NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Seeing Muslims as God sees them

Catherine M. Odell | Jul. 17, 2012

In 2007, an Algerian Muslim joins a prayer led by French Cardinal Philippe Barbarin, center, in memory of seven French monks killed 11 years before at Our Lady of Atlas monastery in Tibhirine, Algeria. (Newscom/Getty Images/AFP/Fayez Nureldine)

NOTRE DAME, IND. -- People say there is no monastic tradition in Islam," explained a quietly exasperated Trappist who has been persistently promoting interreligious dialogue among the world's monks and nuns and Muslims for many years.

He knows that there are many threads to the pushback over monastic dialogue with Muslims. That there are "no Muslim monks" is one that many people mention.

Fr. Armand Veilleux, a soft-spoken intellectual who received a doctorate in both theology and liturgy in Rome, disagrees with the position. "There is some dimension of it [monasticism] in Islam," he argued. "They have a mystical tradition. The Sufis would be closer to that and it would be possible to dialogue with them."

Veilleux has been an abbot for three different monasteries and is currently abbot of Scourmont Monastery in Belgium. He has also served as procurator general of the entire order. Still, he worries a great deal about life outside the monastery. He is concerned about what he calls the "demonizing of all things Muslim." All interreligious dialogue is vital, but Catholic-Muslim dialogue is desperately needed today, he says. Since Sept. 11, Americans in particular have been ready to demonize all things Muslim.

In some ways, he says, the U.S. response to the attacks seems strange, bordering on the "mystical" to him. Though he doesn't diminish the pain suffered by Americans in 2001, such violent tragedies "are happening all the time in other places." In the United States, it was unbearable because it had never happened before "at home."

Veilleux, a Canadian by birth, said the American-led Iraq War has probably backfired, radicalizing many Islamic movements in a political way. "People think they know Islam through the radical expression of those who claim to do things in the name of Islam. That's not really Islam," he added. Many violent events in Africa "are often rooted in political rather than religious tensions, although the struggles can become religious."

This is a message that Veilleux, now in his 70s, passionately hopes to share as long as he's able. He traveled a long way from his monastery to a small conference at the University of Notre Dame earlier this year. "Stories of Practical Holiness: An Exercise in Interreligious Understanding" was a Feb. 5-8 event offered for Notre Dame students and the local community to foster understanding. The stories came from Buddhist, Sikh, Muslim, Jewish and Catholic speakers. Such small venues, Veilleux said, work best in helping people connect and learn.

Veilleux was asked to share the backstory for "Of Gods and Men," the widely acclaimed 2010 film about seven Trappist monks murdered in northern Algeria in the spring of 1996. Though he didn't tell the Notre Dame audience, he was procurator general and living in Rome when the monks at the monastery of Our Lady of Atlas at Tibhirine were kidnapped and then beheaded several weeks later. It was Veilleux's grim responsibility to identify the remains and preside at their funerals in the cathedral of Algiers.

"I knew all of them personally, but the one dearest to me was the medical doctor, Brother Luc," Veilleux recalled. Just a month or two before they were killed, he had flown one last time to Algeria to talk, pray and be with the community. The monks were trying to discern whether "to go or to stay." Algeria had become a brutal Islamic state, torn by continuing civil war and violence.

This is where the Tibhirine event truly becomes a modern-day parable about all interreligious dialogue, according to Veilleux.

The monks at Tibhirine had survived a vicious civil war for many years. They were living in a Muslim state where almost all foreigners had been expelled. How did they survive? The key, this Trappist explained, "was a simple sharing of work, life and prayer between them and villagers. The villagers were ordinary Muslims who loved and protected them. Building on this trust, the superior, Father Christian, had also established a dialogue group with profoundly devout Muslims -- Sufis. The group met regularly at the monastery."

Thus, interreligious "dialogue" was the sharing of work, life and prayer. The Trappist monks and the Muslims had found enough common ground on which they could stand and pray -- together. The monks had even allowed local Muslims to use a monastery building as the village mosque.

The diary or "testament" of Fr. Christian de Chergé that was later published is, Veilleux said, "one of the most beautiful spiritual writings of the 20th century. It had and continues to have a great influence in the Muslim, as well as the Christian, world."

De Chergé knew he would probably be killed. He wrote that if that happened, "my most insistent curiosity will then be set free." What he longed for in paradise was to see his Muslim brothers and sisters as God saw them -- "all shining with the glory of Christ, the fruit of His Passion, filled with the Gift of the Spirit."

[Catherine M. Odell is a freelance writer and author of *Those Who Saw Her: Apparitions of Mary* (Our Sunday Visitor Press).]

The Next Step FORWARD [1]

DONATE NOW [1]

Enjoy this article?
Help support more like it by **donating today!** [1]

Source URL (retrieved on *10/09/2015 - 14:11*): http://ncronline.org/news/people/seeing-muslims-god-sees-them

Links:
[1] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/article-end