



Institut de formation islamo-chrétienne
Bamako - Mali



Dialogue with Islam – foundations, chances and challenges.

The Malian experience

Opening words:

Distinguished hosts and guests good morning; allow me to extend to you the warm greetings of the people of Mali. When I received the invitation and had to discuss with my community what our answer should be to the invitation, the guts' reaction of the German priest we have in the community was: "why would the German Bishops' conference call on you from this far to participate in a conference? They could have found someone on the spot." But realising that the invitation came from the office of the President of the Commission for International Church Affairs, we understood that we were called as a part of the universal Church to give our contribution to the local Church in Germany by bringing to this conference our specific experience in Dialogue with Islam. This is exactly what I will do, basing myself on the concrete experience of the people and the Church in Mali. I appreciate very well the urgency of this pastoral concern in Europe at large. I hope that the contribution of the Malian experience will bring some rays of light to help the Bishops' conference in its discernment for an appropriate pastoral response to the new pastoral challenges posed by the increased presence of Muslims in Europe.

THE MALIAN EXPERIENCE:

Introduction

As one of the officers¹ I interviewed said: “The Malian war is neither religious nor racial; it is nothing else other than the drawback of a geo-political crisis, namely the Libyan crisis”. However, the Libyan crisis found in Mali, in the north in particular, a socio-political crisis caused by changes in societal structures brought about by new economic input: In the north of Mali we have mainly Arabs, Tuareg speaking Tamachek and often called by that name (these are white coloured, comprising interdependent peoples - Tuareg, Indem, and Bella; and also Sonraï and Peul. These societies have two groups: the vassal and the noble; now this structure has changed considerably with drug trafficking in the region, because the vassal acquired economic power through the selling of drugs to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, etc., drug traffickers help that transaction. For instance, according to the confessions of captured djihadists in the North of Mali, when one takes a car full of drugs as far as Egypt, he gets 60 million cfa (that is about 90,000 euros) and the man keeps the car. Now we can easily imagine how much he gets after a second or third trip. This way, the vassals in the North have now acquired economic power and feel free and even stronger than their masters; therefore the power has shifted from the masters to the vassals. This is causing a social crisis in the region; one of the group leaders of the Tamachek once asked the local governor to “bring order back” otherwise they will bring it back ‘by force’. This group has members in Algeria, Libya, Saudi Arabia... The opportunity of bringing back order was given to them by the Libyan crisis. We all know that they did participate in the war in Libya and then came back with all the arsenal of weapon that they got from there and took over the North of Mali.

Among the warring groups from Libya, there were also Islamists; the latter added to the socio-political agenda of the Tamachek, their objective; according to a prisoner who was a leader in the group, the objective of the Islamists was to conquer the whole of the region down to the Mediterranean sea; and once they were well settled, they would then target Europe. How would that be possible? We know that the local armies are not well equipped to face up to a determined and well equipped army; and these groups had the financial means required to equip themselves and pay their personnel; a prisoner said that for every town captured, though there were about 300 fighters, each one of them received 500,000cfa (that is about 751 euros); now that may sound a small amount for many in this part of the world but in that region of Mali, only immensely rich government officials can afford such a pay. So it was financially motivating to go to war; I had also an exchange with officers over the young Malians caught as Islamists: they too confirmed that they got 85,000cfa (127 euros) per day. The only governments able to dish out such huge amounts of money in the region are those

¹ He is an officer of the Malian security forces who served in the North up to the rise of the Islamists.

with petro-dollars, (some sources say that Saudi Arabia and Qatar mainly are playing an important role in this).

So the war in Mali became a melting pot of interests sometimes antagonistic. Yet it was quite often presented by some of the media as a religious war. But for the Malian people there was no framework, neither social nor political, that could favour or foretell a religious war between Muslims and non-Muslims in Mali.

The Malian political framework for Christian-Muslim coexistence

In Mali, since the first constitution at the time of Modibo Kéita around 1962, it is secular state that prevails; in the constitution of the country article 118 states that *“the republican form and the secular character of the state as well as multiparty system can’t be subject to review”*; and article 25 states that Mali is secular; in fact it translates practically the real experience of the people of Mali. Muslims, Christians and adherents of the African Traditional Religion leave together side by side in peace. This is the truth about the relationship between adherents of different religious groups in Mali and in the region of West Africa, in general. So much so that there has never been question of religious crisis to be resolved that that did not necessitate a formal forum to gather religious leaders of different religious groups; even the last official meeting that took place in Mali in the present situation, confirms that reality: the gathering of two days (18-19th February 2016) brought together Muslim religious leaders; the other religious denominations came at the opening and closure of the forum; the aim was, for the government, to communicate with all Muslim religious leaders and agree as leaders to reject all together the violent Islam that is looming over Malian Muslims known for their conviviality and tolerance. Thus, the theme was: “All together for Peace”. This gives us an idea of the political framework in Mali for peaceful co-existence between Muslims and non-Muslims. However the Christian-Muslim relations in Mali nowadays require a particular attention.

Christian-Muslim relations in Mali



Muslims praying by the Cathedral every Friday

A changing relationship

The Islamic landscape:

Islam in the region is more than a thousand years old; and its implantation in Mali was pacific; violence came only with the reformists troops of the 19th century namely, those of El Hajj Umar Tall and Almany Samori Touré, just to name the famous ones. It was not only an ethnic Islam but also an Islam for the elite, mainly the merchants. That is why it remained a conciliating, tolerant, syncretic and even ‘ignorant Islam’, even if it survived with the help of some literate adepts.

It is also a mystic Islam (it is an Islam with Sufi inspirations) composed of brotherhoods (a group coming together around a spiritual leader). In Mali, the oldest and one of the biggest brotherhood is the *Qâdiriyya*; its advent corresponds to the islamist awakening of the sixteenth and nineteenth century. Its founder is ‘*Abd-el Qâdir al-Jilânî* (1077- 1166). It is dominant in the sub-Saharan region. This Islam is characterised by moralistic and tolerant attitudes, especially tolerance towards non-Muslims. The most important brotherhood at the moment is the *Tijaniyya* which was founded by *Ahmed al-Tijani* (1737-1818) and made its way into the region through the jihâd of *El Hajj ‘Umar Tall* in the middle of the 19th century.

Each of these brotherhoods is divided into many branches. However they are so discreet that their presence is only felt during their pilgrimage to their centres “*zawiyya*”. This kind of Islam is characterised by the presence of “*marabout*”, which refers to ascetic Islam and yet seems to distant itself from orthodox Islam because of some practices that are judged

by orthodox Islam as innovations such as the erection of mausoleums over their dead leader and their visitation, extraordinary powers vested in their Sheikhs, etc.

The Muslim community in Mali is mainly of Sunni persuasion and of Malikite jurisprudential rite; thus their Islam is characterised by the search for piety, devotion, asceticism, simplicity, dignity... And this normally creates a peaceful Muslim community.

The erosion:

When speaking of the evolution of Islam in the region, one thing is to be taken into account: there has been since 1999, a kind of reawakening of what we call “the wake of Islamity”; this is to say that among Muslims, there are those who are attracted by what they call “the pure Islam”, that which does not mingle with non-Islamic values and laws and even with established Muslim practices in the region. Therefore, some of the values of the region’s Islam such as tolerance are fading away in front of the rising fundamentalist and intolerant interpretation of the Islamic message.

This new phenomenon of Islamism can be explained by the new geo-political situation in the world, characterised by political and religious imperialism and the tendency to divide; this pushes the communities into self-isolation the adoption of defensive and aggressive attitudes; all poked up by the rise of the phenomenon of Wahhabism (in reference to the preacher **Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (1703-1792)**). To use the definition given it by the orientalist Henri Laoust, this « religious, political, Arab and Muslim movement » has, in the region, the plan of establishing a Sunni state and restoring Islam to its original purity by fighting against all sorts of suspicious innovations and popular superstitions; it also intends to undertake the expansion of Islam as it were at the time of the prophet. Their radical and fundamentalist interpretation of the Qur’ān and ḥadīths is causing a growing erosion of the peaceful landscape of Islam in Mali.

As a result, the « africanity » of our Islam, that is to say its real inculturation into local social relations and ritual expressions is more and more being put to question by external influences twined with a certain wake of « islamity » (we are Muslims!) based on non-African models ; thus a desire to purify African Islam. We are now witnessing a certain deafricanisation and the arabisation (through islamisation) of the african Islam that is causing it to lose its convivial and tolerant character. In a highly majority Muslim country, this new religious phenomenon is a challenge to social cohesion and Christian-Muslim coexistence; it requires urgent pastoral responses. Thus the Institute for Islamo-Christian Formation (IFIC) was set up in response to the emerging pastoral challenges.

The specific approach and contribution of IFIC to the Christian-Muslim dialogue

The Institute is the pastoral response of the Missionaries of Africa to the call of the Church in Mali who needed the long years of the lived experience of these missionaries in

Muslim milieu, especially North Africa. The 1998 general chapter of the Society of the Missionaries of Africa decided to give precedence to interreligious dialogue in Mali.

The kind of pastoral response proposed by the Missionaries of Africa follows the vision of their founder as regards to Muslim-Christian coexistence. The main attitude worthy of an apostle among Muslims is for him to be a brother to them. Cardinal Lavigerie once said: “you must win their hearts only by your good deeds. You will have for them respect and a charity that faith gives. You will love them as brothers. »²

In order to achieve this mission, the Missionaries of Africa came with an already existing instrument of their ministry in Muslim countries, namely the pastoral year of the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI) which is based in Rome. This pastoral year which was called “Islam and Christian Reflexion” was then transferred to Mali (that is IFIC) for French speaking Africa and Nairobi for English speaking Africa.³

The objective of the Institute is to train trainers in the art of dialogue with Muslims. IFIC is, as said Archbishop Zerbo of Bamako, « a school for the formation of resource persons whose mission is to lighten up and keep alight through that school the candlestick of interreligious dialogue, a dialogue at the service of peace between peoples».

Thus IFIC targets committed church members, priests, religious men and women, pastors, male and female of other Christian denominations and lay faithful (teachers, educators, and leaders of catholic social movements...). These are to be sent by their respective institutions with a clear pastoral perspective for dialogue with Muslims. IFIC, through its program, provides the pastoral agents with a theological and pastoral formation that will empower them to take the multifaceted adventure of Encounter and Dialogue between Muslim and Christians. Candidates are to have had an experience with Muslims; IFIC then helps them to revisit their experience in the light of a better knowledge of Islam and to help them deepen that experience through reflexion based on the basic elements of faith.

The program of IFIC is made of a minimum of 477 hours spread through 8 months of study (19h/week from mid-October to mid-June); two axes hold the program together:

- ❖ Objective knowledge of Islam (courses on Islamic studies are given to transmit a knowledge that corresponds to the sources and traditions of Islam)
- ❖ A Christian reflexion on the Muslim realities (provoke a reflexion on the content of Islamic faith)

The last important part of the program is the pastoral reflexion which considers concrete lived realities of Islam and proposes perspectives for encounter and dialogue at the grassroots level. We offer training to various groups that live among Muslims and seek a peaceful coexistence and even deeper conviviality. IFIC in fact provides knowledge of Islam, a deepening of one's Christian faith and facilitates encounter and dialogue with Muslims. Knowledge brings healing and reconciliation. Many of the students of IFIC acknowledge that their time at the institute proved to be a conversion time and a healing process. For when there is mutual knowledge, mutual understanding comes and with it hurts are understood and forgiven sincerely. And a deeper relationship may arise from past painful experiences. In the current social and religious turmoil, IFIC is a blessing to the church in Mali and to the French speaking Africa. We have trained so far 92 candidates from many French speaking countries between 2007 and 2016.

² Cardinal Lavigerie quoted by Fr. José Morales, Provincial of Mali, in *En Chemin* n°7 (December 2004) 3

³ The plenary council of the Missionaries of Africa in Nairobi in 2000 took that decision.

Concluding Remarks:

In *Gaudium et spes* the Council teaches us that Christ the new Adam, through his incarnation, death and resurrection, acts in every human person in order to bring him to an interior renewal. ‘And this stands not only for those who believe in Christ but also for all men and women of Good will in whose hearts grace works in an invisible way. And since Christ died for all and our common destiny is unique, that is to say divine, therefore we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all, in a way known to God, the possibility to be associated to the pascal mystery.’⁴ And so, pope emeritus Benedict XVI writes: “Love is divine because it comes from God and unites us with God and, through this process of unification, transforms us into one big “Us” which surpasses our divisions and makes us become one till at last God be all in all”⁵

This fundamental attitude of embracing the whole of humanity, and in a particular way the stranger, is for me the biggest cry of Christ today to his Church. And it urges us to dare to become universal lovers in this global world. This requires that we reach out to the other seeking understanding; for ‘if we do not seek to understand each other, we allow despise to settle and we thus consciously dig a pit that separates us’⁶. Pope Francis’ call not to fall into the trap that he called “globalization of indifference” is urgent. The main recommendation I give to my students in IFIC is to always seek to know the other, to know yourself furthermore, to overcome your fears and to dare to reach out to the other in all sincerity, trust and charity; for God is always in dialogue with humankind as would say St. John Paul II.

The question is how to facilitate this encounter and dialogue of God with our brothers and sisters of other religions. My personal experience is that the path shown by Paul Tillich is the way: I used to say to my friends who ask me why I love those who persecute me for my faith, that I understand not to be understood. To borrow the terms of Tillich, I would say that I understand that there is no universal validity without living relation; that means that the absoluteness of Christianity is put at the level of experience; in other words it is through his relation to the revelation that a person recognises the validity of the claim to the universality of Christianity. And I am convinced that we ought to trust that ‘what we bear witness to in faith will fortify us for a more profound spiritual relation with Muslims; thus, leading us to discover, accept and share divine blessings with them.’⁷ Our main contribution is therefore being, amongst our brother and sisters of other religions, witnesses of Christ.

This is what I had to share with you, hoping that it serves in the discernment of the conference. Thank you.

Fr. Sawadogo Mamadou Adrien, Director of IFIC

⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

⁵ *Deus Caritas Est*, p. 40

⁶ François-Xavier Guiblin, « vivre en pays musulman, défi de la rencontre de l’autre », *Cahiers de l’Atelier* 531 (2011) 118-123.

⁷ St. John Paul II, « Forming communities that manifest Christ »