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In Timbuktu, majority Muslims, minority Christians reject extremists

Paul Jeffrey Catholic News Service | Jul. 9, 2013
Timbuktu, Mali

In this ancient city that has become synonymous with the ends of the earth, the recent terrorism of Islamist extremists belies long years of peaceful Muslim-Christian coexistence.

"This city is 99 percent Muslim, but all of us are tolerant. We preach tolerance. Islam teaches us to respect all religions," Abdrahamane Ben Essayouti, the chief imam of the fabled desert city, told Catholic News Service.

The Rev. Moha Ag Oyahitt agrees. He's a Baptist pastor who fled Timbuktu for Bamako, the nation's capital, when the al-Qaida-linked terrorists took over the town.

"There were no problems in Timbuktu between us and the Muslims. We lived as brothers and sisters. The only difference was Jesus Christ and Mohammed. Besides that, there was no problem. Whatever we do, we invite them, and they invite us when they have births or marriages. Whatever the activity, we invite each other. When we Christians have evangelical campaigns, they come. I cannot explain to you how it was wonderful to live together in peace," he said.

Troubles in Timbuktu began in April 2012, when the city was taken over by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, or MNLA, a largely Tuareg group that wants a secular and independent state in northern Mali. Yet the group's Islamist allies soon turned against the MNLA and drove it out of the city. That left the jihadists in control of Timbuktu.

"We've had the separatists fighting for years in the north of Mali, and we never had problems until they united with the terrorists, then we started to have problems," Oyahitt said.

Essayouti said the Islamist groups -- including Ansar Dine and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, which want a Mali governed by Islamic law -- are not what they claim.

"They aren't Muslims, they are terrorists. They came here just to destroy and to steal. In Timbuktu, we know Islam, and we teach Islam, and what they think is something completely different," the imam said.

Essayouti said the French were greeted as heroes by the entire population.

"When the French came to Timbuktu, it was like the second coming of Jesus Christ," the imam said.

Many Timbuktu residents consider the jihadists little more than an organized crime syndicate. They say when the Islamists arrived, they appropriated houses, vehicles, and refrigerators, often trucking the items off through the desert to sell elsewhere. Many fighters switched back and forth between the different jihadist groups, aligning themselves with whichever group offered the most lucrative reimbursement.

Maman Dedeou knows that all too well. When a jihadi asked him to store some items he had looted from

government offices, Dedeou did so. Later, when times got tough and Dedeou thought the jihadi had left town, he sold part of the loot. Shortly after, the jihadi returned and Dedeou was arrested for being a thief. Over several weeks, the jihadists extorted the equivalent of several thousand dollars from his family, supposedly to buy his freedom. When his family could no longer pay anything, the jihadists cut off his right hand.

Dedeou went to Bamako for medical treatment and did not return to Timbuktu until after the French had intervened. He is staying with a friend and looking for work, but in the city's moribund economy, it's difficult, especially for a man without a hand.

Dedeou, a Muslim, said he remains angry about what the extremists did to his body and to his city. "If I saw a jihadi today, I'd cut his throat," he said.

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