Charles de Foucauld, Silent witness for Jesus, 'in the face of Islam'

Cardinal Michael Fitsgerald Missionaries of Africa

At a time when there is so much need for understanding among people belonging to different religions, may these studies stimulate that exchange at a deeper level which leads to an experience of harmony, and even of a certain unity. Our conflict-ridden world is longing for this.

'His vocation has always drawn him towards the Muslim world.'1

So wrote Charles de Foucauld's spiritual director and friend, the Abbe Huvelin.2 His scholarly 'successor', Louis Massignon, went further:

'I feel that he was predestined for Islam, that his death was for it [Islam]3.

This attraction towards Islam and the 'Muslim world' undoubtedly begins early in Foucauld's life, from his experience as a young lieutenant of the French army in Algeria and clearly dominates his last fifteen years in that country. It is perhaps more extensive still. Can we add that this relationship was Foucauld's 'destiny', as Massignon 4 implies and certainly thought? And what form did this relationship take? We need to look more closely at Foucauld's life to form a judgement.

At the age of fifteen, Charles lost all faith. Why? Remaining on the intellectual level (of course his emotions were deeply involved), it was certainly due to the natural questioning of an intelligent adolescent in a sceptical and relativistic age (Charles was an ardent reader), but it was also due, most probably, to something more specific. To quote a letter of Charles to an officer acquaintance whose faith was 'shaken':

'Your faith has only been shaken, mine was completely dead for years: for twelve years I lived without any faith: nothing seemed to me to be sufficiently proven; the equal faith with which people follow such different religions seemed to me the condemnation of them all; less than any, the religion of my childhood seemed to me admissible, with its 1=3, that I couldn't bring myself to consider; Islam pleased me a lot, with its simplicity, simplicity of dogma, simplicity of hierarchy, simplicity of morality, but I saw clearly that it was without divine foundation and that the truth was not there; the philosophers are all in disagreement: I remained twelve years without denying anything, without believing anything, in despair of the truth, not even believing in God, as no proof seemed to me evident enough.'5

It is important to see the whole of this key text. Charles suggests that his loss of faith in the Christian revelation of God, while based upon a general rational doubt, was due specifically to the 'challenge' of Islam: if there was a God, God should be 'simple', and not 'Trinitarian'.

Given the context of this letter, Charles is most probably 'foreshortening' the history of his period of non-belief: he is attributing the explicit admiration for Islam of his later years to the time of his adolescent doubting. But Islam was almost certainly one of the several religions to which he refers, and

most probably the religion most present to his mind. For the French colonial presence in Algeria since 1830, and more particularly the well-publicised activities of Cardinal Lavigerie and the newly-founded 'White Fathers' and 'White Sisters' in the early 1870s,6 had brought the 'challenge' of Islam to the fore among the French intelligentsia, whether 'religious' or 'lay' (meaning, then, 'believing' or 'agnostic'). If this 'reading' of Charles' loss of faith experience is correct, it is of considerable significance: it is a sign of the presence of Islam in his life, precisely as challenge.

When Charles recovered his 'childhood faith' (an undeveloped faith, hidden in the womb of his family 'piety'), it was, as he explicitly and repeatedly affirms, through Islam.

'Yes, you are right, Islam produced in me a profound 'over- turning' ('a profound bouleversement') - the sight of this faith, of these souls living in the continual presence of God, made me catch a glimpse of something greater and more true, more real, than earthly occupations: 'ad majora nati sumus' .. .7

This clearly refers to the two years he spent in Algeria as an army officer and particularly to the eighteen months of his exploration of Morocco. In the following letter to the same correspondent, Charles goes further, affirming:

'Islam is extremely seductive: it seduced me to excess.'8

Did Charles 'wish to become a Muslim', as his friend Laperrine wrote in a letter to a fellow officer? He was undoubtedly 'seduced' by the beauty of certain quranic prayers with their classical Arabic cadences and traditional melodies, using them himself both before, and at times after, his conversion. Was this attraction due primarily to that sense of beauty dear to the aesthete, as Hugues Didier, 9 the historian, supposes? To my mind, it almost certainly went well beyond this aesthetic attraction, as we can judge by its consequences. But, as Jean-Francois Six 10 carefully argues, it implied no real voluntary wish to convert to Islam, let alone the wish to make the act of pronouncing the 'Shahada', the act of witness in which Islamic conversion consists. As Charles' lengthy correspondence with Henry de Castries makes clear, when taken as a whole, the key concept for Charles is that of 'adoration':11 adoration as the human response to that 'something

For Charles de Foucauld, like his friend Henry de Castries, had been impressed - marked for life we can say - by the Muslim adoration of God's greatness.

'I saw the ample burnous (hooded cloaks) of my troops bend down together in a superb gesture of ritual prostration, and I heard the repeated invocation, with increasing intensity: Allah akbar!'12

So wrote Henry de Castries at the beginning of a then famous book entitled simply Islam. He was struck by the 'majestic beauty' of this act of homage, with the 'grandiose immensity' of its Saharan background, and by the fact that it was an act of 'men' in the open air (in contrast to the muttered prayer, mainly of women, inside the walls of Christian temples!). Charles had been struck by the same ritual act of homage: an act seen and heard, an act impressing the imagination and stirring the emotions, an act of public witness to 'something greater' than the purely human, for it involved the immediate cessation of

all ordinary human activities in order to witness to the 'beyondness' of God: God is great, or, to be more exact, God is greater.

But while de Castries remains with the visible beauty of the human act of homage, with its appeal to the imagination, and seems unable to get beyond this, Charles is seized, 'seduced', by the beauty of the One to whom the homage is addressed. Hence his constant reference to 'adoration', seen as the 'loss of self, in 'love', in the immensity of the Other.

'Adoration, my dear friend, which is the most complete expression of perfect love, is pre-eminently the human act! Yes, it's our habitual activity as human beings if we act according to our nature and reason!'13Reflecting on his experiences in Morocco, as the writing of his book Reconnaissance au Maroc obliged him to do, and in the context of renewed contact with the family of his discreet but deeply believing cousins in Paris, Charles almost 'naturally' put to himself the question of the 'truth' of that 'something greater' to which the Muslims had alerted him and attracted him.

'I began to pray this strange prayer, "My God, if You exist, make me know You."...'

While reticent to the point of silence on the nature of his sudden conversion in the confessional of the Abbe Huvelin, Charles will constantly recommend this prayer to those of his family and friends who found themselves in his position of doubt. For his prayer is answered, and he discovers the reality of God, a reality so strong that

'immediately I knew there was a God, I realized that I could live only for God'.14

The story is well known, but the key point, hidden by Charles' discretion, is usually missed. Charles discovers the living God not in the silent immensity and solitude of the desert, but in the living presence of the man Jesus, who enlightens his doubts, heals his past and feeds him with the living Bread of Life. For Charles' conversion occurs through his participation in the sacraments of confession and communion, offered, even pressed upon him, to his own surprise (he had only come to ask for information!) and that by an old and sick minister of the Church, in a dark and stuffy church building! His friend Henry de Castries, from a similar starting point, the 'seduction' of Islam, never, it seems, discovered this living 'presence' of Jesus, which became the bedrock foundation of Charles' spirituality.

Did, we may ask, Charles compromise the absolute 'transcendence' of God that he had glimpsed in Islam, and which, as he increasingly discovered, was the one foundation, the one uncompromising and uncompromisable foundation, of Islam? On the contrary, Charles feels called, we can say, to accentuate in his words and life, the 'All' of the 'One' God, that Absolute in face of whom the whole creation is as 'nothing'. Nor does he diminish the real humanity of Jesus; on the contrary he sees Jesus as primarily the 'workman of Nazareth': the 'divine workman', yes, but one who is fully human, 'like us', 'one of us'.15

Charles, therefore, is, as it were, 'caught'. He will never deny the truth and grandeur of the basic Muslim affirmation, 'God is great', and the corresponding natural obligation of all humans to 'adore'. On the contrary, he will declare that the Muslims fail to go far enough:

'Islam has not enough contempt for creatures to be capable of teaching a love of God worthy of God: without chastity and poverty, love and adoration remain very imperfect'.16

But he is internally obliged, by the inner logic of the faith of his conversion experience, to affirm by his life that this transcendent God is the 'God-with-us', who is in person this man Jesus of Nazareth.

This lived faith-experience of the essential relationship between Islam and Christianity, as Charles came to reflect on it and formulate it, underlies his existential relationships with his Muslim neighbours after his return to North Africa as a 'monk'.

Following his conversion (in Paris, 1886, aged twenty-eight), Charles, after three years of search for his personal vocation, became a Trappist monk, going at his own request, a few months after his entry, to a poor and distant foundation in Syria. After seven years he left the Trappists. He felt called to a literal 'imitation' of Jesus' Nazareth life, and spent three years as a 'domestic' with the Poor Clares in Nazareth itself. In both cases he was in close touch with Muslims, a fact of which he was conscious (he regretted, for example, not to have suffered at the hand of the Muslim Turks, in one of the Armenian massacres', 17 along with many of his neighbouring co-religionists), but for the whole of this period the basic thrust of his life was away from human contacts, in the whole-hearted search for God as the one and all-absorbing absolute. Charles, however, was persuaded to accept ordination, which he had long resisted, and his preordination retreats (he was again, for nearly a year, with the Trappists) gave him the urge to return to Algeria with the intention of founding a 'fraternity', as a 'presence' among the local Muslims. This overall intention covers the remaining fifteen years of his life, from 1902 until 1916. It was a complete reversal: the original search for God continues unabated, but Charles now feels called to live this basic thrust in contact, in an increasingly close and consciously chosen contact, with his Muslim neighbours: neighbours to whom he 'went', to whom he felt himself 'sent'.

During this period, Charles normally refers to himself simply as a 'monk'.18 Occasionally he will use the expression 'missionary-monk', meaning 'monk in a missionary situation', but always with the proviso that the role and work of a 'missionary' is not his. Obviously he was an unusual monk, as he humorously remarks! He was alone, he had only his own self-made rule, he was constantly drawn away from any sort of stability or regularity, he spent less and less time in formal prayer, being absorbed in linguistic studies and human contacts ... But, as an agnostic visitor who knew him well, remarked, he was 'in no way the ex-soldier (as many then, and later, imagined), but every inch the monk!' And - a small but significant fact - he absolutely refused to have his linguistic works published under his name: was he not called to be 'a monk, dead to the world'?19

Charles, then, came to Beni Abbes, an Algerian oasis just south of the Atlas mountains and close to the frontier with Morocco. There were gardens, worked by slaves from central Africa, local nomads with property in the oasis and many visiting nomads from further afield, travelling merchants both Muslim and Jewish, and a French military force representing the occupying power. The French soldiers built a

small 'hermitage' for Charles (rebuilt, it is still there), near, but deliberately separate from, the main settlement. It was poor and rough, built of mud bricks and palm branches, with a chapel, a small courtyard and six tiny cells.

Did Charles intend to found a poor but basically traditional Christian monastery, a 'Trappe' in miniature, as some have said? True, there are elements of this; but - as Charles makes clear - the basic inspiration was Islamic! As Charles told his friend, Henry de Castries, it was intended to be a 'a zaouia of prayer and hospitality'.20 Charles had been received in such Muslim zaouias while exploring Morocco, especially by a certain Sidi ben Edris, the grandson of the local 'marabout', Sidi ben Daoud, to whom he had revealed, at the risk of his life, his 'Christian' and 'French' identity, a confidence reciprocated by the handing over to Charles of a secret letter to the 'Ambassador of the French Government'.

A zaouia was a Muslim confraternity for ritual worship and hospitality, often at the centre of the religious and socio-political life of the area.21 Drawing on this Moroccan experience, Charles, now again in an Islamic context with the same cultural background, chose to found a similar zaouia:

'a zaouia of prayer and hospitality, from which will radiate such a "piety" as to spread light and warmth to all the country around'.

The finality and the form are clearly the same. But there is an essential difference. For inside the chapel, above the tabernacle with the sacramental 'presence', is a life-size outline drawing of Jesus with outstretched arms and a symbolic heart, done by Charles himself. The living Jesus, hidden in the tabernacle but forcefully expressed to the view of all in the painted drawing, is put at the 'centre' of this 'Christian' zaouia. And the love that Jesus lived is to be the living motivation of its members' relationships with all who come. Charles' dress and title express this same intention. He wears the Muslim gandourah, but with a red heart-and-cross roughly stitched on it. And he was called, with his approval, the 'Christian marabout', marabout 22 being the normal title of the head of a zaouia.

Is this a case of religious 'inculturation'? Although the concept did not then exist, it could legitimately be seen as an example of unconscious inculturation, inspired by Charles' basic desire of 'imitating' Jesus in his 'Nazareth' life as 'one of us'. This motivation is undoubtedly there; Charles refers to it frequently. But the key point is that the mental movement is the exact opposite of that normally invoked for practising inculturation. Charles does not start from his Christian belief and practice, moving towards an appropriate Muslim adaptation; rather, he begins by reflecting on the truth and value of his Muslim experience (that profound experience which was at the origin of his discovery of an adult faith), and 'completes' that experience with the explicit content and centre of that faith: the living person of Jesus with his radiating Love, a content given in a still more profound experience. In other words, Islam is for him the way to Christ, who becomes its subjective 'fulfilment'. Charles does not consciously reflect on the meaning of this 'movement' in his life (unlike his disciple and successor Louis Massignon), but it seems to penetrate his 'spiritual unconscious' and so to influence all his concrete decisions and actions.

Charles' time in Beni Abbes, between two and three years, is usually seen as marked by his expressed desire to be, and to be seen as, the 'universal brother':

'I want to accustom everyone here, Christian, Muslim, Jew or pagan, to look on me as their brother, as the "universal brother"' (a brother to every one of them); and, 'The building is known as the Khaoua, the "fraternity"'.23

Charles has in mind two quite disparate sources: the French Republic, with its slogan 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity', and the Gospel words, 'You are all brothers' (in his letters, he frequently quotes both 'texts', often in the same passage). The intention, clearly, is to make an initial contact with a person, whoever they be, by respecting that person as an 'other' of 'equal' worth to one's own. As Charles found out, the practice of this 'brother to brother' approach was difficult! - all the more difficult in the colonial context in which both 'sides', the colonized and the colonizers, had strong hierarchical structures. But the interest for us is that this approach provides the 'secular', basis for any form of 'inter-faith' dialogue, while being open to the religious dimension (the notion of 'brotherhood' being common to Islam and Christianity, as indeed to most religions). Charles did not use the vocabulary of secularity (the term then had a connotation of 'a-religious', tending towards the 'ir-religious'), but talked simply of 'meeting' people - and later of 'living with' people - in the context of their everyday life and concerns. The word 'brother' is for him a summons to welcome the other who comes in their 'otherness' and concrete difference, while acknowledging what is 'common'; their humanity. It was, clearly, a solid 'foundation' on which to build a dialogue of minds and spirits: not a dialogue about one's faith (though this was not excluded), but a dialogue of life, starting from the 'bottom up', from the ordinary little things of a shared life.

After two years in Beni Abbes and a year largely of travelling in the southern Sahara, Charles settled in the central Saharan 'hamlet' of Tamanrasset. He was to remain there, except for three visits to France, for the next, and last, eleven years of his life (1905-1916).

Tamanrasset, now a town of some thirty thousand or more inhabitants, was then a scattered collection of 'twenty hearths, in the heart of the Hoggar mountains', the centre for the Dag-Rali, the principal Touareg tribe, and of their chief, Moussa agg Amastan. The Touareg,24 who had recently accepted the French presence, were nomadic warriors, with flocks of sheep, goats and camels, the women having a distinctive but equal role. The noble warriors were followed by three 'lesser' classes, and a group of captured Negro slaves. Their faith was Islam, but their language and culture was Berber, anterior to and quite distinct from the Arabic culture of the north. Charles considered that they were 'less Islamic' (the outward expression of their Islam was certainly much different), and might even have derived from the North African Christians of St Augustine's time!

To be with them, Charles no longer built a 'hermitage' as at Beni Abbes, but a simple wattle hut, long and narrow, with just enough room for himself. And, significantly, it was a part of the village: on the edge, but fairly close to the neighbouring dwellings. In fact, in contrast to his previous desire to be 'separate', he now wished to be near, in 'proximity'. Did not Jesus choose to live 'with us', as 'one of us'? That was, as always, his underlying motive.

He was no longer satisfied with being the 'universal brother' (with its rather cover-all approach), wishing rather to become a particular 'friend'. Of course he remained the Christian monk, the Christian 'marabout': he continued to hold to an imaginary '100 metre enclosure'! To quote a 'text' that Charles had written before returning to North Africa;

'Like our Lord Jesus ... we should be universal friends, universal brothers, and as far as possible universal saviours.'25

This highly idealistic programme (designed for Charles' future 'Petits Freres') remained to the end Charles' intention and aim. The considerable evolution was in the day-to-day living which Charles wisely adapted to circumstances, more exactly to concrete people and his relationships with them.

Charles was little given to theoretical analysis. But it is worth noting that, for him, the term 'brother' expressed the intention to be, and to be seen, in a relation of basic equality with the other, whoever that 'other' might be. The term 'friend', while presupposing this recognition of the equal worth of the other in their difference, adds the desire to be, as far as possible, 'one' with that other: to be united with that other in the 'sharing' of common interests and concerns. And, of course, genuine friendship, as he came to understand, is not only lasting, but also reciprocal and gratuitous. It is not 'for' some ulterior purpose.

Commented [LT1]:

A lasting friendship has, obviously, to be patiently constructed and to grow of itself. In Beni Abbes, and while travelling in convoy, Charles had been a 'benefactor', giving what he had (and he had 'more' for this purpose), to help the needy, certainly, but also to 'win over' the other who was, not unnaturally, mistrustful in the face of the unknown and conquering stranger. Now, alone as a European (and therefore at risk), with no extra means of support (above his own strictly limited means), Charles was, simply, a neighbour: a special and peculiar neighbour, yes, but one with no other resources than his capacity to relate and to be accepted in relation. The small 'gifts' that he continued to give to this or that person, on special occasions, were a part of the local culture determining the proper way to relate.

After some two years of limited links, during a winter of famine, Charles noted: 'Am sick. Obliged to stop all work. Jesus, Mary, Joseph, I give you my soul, my spirit and my life.'26 Charles was not a person to exaggerate his sickness. And he was desperate to continue his linguistic work. He thought he was dying: alone, useless, with nothing accomplished. Having given away the little that he had, he was growing weaker and weaker. But local people managed to find some goats' milk, and saved his life. Without his awareness of the reason for it, his relationship with the people changed:

'I see quite a few people, they come to see me ...'

After visiting him, his officer-friend Laperrine wrote:

'He came into my camp on horseback, amid a group of Touareg horsemen - he is more popular than ever among them, and they appreciate his presence more and more.'

Instead of being self-sufficient, he becomes, of necessity, the one who receives. The friendship is growing because it has become reciprocal.

This reciprocity is particularly evident on the level of cultural exchange. Charles begins to realize that the common way of looking at the Touaregs in his milieu - a view that he himself had shared - was inexact. To the French colonizers, the Touaregs were 'infidels and barbarians'. Had not Charles seen them as 'the furthest off and 'the most abandoned', far from 'the faith' and with no 'civilization'! He was most surprised to discover that the Touaregs saw the French conquerors in exactly the same light!

'You possess the earth, but we possess the heavens!'27

Charles heard these things, and he came to see that they were true. But Charles went further. He spent many hours with an interpreter, Ba-Hammou, to study in detail and in depth the Touareg language and, through the language, the Touareg culture. For ten years Charles patiently continued this work, often working, as he notes with precision, ten hours forty-five minutes a day!

Why did Charles devote so much of his time and energy to this intensive linguistic study? At first his motif is clear and simple. He writes to his 'bishop',

'My intention, is to begin evangelizing the Touareg by settling among them, learning their language, translating the Holy Gospels, becoming friends with them as best I can.'

So he translates the four Gospels, and produces a 'little dictionary and an elementary grammar'28 and he affirms:

'The Touareg language is very easy, a hundred times easier than Arabic.'

With his usual 'fougue', he works in haste! But he soon realizes that a proper knowledge of the language is more complex! With this in mind, he calls on an experienced linguist, Motylinski, who comes to spend some months with him. Apart from the learning of the required technical skills for studying an oral language, Charles learns from him to change his perspective and method: instead of 'translating what he wished to communicate to the Touareg, he should rather listen to them and to their spoken language, both prose and poetry'.

But at first he remains convinced that a 'scientific study of the language is outside my vocation'.

However, after his physical and psychological crisis of January 1908, he writes: so much linguistic work remains to be done: it will take thirty years',and a little later he adds:

'My life is mainly taken up with the study of the Touareg language ... I had thought that it was poor and simple; on the contrary, it's rich and complex.'

There is little doubt that Charles' motivation changes. He studies the language and culture not just as a means but as an end in itself, and as an essential component of a genuinely reciprocal friendship. And his steadfast refusal to allow his linguistic works to be published under his own name is a sign that this work, with all the human relationships that it involved (hours of participating in gatherings of men and of women recounting their stories and their poems), was genuinely gratuitous.

But can Charles' approach to evangelization be reconciled with his desire for a genuine friendship that is both reciprocal and gratuitous? When coming to Tamanrasset, Charles clearly intended to propose the Gospel to the people when appropriate; was it not his initial reason for learning the language? But soon after his near-death crisis, he writes:

'There may well be centuries between the first digging of the earth and the harvest.'29

A month later he adds:

'To preach Jesus to the Touaregs is not, I believe, something that Jesus wishes, neither from me nor from anybody. It would be the way of retarding, not advancing, their conversion. The need is to get to know them, with great prudence and gentleness.'

This long-term perspective leaves the present free: free to 'get to know' the other as the other is and wishes to be. The penetration of another culture, and the cultivation of patient personal contacts, are sure ways to come to know these persons and their communities. And such a search for 'scientific' knowledge is the gateway to friendship, already in fact a key constituent of it.

We need to look more closely at Charles' conception of evangelization, to examine its compatibility with genuine friendship and dialogue. In a long correspondence with a certain Joseph Hours,30 a merchant of Lyon, Charles, in answer to a question on evangelization among the Muslims, gives a more or less systematic account of his own approach. The first step, he points out, is to establish an 'intimate contact', followed by an effort

'to make oneself known and to get to know them',

and by the expression of a 'whole-hearted love'. Only then will it be a matter of speaking, and only 'in particular', according to the dispositions of each. We find here, duly adapted, the exact attitude and procedure of Charles' cousin, Marie de Bondy, towards Charles himself on his return from Morocco. In face of his absence of faith, his cousin,

'by her silence, her gentleness, her goodness', profoundly influenced him. 'And since she was so intelligent',

he was led to think that 'her religious beliefs might not be pure folly, as he had supposed.'

As he later said, he recognized the presence of Jesus in her person and conduct.31

In a similar way, Charles wished to make Jesus 'present', through the sacramental presence of the Eucharist, and, as a 'radiance' of that, through the presence of Jesus' love and goodness in his own life. It was his long-held idea: not to preach in words, but 'to proclaim the Gospel through one's life'.

He had in mind the daily contact of neighbour with neighbour, and he insisted on the necessity to 'banish the militant spirit', and the need to see the other 'not as an enemy to be conquered, but as a brother, for "you are all brothers"'.

In the Gospel text, this word of Jesus applies to relations within the Christian community; Charles, typically, gives it a universal extension: the Muslim is 'my brother' in the same identical sense as a fellow Christian.

The only proper motive for evangelization, as Charles sees it, is the love of the other; for that other is a 'person whom Jesus loves, and whom we ought to love as we love ourselves, and for whose salvation in consequence we ought to work'.

In other words, it is an act of friendship: 'I must offer my friend my dearest treasure'.

But the 'offer' is to be made with discretion, in no way forcing the other. Charles frequently refers to the 'model' of Mary carrying Jesus, hidden in her womb, to her cousin Elizabeth. Mary's act is a simple neighbourly act: she comes to live with her cousin in her pregnancy, but Jesus is 'present' in their relationship, though in a hidden and unobtrusive way.

Charles personal understanding of the 'Visitation'32 (on which he frequently meditated), and his concrete practice in Tamanrasset (more simple and spontaneous than his theoretical reflections would suggest!), indicate clearly how he lived that delicate combination of being both friend and, in his way, evangelist. For to evangelize, for him, was essentially to 'make Jesus present'; not in word but 'in person'; not in an open way (that would be the way of the 'militant spirit'), but hidden, 'incognito' we might say, in the human actions of the human person who is there simply as a 'friend'; not as an 'interested' friend, with some concealed ulterior aim, but with the gratuity of true friendship. For the living of friendship is itself the evangelization, the 'making present of Jesus', and any 'conversion', if and when it happens, is God's work alone.

How, in Charles' view, could his neighbours, as Muslims, receive his presence? In this correspondence with Joseph Hours, which dates from the central years of his time in Tamanrasset, he insists that 'all the Muslims whom I have known are of good faith', and that 'they are intellectually our equals',:33

two simple but vital essentials of any form of authentic dialogue. Considering, however, that 'all religious discussion is impossible',

Charles, without using the word, proposes another way of 'dialogue'. It is an inter-personal religious exchange not in the field of knowledge and verbal communication, but in the activity and relationship of love and friendship. So he is constantly both reminding himself and recommending to his Muslim visitors the twin commandment of:

'Love God with all your heart and your neighbour as yourself'. He calls this 'natural religion'.34

The implication is clear: this command of 'double love' is present, explicitly or at least implicitly, in the teaching of all religions, and its role is to clarify and stimulate the fundamental orientation of the human 'heart', which is basically the same whatever the cultural and religious history of the people concerned. Jesus comes to 'fulfil' this 'law' of the human heart, in his own life, and then in the life of his followers. But the 'law' itself is the same for all, Christian or Muslim. In this perspective, which Charles does not explicate but which he seems to imply, the call to 'conversion' of the other is fundamentally the same as the call to the 'conversion' of oneself: a call Charles constantly recalls,

'Lord, convert me!'

We have here a genuine 'reciprocity': the reciprocity of 'brothers' recognizing the worth and equality of each other, the reciprocity of 'friends' in their mutual exchanges, and the reciprocity of 'fellow pilgrims' ('saviours of each other' to adapt Charles' phrase) on the same path to the same end: together on their pilgrimage way to the one God.

Charles records:

'The Touareg community are a great consolation to me; I can't say how good they are to me, how many upright people there are among them; a few are real friends, something so rare and precious everywhere. I have at least four 'friends' on whom I can count entirely ... We relate together ..., and they have came to know that they have a friend in me, that I am devoted to them, that they can have confidence in me - and they have reciprocated what I am for them.'35

Charles' death, long prepared, can be seen as the final act of friendship. He chose to remain with his neighbours and friends in spite of the obvious danger. The war of 1914-1918 between the European colonizing powers had profound repercussions in the central Sahara: it was for some an opportunity for a 'just struggle' to expel the 'foreign unbelievers' and to restore the true Islamic religion, a struggle which involved inter-tribal conflict and instability. In this confused situation, Charles was shot and killed (in a moment of panic by a young member of a raiding band who intended, most probably, to take him as a hostage).36

He had long expressed the wish, in prayer, to 'die a martyr', adding in a meditation that his death might well appear otherwise. In fact his death was an 'accident', but his desired intention remains. His motive was, simply, to 'imitate' Jesus: to die like Jesus, and so to 'give his life' with Jesus 'for the salvation of all'. Who were these 'all'? In the first place the Touareg neighbours, the Muslim people who had become 'his people'. Certainly also for 'all without exception', a constant intention of Charles. Did Charles also offer his life for Islam, as Louis Massignon, his 'successor', claims?37

Given his particular intention for the Touaregs, and clearly for the Touaregs as Muslims, and given Charles' constant inclination to 'universalize' his prayer intentions and self-offering (did not Jesus, his 'one Model', while living with only a few, offer his life for all?), we can say that he probably, implicitly at least, included in his self-offering 'the whole house of Islam'. In any case, his death was seen as 'the death of our friend' by Moussa agg Amastan. He wrote to Charles' sister, Madame de Blic:

'When I heard of the death of our friend, your brother Charles, my eyes closed. There was darkness all about me. I wept and shed tears ... Charles the Marabout has died not only for all of you, he has died for us too. May God have mercy on him, and may we meet in Paradise.'38

The friendship was not limited to Tamanrasset: it was for ever ...

Were all the Muslim appreciations of Charles' presence as positive? Ali Merad, an Algerian Muslim scholar and university professor, has given us a personal 'testimony' on the 'significance, in the eyes of Islam, of this Christian life planted right in the land of Islam'. His conclusion is simple:

'Charles de Foucauld seems to have been called by his destiny to be a mystical witness for Jesus, in the face of Islam.'39

The key word is 'in the face of ('devant' in the French original, in bold characters). It expresses, essentially, a 'challenge': not a hostile or aggressive challenge, but the firm and uncompromising challenge of the Christian brother and friend in relation to his Muslim brother and friend. For, as Merad insists, Charles' one aim was 'the imitation of Jesus': he

'conceived the imitation of Jesus as his greatest happiness, and, even more, as the true reason for his existence'.40

More particularly, he witnessed to the 'poverty and humility of Jesus, to the Jesus who took the last place.' As such, he is the 'witness': a 'mystical' witness 'for' Jesus ('mystical', meaning here 'totally committed to God'),

'in the face of the community of Islam as a 'fraternal challenge'. In spite of emphasizing Charles' participation in the 'colonial mentality' of the time, with its secular depreciation of Islamic culture and its religious triumphalism towards the Muslim religion, Merad concludes by saying: 'this exceptional human adventure will continue to challenge the Muslim conscience just as much as the Christian conscience', and he adds,

'This fragile light (like the 'monk's lamp' dear to the ancient Arab poets) is like the joyful sign of a fraternal presence.'41

A challenge supposes something held in common and something on which one differs. Between Charles as the God-seeking monk, the 'Christian marabout', and his Muslim neighbours, what is common is clearly the adoration of God's greatness - Allah akbar. What differs is the mediation: the prophetic word and example of Muhammad, or the self-revealing and salvific word and example of Jesus.

A small, apparently insignificant, incident encapsulates Charles' approach. Charles is writing to his 'apostolic prefect', Mgr Guerin:

'Yesterday, long visit from two men from Tafilalet, two marabouts. They had heard about you, and asked if you had been to Tafilalet - No, he will go another time -[...] Does he travel on foot? - No, by camel ... This question, put by some marabouts, has made me reflect ... They travel on foot, leading their donkeys... We are disciples of JESUS, we want JESUS to live in us ('the Christian is another Christ'), we are always speaking of poverty. They are disciples of Muhammad: their question really makes me reflect.'42

We can see here, in life, Charles' attitude of accepting, and desiring to make, a fraternal challenge, a mutual challenge!

In what sense, then, can Charles' approach to Islam be said to be that of dialogue? 'He was in no way a pioneer of Islamic-Christian dialogue',43 declares Hugues Didier. In the sense of a dialogue seeking to know and to appreciate the faith of the other, this is most certainly true. Following his conversion, Charles made no further study of Islam as a religion (ceasing, for example, to read the Koran, and neglecting the study of classical Arabic, a necessary concomitant).

He did, however, seek to know and appreciate the culture of the Touaregs, devoting up to ten hours a day for ten years of his life to this end, and this culture, as Ali Merad has pointed out in detail, was impregnated with Islamic themes. Maurice Serpette,44 in a work which highlights Charles' 'scientific' research, especially in the linguistic field, sums up by saying:

'For Charles, the "universal brother", knowledge of the other was an obsessional duty of charity'.

And Jean-Francois Six,45 the first to undertake a serious study of Charles de Foucauld's spiritual journey, adds in an 'afterward' to Serpette's book:

'The secret of this extraordinary labour ... should be seen in that ... ardent and exact 'recognition' of the other ..., the fruit of his fraternal love.'

It was, then, a dialogue of fraternal presence, motivated by faith, but whose starting point was not the differences of faith but rather the unity of (native or adopted) language and culture. This language and culture, certainly, were 'carriers' of faith (permeated with references to the 'Most High' and his 'angels', to 'the prophet' and the 'holy city of Mecca'), but they had their roots in the everyday life of the people (their tents and camels, their wars and loves), a life that Charles came to share, and which he did share, indirectly but with empathy, through the fraternal relationships involved in listening to their stories and poems, as they recounted them together.

The dialogue, then, was a dialogue of 'presence', a dialogue between 'brothers', a dialogue of 'friends', a dialogue of 'fellow pilgrims', a dialogue where each 'challenged' the other on their pilgrim way, not by their words but by their actions, a dialogue where all 'hoped' to enjoy God's presence, in the here-and-now, and in the final Paradise, where all would be filled to overflowing in God's glory, not alone but all together ...

Perhaps these terms need some explication, some contextualization. Charles came to the Sahara to be with the Muslims (not to be a 'hermit'!), as a Christian monk (not as a kind of missionary!). His motive was solely the 'imitation' of Jesus: not of his 'public' life, with its public 'proclamation', but of his Nazareth Life, with its 'hidden-ness' and kind of 'incognito'. It was simply, no more no less, a 'being with', a 'presence'.

Having this 'presence' as a concrete base, Charles was able to 'relate' both as a brother, recognizing the dignity of the other as equal in value precisely in their otherness, and as a friend, uniting with the other in common interests and concerns.

Further, Charles felt called to be, as far as possible, a saviour - as and with Jesus - of those who were becoming brothers and friends. His intention was to push friendship to its ultimate limits: a true friend is one who 'gives his life for his friends'. For Charles this covers both the domain of our so-called earthly concerns, both personal and communal, and the field of our eternal destiny. And he implicitly admits the reciprocity of this 'saving' role, as the following event illustrates: Charles is informed of the 'very

beautiful attitude' of a noble Touareg woman who refused to allow her husband to kill some wounded French prisoners, helped to heal their wounds, and saw to their repatriation. He notes:

'Should we not write and tell her that the charity with which she has gathered, cared for, defended and sent home our wounded soldiers, is known to us and fills us with joy and thanks towards God';46

He even wants to ask the Holy Father to write to her in person!

This presence as brother, friend and saviour is conceived and lived as a challenge. The story of the visit of the two marabouts travelling 'on foot' leaves one in no doubt about the truth of Ali Merad's definition of Charles as the 'mystical witness for Jesus in the face of Islam'.

In fact, Merad contrasts Charles de Foucauld with Louis Massignon, whom he describes as

'the tireless Christian witness for Islam'.47

More exactly, Charles' relationship is not with Islam as such, but with the concrete Muslim people he is in contact with. He both affirms his Christian identity, and recognizes their Muslim identity. Admittedly his total conviction of the absolute truth of his Christian faith, basically a personal faith-experience in the person of Jesus, leads him to deny the truth of Islam, and to hope for a final acceptance of Jesus. But this 'final acceptance' is more and more seen as 'far ahead'.48 In the meantime, he fully accepts Islam's positive, indeed providential, role in his own faith-journey, and also accepts much that is true and beneficial, and equally providential, in its practice by his Muslim neighbours. His presence remains a 'challenge', both concerning the 'way' to God, and in matters of everyday honesty and goodness. And he is, increasingly, open to accept the 'challenge' from his neighbours: when sick and near to death, he learnt that some Muslim women were praying for his 'conversion' to Islam before it was too late!49 And he frequently expresses admiration for the good acts and attitudes of many of his newly-found friends: they 'challenge' him, as he does them.

Ali Merad confesses that he was repeatedly 'confronted' by the 'message' of Charles, and he, in his turn, writes to 'confront' his Christian colleagues (one of whom, a French priest, writes the preface to his book).50

Charles' approach, therefore, is not, as I would see it, a faith dialogue with Islam, but rather a dialogue of life with living Muslims, in a stance of mutual challenge. It supposes a common 'end', and a common 'providence' leading to that end, but differs in the concrete 'way': Jesus, or Muhammad. But this challenge, though painful, is not negative: each is called to summon the other to what is better, so that together they may attain the 'goal'.

'May we all meet in Paradise!', as Moussa had said to Charles' sister on hearing of his death.

Notes

1. Jean-Francois Six, Itineraire spirituel de Charles de Foucauld, Paris, Seuil, 1958, p. 267. This is the first (and remains the principal) serious study of Foucauld's spiritual journey.

2. The Abbe Huvelin (1838-1910) was the spiritual director of Foucauld from the latter's conversion in 1886 until his own death in 1910. A remarkable man, he had a profound influence on many, including Maurice Blondel and Friedrich von Hugel. See Lucienne Portier, Un precurseur: I'abbe Huvelin, Paris, Cerf, 1979. See pp. 93-107 for his relationship with Foucauld.

3. From an article by Hughes Didier, 'Louis Massignon and Charles de Foucauld'Jacques Keryell (ed.), Louis Massignon et ses contem- porains, Paris, Karthala, 1998. Cf. revue Jesus Caritas, 1951, no. 84. pp. 17-20.

4. Louis Massignon, Foucauld's friend and 'testamentary successor', was responsible for causing his first biography to be written, and so making him known: Rene Bazin, Charles de Foucauld, Explorateur au Maroc, Ermite au Sahara, Paris, Plan, 1921. This was soon translated into English: R. Bazin, Charles de Foucauld Hermit and Explorer, London, Burn Gates & Washbourne, 1923.

5. Charles de Foucauld: Lettres a Henry de Castries: introduction by Jacques de Dampierre, Paris, Grasset, 1938, p. 94. This correspondence is a key source for Foucauld's connections with Islam.

6. Joseph Cuoq, Lavigme, les Peres Blancs et les musulmans maghrebins, Rome, Societe des missionaires d'Afriques, 1986.

7. Correspondence Ch. de F./ H. de Castries, op. cit., p. 86.

8. Ibid., p. 90.

9. Hugues Didier, Petite vie de Charles de Foucauld, Paris, Desclee de Brouwer, 1993, pp. 56-57. This 'Life', though short, is excellent for situating Foucauld in his historical context.

10. J-F. Six, Itineraire, op. cit., p. 44 (see also pp. 45-47).

11. Correspondence Ch. de F./ H. de Castries, op. cit., p. 89.

12. Ibid., p. 33.

13. Ibid., p. 89.

14. J-F. Six, Vie de Charles de Foucauld, Paris, Seuil, 1962, pp. 31-34.

15. Didier, Petite vie, op. cit., p. 72.

16. Correspondence Ch. de F./H. de Castries, op. cit., p. 91.

17. The Armenian massacres, often forgotten, left a deep mark on the conscience of Charles de F. See Bazin (English) pp. 97-98; Six, Vie, pp. 61-62; Didier, Petite vie, pp. 86-89.

18. Antoine Chatelard, Le chemin vers Tamanrasset, Paris, Karthala, 2002, p. 268 (and the whole chapter, pp. 265-282).

19. Ibid., pp. 284, 274.

20. Correspondence Ch. de F./H. de Castries, op. cit., pp. 87, 123, 167 (cf. p.118). For Charles' experience of the zaouias in Morocco, see his Reconnaissance au Maroc, Paris, Challamel, 1888 passim (an experience recalled in Correspondence Ch. de F./H. de C., pp. 162-163). Cf. also Six, Vie, pp. 21-24, 84-86.

21. Charles, receiving a letter from the important 'marabout' Sidi ben Daoud twenty-one years later, replies, addressing him as 'my brother in God' and adding 'I pray God to accord you his favours in this world and heaven in the next' (letter written both in French and Arabic by Charles in March 1905, quoted in Correspondence with H. de Castries, pp. 170-71).

22. Ali Merad, Charles de Foucauld au regard de I'Islam, Paris, Chalet,1975, translated into English, with a Foreword and Afterword by Zoe Hersov, as Christian Hermit in an Islamic World, New York, Paulist Press, 1999, but lacking the valuable annexe L'Islamisme des Touaregs. This work, by an Algerian Muslim, a professor of Arabic literature and civilization in Lyons (France), is, in his own words, 'a [personal] testimony motivated by the desire to make a contribution ..., to the Muslim-Christian dialogue' (p. 14. French; same page in English). Well-written and well-argued, it is the 'key' work on Charles de Foucauld's relationship with Islam from the Muslim side. For Charles as 'the Christian Marabout', see pp. 39-51 in French (chapter II in English).

23. For Charles' role as 'universal brother' and his conception of 'Fraternity', see, Six, Itineraire, pp. 275-76, 331; Six, Vie, pp. 91-94, 98; Chatelard, Chemin, pp. 143-62.

24. For Charles' settling in Tamanrasset and for a description of the local Touareg society, see Elizabeth Hamilton, The Desert my Dwelling Place, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1968, pp.153—59; see also Chatelard, Chemin, op. cit., pp. 231-34.

25. Chatelard, Chemin, op. cit., pp. 147-62.

26. Ibid., pp. 247, 258-59.

27. Six, Vie, op. cit., p. 218; cf. Hamilton, op. cit., pp. 171, 173.

28. Maurice Serpette, Foucauld au Desert, Paris, Desclee de Brouwer, 1997, ch. VII: L'oeuvre linguistique de Ch. de F.; see also the 'Postface' de J-F. Six, pp. 247-50".

29. Six, Vie, op. cit, pp. 184-85 (On the invitation of Moussa, Charles assists at the death of his aunt, Tihit, exhorting her to 'Ouksed Massinin'- 'Fear God'; while known and accepted as the 'Christian marabout', he is ready to use the appropriate Islamic formula).

30. Correspondence inedite [unpublished] du Pere de Foucauld a M.Joseph Hours, letters of 25 Nov. 1911, 3 May 1912, 12 Oct. 1912.

31. Six, Vie, op. cit., pp. 29-31.

32. Oeuvres Spirituelles, Anthologie, Paris, Seuil, 1958, pp. 313-15. Charles frequently returns, in his meditations, to the 'model' of the Visitation: Jesus is seen as present and active in the interpersonal life of the Christian who is united with Him (and, as Jacques Maritain has added, the more effectively so, paradoxically, when the person acting is unconscious of this hidden presence: see Approches sans entraves, Paris, Seuil, 1975, p. 82—85.

33. Correspondence Ch. de F/J. Hours, letter of 12 October 1912.

34. Ibid., letter of 25 November 1912.

35. Chatelard, Chemin, op. cit., p. 150.

36. A. Chatelard, La Mart de Charles de Foucauld, Paris, Karthala, 2000, passim.

37. Hughes Didier, Louis Massignon et Charles de Foucauld, op. cit., pp. 93-98. To my mind, the 'spiritual intuition' of Massigon that Foucauld 'offered his life for Islam' is correct (against Didier), the difference being that Charles saw his self-offering in terms of 'solidarity', while Massignon spoke of 'substitution', pp. 96-97.

38. Hamilton, The Desert my Dwelling Place op. cit., p. 207.

39. Ali Merad, op. cit., p.75 (French). The English translation, p. 44, while materially correct, fails to bring out the implied sense of 'challenge': Charles witnessed for Jesus in the face of Islam, in the sense that his life 'remains a challenge to the Muslim conscience' (p. 129), just as much, the author adds, 'as to the Christian conscience'! This challenge is not that of an 'outsider', but of one 'who chose to live and die in a Muslim land', choosing 'to rest there until the Resurrection', p. 128.

40. Ibid., p. 28; pp. 45-48 French (English pp. 21; 29-31).

41.Ibid., p.129 French (English p. 74: the French 'interpeller' is better translated as 'challenged', rather than as 'summoned').

42. Chatelard, Chemin, op. cit., p. 200.

43. Didier, Petite vie, op. cit.,p. 152; cf. Didier's article, Louis Massignon ..., op. cit., pp. 104-108.

44. Maurice Serpette, Foucauld au Desert, op. cit., p. 243.

45. Ibid., Postface de J-F. Six, p. 255. This remarkable 'postface' brings out the significance of Foucauld's intellectual studies, as seen by Louis Massignan and Emile Gautier: they show at once 'the secular fury to understand', typical of the modem 'scientific' mindset, and the 'experimental discovery of the sacred' in the gratuitous search to know the other in their alterity.

46. Chatelard, Chemin, op. cit., pp. 165-66.

47.Merad, op. cit., p. 75 French (English p. 44).

48. Six, Vie, op. cit., p. 184.

49.Ibid., p. 186.

50. Merad, op. cit., p. 14 French (English p. 14) and pp. 7-9 ('Preface' of Michel Lelong; replaced in the English translation by a new preface by the translator, Zoe Hersov).

Printed with kind permission:

Originally published as chapter 4 of Catholics in Interreligious Dialogue: Studies in Monasticism, Theology and Spirituality.

Published by Gracewing (2006) UK ISBN 0 85244 640 3

Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916): Silent witness for Jesus 'in the face of Islam'

