction

There is a model used by thinkers in the Departments of Defense and State to plan movements on the diplomatic and military chessboards. It is called the *rational decision-maker* model, in which only national interests and power politics are assumed to drive international behavior. Religion as a dimension of rational decision-making is absent. In all likelihood, this is part of our legacy from eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers, mostly Frenchmen who argued that religion belonged to a pre-scientific era of superstition, hobgoblins, and irrational forces in need of appeasement. With the march of time, certain of these enlightened people argued, science, technology, and unaided human reason all working together would promote human progress. Religion would simply become irrelevant, or, as the Marxists predicted, wither away.

Obviously, religion has not withered away, nor is it likely ever to wither away so long as human beings have an urge to look for deeper meaning in their lives than seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, or want answers that go beyond molecular motion, and so long as malleable reason needs to be reinforced by higher authority. Every parent knows the importance of that divine-like injunction essential for raising children, "Because I said so!"

It is curious, indeed, that the United States, the supposed archetypical scientific-technological-materialistic modern society and now standard-bearer in the fight against political religious fanaticism in the Islamic world, is itself a hotbed of religious ferment and awakening, particularly among the more evangelical Protestant sects. And, as in many Muslim countries, the United States establishment is facing moral challenges from an aggrieved but politically active Christian minority—challenges to a culture perceived as self-absorbed, violent, promiscuous, materialistic, anti-family, anti-life, and anti-Christian. Anyone who doubts this or who wants an exposure to *political Christianity* need only tune in to Christian radio stations. Their messages are a goad and a thorn. One doesn't have to be a born-again Christian to agree with much of the critique. It is the tone that bothers people like me. They would want me to believe that only Christians have the answer.

So I am going to talk unabashedly about religion. For one reason, the book I have written is about Muslims and Christians whose identities are defined by their faith, a faith they are willing to die for. Second, I do not believe America or any other country in the world can address conflicts in the Muslim world without a deep understanding of, and empathy for, the tremendous role of faith in the lives of Muslims throughout the world. Islam is their flag, their home, and their source of moral and social values.

One of the great paradoxes of organized religion is its tremendous power to do good as well as evil in poor God's name. One of my motives for writing the *Monks of Tibhirine* was my desire to get inside the world of these monks, who won my admiration by the way they lived their Christianity—one that was a truly universal, unconditional brotherly love. I thought their story might also provide a window through which to view the different kinds of Islam in Algeria

and, by extension, the Muslim world. When one has identified with one religion, I believe one can identify to some degree with all religions and better understand the challenge of living one's faith properly and, yes, know what "properly" means. I found many good answers in the Rule of a fifth-century monk named Saint Benedict.

Finally, by way of establishing a framework for the discussion, I would posit a division of the world that I believe is more important in the long run than the now fashionable and misleading opposition of the Western world and Islam. That is the division between those who believe that the purpose of life is to prepare them for the next world and those who believe notions of a life after death are ridiculous. George Orwell once said that the greatest loss of the twentieth century would be the loss in the belief in the immortality of the soul. There is, of course, a third group: those who are not sure but believe it is prudent to act as if there were a sequel in the invisible realm.

Among the believers and nonbelievers, I posit a further division that plays an important role in questions of war and peace: the division between the *big God* and *small God* believers. This distinction became official when Pope John XXIII guided the Catholic Church to a great and still contested discovery during the conciliar process known as Vatican II. The council documents made a revolutionary declaration (for Christians): the Kingdom of God is bigger than the Church. This thought is still considered heresy among ultra-traditionalist Catholics and among many Protestant denominations. With Vatican II, the Catholic Church accepted that God can be loved in different ways and that salvation is ultimately a mystery.

God is greater than the Church. Muslims simply say, "God is greater." Greater than what? Whatever we may think God is, God is greater, because we are his creatures, limited and finite, and God is infinite in every way. And so now I can reveal to you my own religious orientation. Without being a Catholic myself, mine is a Vatican II spiritual worldview. Mine is also a Muslim worldview as expressed by the Emir Abdelkader, the Algerian "George Washington," holy warrior, Sufi mystic poet, and statesman, who gave the French ulcers for fifteen years as they decided whether and how to colonize Algeria. It is a view cited often and approvingly by Catholics in Algeria who are familiar with Abdelkader's spiritual writings.

His words are important because he is still revered throughout most of the Arab world. I believe (as an act of faith, not as the result of a scientific poll) that his bigness of spirit corresponds to the majority of Muslims today, even though in his time he was a ferocious anti-Christian crusader. Like many Muslims, his problem really was not with Christianity but with Christians who failed to act like Christians. In the end, Abdelkader became a respected world figure because of his Islam, an Islam that required him to save the lives of eight to ten thousand Europeans who were being massacred in Damascus by other Muslims at a time when he was living there in exile. In his *Spiritual Writings* Abdelkader writes:

If you think God is what the different communities believe—  
Muslims, Jews, Christians, polytheists, and others—he is that,

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but also more. . . . None of his creatures worships Him in his entirety. No one is an infidel in all the ways of relating to God. No one knows all God's facets. Each of his creatures worships and knows Him in certain ways and is ignorant of Him in others. Error does not exist in this world except in a relative manner.

In opposition to the "God is greater" believers, there are the "God is smaller" believers, the pre-Vatican II exclusionists who exist in all the Abrahamic faiths. Their house of God is small, with only one door and one key. Their concept of truth is too small to allow others to possess a share of the same truth, expressed differently. Sheik Alawi, a twentieth-century Sufi master and founder of the Alawine brotherhood in Mostaganem, Algeria, responded to his Muslim critics with words that might apply to the "God is smaller" believers everywhere: "Islam, which has no priesthood per se, has a large number of very limited individuals who imagine that the whole religion is within their grasp and that anything outside the scope of their meager understanding is outside the pale of Islam itself."

The *Monks of Tibhirine* is among other things a story of the struggle between *big God* versus *small God* Christians and *big God* versus *small God* Muslims. It is ultimately about community and how community can be defined so one can maintain a sense of identity and particularity and yet be open to change and growth. The monks of Tibhirine faced this challenge just as Muslims face it today. Although the story of the monks itself has a sad ending, one that has still not been definitively written because of lingering questions, it was for me ultimately a hopeful story for the future of Christian-Muslim relations. So the balance of my remarks is intended to explain why.

### *Historical Background*

What, you might ask, are Trappist monks still doing in Algeria, a Muslim country, many decades after independence and with no Christian community to speak of? The answer is largely found in the person of a *God is greater* French bishop named Léon-Étienne Duval, who was appointed to the diocese of Algiers in 1954. Because of him, a genuinely universal form of Christianity stamped the church in Algeria, one that persists today. It has created a bond of mutual respect since 1962 that embraces the overwhelming majority of Algerians, including many of the terrorists themselves.

Duval was a moral giant during the seven-year war, known in France at the time simply as *the events*. By insisting on the duty of Christians to respect the dignity of all God's children, he split the Church. The *Algérie Française* nationalist Christians believed that their highest duty as Christians was to serve France and by serving France serve the cause of Christian civilization, modernity, and enlightenment, values threatened by the forces of darkness,

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represented by the twin evils of Godless communism and a degenerate Islam. Those who followed the message of Duval believed their highest loyalty was not to France but to the message of the Gospels. He was a unifier, not a separator.

Duval's investiture as bishop at Sacré Coeur in Algiers in February 1954 made him titular head of the Christian community of French Algeria. His sermon sent shock waves to those hoping for comfort. Duval's sermon was a warning:

Muslims and Jews know that our Christianity requires us to love them, too. To love God means to love all God's children as brothers. Muslims and Jews know that when we do not follow these demands we betray our ideal as Christians. A Catholic bishop must be a bishop for all the people; otherwise he is only the head of a sect.<sup>1</sup>

Duval was vilified by many of the *ped noirs*<sup>2</sup> and the adherents of *l'Algérie Française* for whom "brotherly love" and "justice for all" was not in their catechism if it meant Arabs or Muslims. His enemies called him "Mohammed" Duval. The doors to his churches were smeared with excrement and his life threatened. Yet much of the clergy stood with him, including the monks at Tibhirine, who lived in the middle of a "hot zone," south of Algiers.

Unlike the fields belonging to the French farmers around them, the monks never had their crops burned by the fellaghas. When the French army dropped napalm on the villages in the mountains across the valley, the monks took in some of the fleeing families and gave them shelter in unused buildings. Later, they hired some of the men to work in the fields. Slowly a village grew up around the monastery that became Tibhirine.

The Catholic Church in Algeria today is very much in Duval's image. After independence, many of the clergy who had sympathized with the FLN (National Liberation Front) cause stayed on to help rebuild the country. Some, including Duval, were given Algerian citizenship. In the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies, the Church was an important partner in building a new Algeria—it ran schools and hospitals and old age homes and cared for the deaf. The Catholic schools were particularly popular with Muslims because of the high teaching standards and good moral instruction. Duval constantly had to remind visitors from France, concerned about the dwindling number of baptized in his flock, that winning souls was not the Church's goal in a Muslim country. Nor would it act like a multinational corporation and simply scoot in the face of adversity.

The monks who had been in the Medea since 1938 were part of an order whose presence in Algeria goes back to 1847. Unlike the Algerian church after 1962, the monks and other orders were brought to Algeria in the nineteenth century with a premeditated, political agenda. The natives were mystified at

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<sup>1</sup>Marie-Christine Ray, *Le Cardinal Duval* (Paris: Cerf, 1998) 62.

<sup>2</sup>An expression for the European colonists who came to Algeria, thought to derive from the black army-issue boots they wore.

first by the godless French. Their soldiers didn't pray. Where were their holy men and places of worship, they wondered? What kind of barbarian ingrates are a people who don't recognize their creator?

Bringing monks to Algeria was aimed at winning more respect in the eyes of the Arabs. Yet the Trappists' first monastery was built on the plain of Staouéli, outside Algiers, where the French won their first victory over the Turks in 1830. Cannonballs were symbolically laid in the foundation. The arrival of the monks was part of a tripartite French strategy for dominating its new colony, summed up in the motto *The sword, the plow, and the cross*. The sword was to subdue and dominate, the plow to cultivate the earth and sink roots, the cross to uplift and civilize, even if it had to be by uncivilized means.

Despite all the good done by the church—feeding the poor during famines, running orphanages, medical clinics, and schools both before and after independence—the cross remains part of a bad memory associated with contempt for and suppression of the Arab language and people. Institutionally, it has a sweet and sour taste. For those younger, more radicalized elements who have never had personal contact with a father, crosses, churches, and other symbols of Christianity can be viewed as a provocation. For some, they are a reminder of the arrogant and painful triumphalism of the past, symbolized by the statue of Cardinal Lavigerie in Algiers, whose right arm, triumphantly thrusting forward a cross, was sawed off after independence.

After the mysterious stabbing to death of his vicar in 1976, Duval urged his clergy not to wear their clerical habits publicly or to display their crucifixes ostentatiously. Churches in Algiers stopped ringing church bells. One community that ignored this admonition was the monastery of Notre Dame of the Atlas at Tibhirine.

The monks rang their bells with normal regularity of the Divine Offices seven times a day beginning at 4:00 A.M. until Compline at 8:00 P.M. No one in the ultra-conservative area of the Medea ever complained about the bells or the brothers who appeared in the marketplaces wearing their habits. The monks were holy fathers who lived like good Muslims.

Indeed, the affinity of the monks and Muslims was natural from the beginning. An Algerian in his long, hooded robe, or *abaya*, is virtually indistinguishable from a monk in his white prayer cowl. Both monk and Muslim pray communally and with formalistic regularity. Like the natives they lived with, the monks existed only as a part of an extended family; alone one is nothing. Their brothers and sisters have survived collectively for nine hundred years through solidarity of monastery, order, and church. The architecture of the cloister was one of interiorized space. Like the veil and the Algerian *gourbi* (mud houses common in the countryside) with its inner courtyard, monasteries present to the world a protective exterior that shelters an inner privacy. Both worlds separate men and women in places of worship and everyday life. (Before Vatican II women could not go into the chapel or accompany their husbands to the guesthouse). And, like the Trappists, the traditional Muslim,

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whether Berber or Arab, places great importance on the virtue of hospitality. Indeed, it is a sacred duty.

### *Story Overview*

Let me say a few words about the story itself and its main character, Christian de Chergé. This third son of an old aristocratic family with a tradition of military service had a special calling of joining hands and hearts with Muslims in seeking to know God.

He was marked from birth with a vocation to serve God, much influenced by a devout mother. As a youth he was chivalrous, engaging, intense, competitive in school, and always graduating first with honors. While in seminary in Paris, his studies were interrupted by the requirement to perform his military service in Algeria in 1959.

There his religious calling was marked by a powerful experience. His life was saved by a Muslim policeman, Mohammed. Christian had been assigned to an internment camp where his job was to befriend important local community leaders who were under French protection and make them “feel French.” This older Arab man intervened one day to convince the fellaghas not to kill his French friend, with whom he was walking in the countryside, where they often talked about God. The terrorists spared the French soldier. The next day, Mohammed, a father of twelve children, was found near his home with his throat slit. For Christian, the policeman’s act was a gift of love freely given, a sign that the spirit of Jesus Christ is in all people.

So there was the drama of Christian wanting to become a Trappist monk in Algeria, the shock and dismay that decision caused his family and friends, and the drama of his insertion, in 1971, into a community of older monks not as imbued with the Vatican II ecumenical fervor as Christian. His new brothers were also intimidated by his education, intelligence, energetic enthusiasm for all things Arab and were nervous about where his Arabophilia might lead. Yet in the end Christian won the support and confidence of superiors who trusted his good judgment. In 1984 he was elected superior of his small community of eleven brothers and re-elected in 1990.

Christian’s personality was marked by several notable qualities. He was an intellectual who trusted more in truths of the heart than the head. He thought intellectual sparring divided people. A handshake, sharing a glass of water or a piece of bread, he said, did more than tomes to bring people together. *Il jugeait sur pièce*—he only judged specific acts, not people or governments as a whole. He refused to generalize condemnation. Christian would say that an action was unhelpful or that a certain decision was not good. He believed that people could change under the right influences. He was an optimist, and some said naïve. He always looked for the good and would not dignify evil by giving it more attention than it deserved.

Central to his faith was the conviction that the image of God is in all his creatures and that all labels dehumanize. Like a doctor who takes the Hippocratic oath, he knew Christians were charged to keep their hearts open to love all people, especially the least loveable. Hence the combatants in the conflict that raged around them remained brothers. Had not Christ told his disciples that to love only those who love you is not much of an accomplishment? Even the despicable tax collectors could do that. So he called the army the *brothers of plain* and the terrorists the *brothers of mountain*. He was a man of prayer who prayed to disarm the other, but also to disarm himself of those feelings of violence and racism deep in all of us. Not only guns can kill, but also words and attitudes. Christian believed religion was useless or worse if it did not help people to live together.

The kidnapping of seven monks in March 1996 was the culmination of a parallel political story about the rise of the GIA (Armed Islamic Group) as the most mediagenic and bloodthirsty of the armed opposition. The story is placed in the context of post-independence Algerian politics that started with the bloody riots of October 1988, which led to a new constitution in 1989 and the first multiparty elections since independence. The first ones were held at the municipal level in 1990. The result was an overwhelming victory for the Islamist FIS party (Islamic Salvation Front) and left the FLN (National Liberation Front) establishment in shock. A year later, national parliamentary elections were scheduled for December 1991. After the first round of votes, when it looked as if the FIS (which won a plurality, but not absolute majority) would win in the second round scheduled for January 11, the elections were abruptly cancelled. President Chadli resigned, and Mohammed Boudiaf was brought back from exile to be president of an interim High Council of State.

In October of 1993, a year after widespread armed opposition began, the GIA (Armed Islamic Group) announced that foreigners had a month to leave Algeria or be held responsible for their own death. The monks, along with all other foreigners and religious, were faced with the decision to stay or leave. The French government advised all its citizens to leave Algeria, but the religious were always told by their bishops that the decision was theirs alone.

The story of Christian, the Islamophile, the tensions his spiritual mission created with his family and fellow monks who were indifferent to his special calling, wound down to a form of mutual acceptance and confidence. Christian's personal struggle was superseded by the story of the monks choosing to share in the insecurity of their Muslim neighbors with whom they had developed a bond of dependence and friendship.

That terror became tangible in mid-December 1993 when twelve Croat technicians working on a hydroelectric project a few kilometers across the valley from the monastery were slaughtered by a group commanded by the local GIA emir, Saya Attia. The monks themselves were terrorized a few weeks later, on Christmas Eve, when six members of the same group of terrorists broke into the monastery after Vespers. They had three demands. They wanted money,



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medical supplies, and the eighty-year-old Brother Luc to go with them to care for their wounded in the mountains.

Christian calmly but firmly refused. He knew how to be firm without being belligerent. The confrontation ended with Attia apologizing to Christian for disturbing the monks on the eve of their celebration of the birth of the Prince of Peace. When Attia left the monastery that night, he promised to send a representative back the next day to repeat his demands. Though the representative never came, the monks lived in constant fear of a return visit.

The sequel to the terrifying appearance of "Father Christmas," as Attia was called by one of the monks, traces how the community of brothers coalesced as one body in Jesus Christ. With this extraordinary sense of solidarity among the brothers came an equally strong sense of being part of an extended family with the villagers. As one monk described it, they developed a kind of maternal love toward the villagers, who not only wanted the monks to stay but who feared their departure. If the monks left, they believed, there was no hope at all for the future. Every six months afterward, the monks voted to renew their decision to stay at Tibhirine.

So the monks chose to live in the shadow of death for almost three years—with frequent grisly reports of heads on the market square benches and women's hands found on the street, in addition to the killings in other cities of foreigners of all stripes, including Marist priests, White Fathers, and Augustinian sisters. Throughout this period, Tibhirine itself remained untouched by the violence. Neither villager nor monk was harmed for two and a half years after the Christmas visit of 1993. It was widely believed and reported that Attia had given the monks his *aman*, 'protection'. The local Algerians, and some of the monks, were convinced their protection came from living under the shadow of Lalla Miriem, the Virgin Mary, whose statue stood on top of the mountain overlooking the monastery. For Muslims, she is the holy Virgin Mother, helper of all mothers, who, by a miraculous birth, gave the world a sinless prophet of God.

### *Convergence*

I would like now to talk about why monks are important, especially monks in the Cistercian/Trappist tradition with their strict observance of the Benedictine Rule. They are important, I believe, for two reasons: 1) In an era when, like it or not, Marshall McLuhan's predicted Global Village has indeed become a reality, the monks have something to tell all people about the art of living together in a community; 2) They are a Western window into the Muslim soul.

As to the art of living together, the Trappist monastery is a kind of microcosm. The monastery is their world. It is a place where very different people are married for life to a specific community. They strive each day to live in peace and harmony with each other as they engage in the regular rhythms of

prayer and manual labor—*ora et labora*. The brothers or sisters take a vow of stability. This means they stay put in their chosen monastery for life. Moreover, they live according to a very detailed set of divine prescriptions contained in scripture, much like the military, except they have no leave. They come from all walks of life, have different levels of education, and may be of different races and nationalities. The only common requirements are sincerity of purpose and maturity of spirit. They share a desire to love God as part of a stable community of brothers or sisters.

Their monasteries—“schools of service to God” according to their forerunner Saint Benedict—are for people called to love God in a certain way, no better than others, no worse. They are for those called to serve God by practicing mutual love, achieved by freeing themselves of the unruly passions of the ego, and by following the example of their Lord and Master. Just as the Prophet Mohammed is a model of behavior for Muslims, so the life of Jesus is the model for Christians.

To serve God, they practice obedience, humility, and charity, forsaking all worldly possessions. They practice obedience to their superior and to each other. Obedience develops humility. And without humility there can be no love. Monks practice love toward those outside the cloister by following Christ’s command to be hospitable to the stranger. This hospitality is provided by the maintenance of a guesthouse open to all who come in the spirit of good will and seek spiritual refreshment. To develop the right orientation of the heart and become a worthy vessel for doing God’s will, monks continually seek to rid themselves of pride, envy, greed, anger, hatred, and other impediments to community life.

Monks know where the “axis of evil” lies—it lies within each of us. As scripture reminds us, one cannot say he loves God and hate his neighbor. Or, as the Prophet said, one cannot change one’s lot without first changing one’s heart.

Monks and devout Muslims are natural brothers. The Koran says, “The closest to the faithful are monks and priests, because they are without pride.” Both monks and practicing Muslims live in a God-filled world, one that emphasizes communal relations, is hierarchical and focused on self-renewal, or at least self-control, through obedience, humility, and charity. The five pillars of Islam are all practiced in their own way by the monks: they love one God, engage in regular prayer, fast, practice charity toward others, and indirectly take part in pilgrimage through hospitality. As the Abbot General of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance, Dom Bernardo Olivera, an Argentinean, said after visiting Tibhirine, “We both sing the same song, only in a different key.”

If Christianity is considered part of the Western tradition, and surely it is, even though some secular fanatics wish it were not, and if desert monasticism has a place at the heart of the Christian tradition, then I believe it is logical and necessary to argue that Islam is every bit as Western as Christianity and Judaism. Indeed, the moral, ethical, and theological cores of all three come out of revelations that took place in the Middle East.

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All claim a common ancestor in Abraham, whom the Koran calls the first Muslim. Indeed, in the tradition of *big Islam*, Abdelkader's Islam, Christians, Jews and all believers everywhere who seek to do the will of the Creator are Muslim. A Muslim is one who submits. That is the reason Christian de Chergé provoked his fellow abbots at a triennial meeting in Spain when he called Jesus Christ the only "perfect Muslim." Why? Because Jesus was sinless and was sent into the world to do the will of his Father. He gave his disciples the Lord's Prayer: "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." This prayer is completely Muslim in spirit. It is what Muslims want—to have God's will done on earth as well as heaven, because only by following God's ordinances will people build a just and harmonious society. Christians in the past have believed the same. Some still do. But Islam, like Christianity, is clearly not of the utilitarian, individualistic, *laissez faire*, "greed is good" Western tradition of Adam Smith or Jeremy Bentham.

No, Islam is more akin to the Calvinist, New England Puritan, Methodist, and Victorian strands of the Western tradition, which may be only temporarily out of fashion. Yet even today in America, these God-filled cultures continue in small communities such as the Hutterites of Montana and Amish, and Mennonites scattered throughout Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Ohio. Islam (Sunni branch) very much parallels the Protestant tradition of the priesthood of all believers. That is why there are "as many Islams as there are varieties of couscous," as a Moroccan friend told me. It is also why many Magrebins in France have been known to lament the absence of a Pope in the Islamic world.

I would carry the argument a step further and suggest that the best in the Western tradition is really an Eastern ethic (Judaism, Christianity, Islam). The sanctity of each individual life is derived from the belief that we are all made in the image of God. Our most fundamental moral obligations to look after the poor, the orphans, and the widows—in other words, the weak and the vulnerable—are ethical precepts of all the Abrahamic faiths, born in the deserts of the East and underlying the best in our Western civilization. Sadly, what may be more authentically Western are the horrible bastardizations of these ethics—the twentieth-century secular monsters of Marxism and Fascism, born in rationally enlightened, godless, Western minds. Whatever the past and current horrors committed in the name of God by Christians and Muslims, they still pale before those committed in the name of secular ideology, by the likes of Hitler and Stalin, and some would say the United States. (Gertrude Anscomb, the great British Catholic philosopher, would not attend a ceremony at Cambridge honoring President Harry Truman, a man whom she regarded as having "a couple of massacres to his credit." American Indians and blacks can talk volumes about the tyranny of the majority, a problem foreseen by James Madison.)

Monks and practicing Muslims still take service to God seriously, even if imperfectly, and sometimes with twisted ungodly results. This is where Saint Benedict reveals his timeless wisdom about the causes of ungodly misconduct among professedly godly people.

The constitution the Trappists live by is the Benedictine Rule. The Rule has seventy-three chapters governing everything from how and when to pray, what to eat, how to sleep, the seven degrees of humility, and how an abbot should greet guests. Chapter 1 of the Rule and chapter 72 are particularly important for understanding religious violence today. In each, Benedict gives reasons why monks go off the rails.

In chapter one, he talks of the anchorites (hermits), the cenobites (those who live in a disciplined community), gyrovagues (wanderers with no community, given over to pleasure), and sarabites. The most detestable are the sarabites:

With no experience to guide them, no rule to try them as gold is tried in a furnace, [they] have a character as soft as lead. . . . [Living] without a shepherd, . . . their law is what they like to do, whatever strikes their fancy. Anything they believe in and choose, they call holy; anything they dislike, they consider forbidden.<sup>3</sup>

Saint Benedict described a widespread disease that afflicts not only religious people. It is called *à la carte* reading of texts, picking out verses one likes and ignoring contrary verses, contexts, and complexities of interpretation. All kinds of people do this when they are seeking to justify a pre-existing position, as opposed to wrestling sincerely with contradictions and ambiguities in pursuit of the truth.

Then, in chapter 72 of the Rule, Saint Benedict strikes at the all-important matter of the disposition of the heart. It is a warning more than a rule: "Just as there is a wicked zeal of bitterness which separates from God and leads to hell, so there is a good zeal which separates from evil and leads to God and everlasting life."<sup>4</sup> This good zeal, he goes on, the monks must foster with fervent love by showing respect for the other, being patient toward the other's weaknesses, and by competing in obedience to one another.

The zeal of bitterness. Does anyone doubt that most forms of violence are rooted in the multiple faces of bitterness—anger, rage, and hatred? The most fervent prayer of the doctor monk, Brother Luc, was, "Please God, don't let me die with hatred in my heart."

Behind terrorism of all kinds, the zeal of bitterness is invariably eating away at someone's spirit. Whether Muslim terrorists, Jewish terrorists, Columbine killers, Timothy McVeighs, or John Mohammeds (the Washington, D.C. accused sniper), there is inevitably rage of some kind fueling the actions, a rage that breaks the boundaries of self-control. The terrorism done in the name of Islam I view as a cultural rage that is expressed in Islamic idiom because that is the only idiom that Muslims know. Their values, their faith, their well-being have been bumped, bruised, and bashed by all kinds of forces from within and

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<sup>3</sup>RB 1.6–9; RB 1980: *The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1981) 169–71.

<sup>4</sup>RB 72.1–2; RB 1980 293.

from without. For the vast majority, their faith is their moral compass, which aids in containing the rage or limiting the targets of that rage.

But because of Gresham's Law, as it applies to news—bad news drives out good—we read only about the violent excesses of Islam. One hardly ever reads about all the Algerian *imams* and non-violent Islamists who are murdered because of their refusal to condone violence against innocents done in the name of Islam. There is the example of Sheik Mohammed Bouslimani, an extremely popular and respected religious leader who lived in Blida, a town not far from Tibhirine:

- After national elections were cancelled in 1992, and various armed opposition groups were formed from elements within the banned FIS, the Hamas party of Sheik Nahnah rejected the use of violence. As a member of the pacific branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, his Islam was militantly non-violent. His party was for a society based on Islamic values, democracy, and free choice. Its path for change was that of slower peaceful methods of *dawa*—teaching, moral exhortation, example, and good works to achieve an Islamic society. The president of Hamas's parallel charitable association, Irshad al-Islah, was a close boyhood friend of sheik Nahnah-Mohammed Bouslimani. Bouslimani was a widely respected savant of Islamic law and international activist known for his organizing abilities. In November 1993, he was kidnapped from his home one morning by the GIA. The local GIA emir wanted him to issue a *fatwa* justifying the killing of civilians who supported the Taghout—the evil, oppressive government that they were trying to overthrow. Bouslimani refused steadfastly over a period of two months to condone murder.
- Police reports from GIA captives indicated that Bouslimani's religious knowledge so greatly exceeded that of his captors that he made them doubt the correctness of their Islam. If they were not fighting according to true Islam, then they would not go to heaven—with fresh water and many virgins to love—but to hell, where they would drink boiling water and putrefied blood. The true *moujihaddeen* want to believe they are doing God's will. To be persuaded by a savant that they have been misled by self-educated leaders with only partial knowledge of the Koran and the Tradition, and that they are actually doing evil instead of good, can have a powerful impact on someone concerned for the fate of his soul. It can be a reason for laying down arms or abandoning a specific emir in favor of a more morally correct fighter for justice.
- In the story of Bouslimani and his debates with his captors, we see the importance of sound religious knowledge and the belief in the immortality of the soul that Orwell talked about: The desire of God-fearing Muslims to do right, in order to go to heaven; yes, even the terrorists. Certainly in Algeria there is much evidence that terrorists fighting the Evil One also worry about the fate of their souls. My conversations with members of British counter terrorism units revealed that they have intercepts of Algerian

security forces trying to “disarm” *mujihadeen* by arguing with them over the correct interpretation of the Law.

Without recognizing that there are Islamists who want to change their societies for the better peacefully based on Islamic principles—which parallel Judeo-Christian ethical principles—the United States runs the danger of falling into a terrible trap of fueling the violence it is trying to contain.

Is it not possible that Islam has within its communities enough moral vigor and health to correct and combat the excesses done in its name that befoul and diminish their faith? The Algerian experience gives some hope that this could be the case in other parts of the Muslim world wracked by violence.

But let us look first at the Islamic zeal of bitterness, as seen through the window of the Algerian civil war of the 1990s, when all Algeria was gripped by fear. Algeria was full of bitterness and anger. There was anger expressed non-violently or perhaps transformed into non-violent activity (Bouslimani), and there was anger that broke out into violence. But the violence also had its categories: there was Islamically correct violence (AIS, or Islamic Salvation Army) that limited its targets to combatants (police, security forces, and agents of the government itself), and Islamically incorrect violence (GIA, or Armed Islamic Group) that was without limits and was financed with drug money, did not care for the widows of the dead *mujahideen*, or engaged in rape and torture.

Whence the anger? There were many sources, but I will name two because they are widespread in the Islamic world.

First, there was bad governance. Let Imam Ali Ben Hadj (and later vice-president of FIS) explain, as he was the most articulate spokesman for the disenfranchised youth of Algiers in the 1980’s and ‘90s:

Our so-called leaders speak of socialism and equality . . . of being “by the people” and “for the people.” But they are rich and you are poor. We believe in God and his apostle, not their fairy tales and nonsense. Our leaders have governed so long with lies, they don’t know anymore where the sun rises, their children’s names, or the color of the sky. They are so lost in the vomit of their deceptions. They think they have fooled us. . . . They are like the French before them. They believe God can be separated from life, visited perhaps once a week in a mosque. They have adopted the so-called Enlightenment thinking of the French, which is at root Greek—an insolent idea that man is the measure of all things. Everything comes from God. Secular thinking separates man’s spirit from God. Islam teaches that it is man’s duty to be humble and to serve God in accordance with his commandments. The jihad of

1954 must continue. Those who died for Islam thirty years ago were betrayed.<sup>5</sup>

The list of grievances included disappointed expectations of the educated, the young post-war generation, economic mismanagement based on too much dependence on oil and a Soviet development model, cronyism, arbitrary justice, police brutality, corruption, inequality of opportunity, and a government that still smelled too French and colonial for the Islamist opposition.

Second, there was the often-overlooked explosive fuel of personal desire to avenge harm done to others. In Algeria, it came from many sources: brutal treatment of friends and relatives or oneself at the hands of security forces, and post-October 1988 anger over the killings of youth in the streets of Algiers by the army. Empathy. Like Americans after 9/11, Muslims also suffer for fellow Muslims killed either by “apostate” Muslims, American bombs, or Israeli tanks.

Like individuals, all countries are different. And they are all the same. I believe that Algeria and, within some limits, the French experience in Algeria past and present offers a microcosm of what the United States is facing today vis-à-vis much of the Islamic world, especially vis-à-vis the Middle East.

What does Algeria have that is shared with other countries? Multiple wars.

There is a civil war that is political, religious, cultural, and economic, and the West is caught up in it—France, in this case, mainly because of its past and the continued support it gives to the Algerian government. As President Bush has enunciated, “the friend of my enemy is my enemy.” *And there is an international war.* The majority of the terrorists still making trouble in Algeria are the GIA remnants, and the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat, both part of the Islamic International. Those are the new *moujehadeen* who share goals enunciated by Osama Bin Laden in 1996. They are three-fold: to get France out of Algeria physically and spiritually (the United States out of Middle East), to fight corrupt, hypocritical, apostate Muslim governments, and to replace the nation state, which has become a false and destructive idol, with the transnational *umma*, a kind of Christendom of old, but with separate rights for different religious communities as the Ottoman Turks allowed. The source of anger toward the United States is similar: the friend of my enemy is my enemy.

Though the Algerian government is still facing a mountain of domestic economic and political problems, it has succeeded in curtailing the extreme violence that ravaged the country in the mid-1990s. There are lessons here as well in the government’s relative success, although Algeria also remains the nightmare that other Arab countries want to avoid. Looking back, the “success” can be attributed to several things: The terrorists lost the initial support of the population by befouling Islam through its ruthless total war tactics, the Algerian security forces got much better at fighting the terrorists and benefited from

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<sup>5</sup>M. Al-Ahnaf, B Botiveau, F Fregosi, *L’Algérie par les Islamistes* (Paris: Kartala, 1991) 85–91; and Pierre Guillard, *Ce flueve qui nous sépare* (Paris: Loysel, 1994) 25–28.

discreet military aid, and they did it without a heavy-handed foreign, that is, French, presence, even after France itself became the target of terrorist attacks in 1995. France was attacked by the GIA for the same reason al Qaeda attacked the United States: the friend of my enemy is my enemy.<sup>6</sup>

### *Meaning for the Future?*

What is there in the French experience that might be useful to reflect on? Some Americans probably would say nothing, just as they said after Dienbienphu, and before America got deeply into Viet Nam. “France is small and effete and they can’t fight anymore,” it was said then. “America is big and strong and the world’s only superpower. The French experience is irrelevant.”

As the Bible says, pride goes before the fall. When one is on top, the danger is greatest, for there is only one direction to go. Many American voices today sound the way French voices did in the mid-nineteenth century. Then, the French were still basking in their Napoleonic glory and their humiliation at Sedan by Prussian armies had yet to come. Its armies and colonists believed that France represented everything that was best in the world—the highest expression of European civilization, the best armies, the liberator of Europe from feudalism, articulator of the Universal Rights of Man, Christian and Cartesian at the same time, technical, logical, progressive bearer of the Christian and later Republican values. In Algeria, France was simply extending the obvious blessings of its civilization. All the native Muslims had to do was give up their backward faith and habits.

This kind of arrogant superiority and widespread contempt for the local population infected much that was genuinely well meaning and beneficial in what France had to offer. Arabs could clearly see the technical superiority of France in warfare, health care, and civil engineering. So today, most Muslims respect what America (and the West) has accomplished economically and admire many of its successes.

But the colonial mentality is still a colonial mentality. That is when one side says we know better, we *are* better, our way of life is superior to yours. Ultimately, it was that contempt that made genuine coexistence impossible. The subjugation of Algeria did not really end in 1847 when Emir Abdelkader surrendered to France after leading a fifteen-year jihad. His submission was just one of many truces that ultimately led to the final uprising on All Saints’ Day, 1954.

So American and Western leaders, whether governmental or NGOs, might well ask themselves if they are not also harboring a more subtle colonial mentality under the guise of building civil society or democracy. Is the smug certainty that we have the answers (capitalism/democracy) any different from that of the self-satisfied Christian missionary of yesteryear determined to

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<sup>6</sup>Adam Robinson, *Bin Laden* (New York: Arcade, 2001) 143; 247.



“uplift” the other? In this nominally Christian country, what revolutionary things might happen if more American leaders practiced a common sense and rational precept that happens to be Gospel: “Do unto others . . .” also means “Put the shoe on the other foot.” Are countries really any different from people? How do Americans react when Europeans criticize our “barbarian” criminal justice system? “Butt out,” was President Bush’s elegant response.

American leaders must learn to interact with the Muslim world in its own idiom. Diplomats are routinely required to speak the language and know the history of the countries they are assigned to. Learning the culture and language of a foreign people is a sign of respecting them enough to make the effort, as well as recognizing that, without that ability, one can only skim the surface of the society. The real language of the Muslim world is not Arabic. It is Islam. If we want to talk to Muslim leaders about reform, change, or morality, we should show them we know their book and argue, if we must, on their terms, as Christian de Chergé did when he encountered Attia.

The Koran is the Muslim constitution; the *Hadiths* (sayings of Mohammed) and *Sunna* (actions attributed to Mohammed), are their case law; the *ulema* their supreme court, the *majlis* their form of consultative, consensual democracy; and the caliph their chief executive. And, yes, the faith, despite all its complexity of interpretation and multiple legal systems, provides the moral compass by which the government (secular authority) should ideally be guided as determined by the ulemas, just as Christianity has been from time to time in the United States (anti-slavery, Social Gospel movement, civil rights, blue laws, anti-alcohol, anti-gambling, divorce, pro-life activists).

Cardinal Duval made a deathbed prediction in 1996, “that one day Algeria will surprise the world.”

Whether Algeria surprises the world or not remains to be seen, but there are things I learned about Algeria that surprised *me* as I did my research, things that constitute more evidence for the unifying and healing role religion can play in the current crisis in Muslim-non Muslim relations:

- 1) During the war of independence, whenever French troops got into difficult situations, they always sent out their chaplains to negotiate with the rebels to extricate themselves.
- 2) Two years after winning independence, the Arab residents of Belcourt, a neighborhood of Algiers where Albert Camus grew up, elected their first representative on the city council. They chose Fr. Jean Scotto, a French catholic priest, much beloved and respected by the population.
- 3) Frenchmen with whom I talked who had nervously visited Algeria in the 1960s, either as tourists or professionally, were routinely amazed at how quickly the Algerians forgave them. “Past is past,” they would say.
- 4) In the mid 1970s, when Algeria was in the middle of its Arabization policies carried out under pressure from the Islamist wing of the FLN, President Boumedienne invited the new Catholic bishop,

Henri Teissier, who was conversant in Arabic, to teach the Koran to the wives of his ministers—a French Catholic and former enemy. What extraordinary good faith was shown by both sides!

- 5) I was told by a French-Algerian journalist that when the Islamist FIS party won the municipal election in Tamannrasset in the deep Sahara in 1990, they appointed a Little Sister of Jesus (Order founded after Charles de Foucauld) to be the city treasurer.
- 6) In 1993, Christian de Chergé faced down the same man who had killed twelve Croats weeks earlier by invoking the law that is common to both Christianity and Islam. The law forbids bringing weapons into houses of worship. He won the respect of the emir, even scolding him for bringing a gun into the monastery guesthouse, then telling him to leave the building he had entered or to leave the gun outside. Before his own death, the emir extended his *aman* to the monastery, which lasted for almost three years. Before leaving the monastery that night, the emir told Christian as they shook hands, “We don’t regard you as foreigners. You are religious people.”

Finally, the murder of the monks and reaction to Christian de Chergé’s testament published in the local newspapers brought forth a flood of letters from ordinary people to Bishop Teissier of Algiers.

One woman wrote:

Does not God test those he loves? No matter what has happened, we truly love you. You are part of us. We have failed in our duty—to protect you, to love you, to love you enough. Forgive us. Your place is with us. Don’t listen to the Pharisees (e.g., Islamists). You must accomplish your divine mission with us. I believe it is God’s plan.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Bishop Teissier's personal archives.

