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## Spiritan Interreligious Dialogue: The Journey So Far

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Marc Botzung is currently the provincial of France. He has been interested in interreligious dialogue since his overseas training in Algeria (1987–89) where he met a deeply islamized society and the rise to power of political Islam. After graduating from the Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Rome, he became missionary in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania (1997–2008). Spiritan Coordinator for relations with Muslims (2006–2015), he was also member of the Commission for Islam of the Episcopal Conference of West Africa, while teaching at the Institute for Islamo-Christian Formation, Bamako, Mali, and at the Institut Catholique de Paris.

*Translated from French by  
Roberta Hatcher.*

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## SPIRITAN COMMITMENT IN INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: A LOOK AT THE ROAD TRAVELED

### Introduction

Thirty years ago a Spiritan confrere asked me what kind of mission I was planning to engage in. I told him about my interest in a strongly Muslim context, which had originated and grown over the course of my internship in Algeria (1987–89). He told me that this type of mission was not part of the congregation's mission, that I would do better to join the White Fathers or accept a more Spiritan mission. This exchange later caused me to reflect on what the congregation's mission may have been in the past and the developments that led us to integrating interreligious dialogue as an important dimension of our mission today. We have come a long way in the congregation (though perhaps not everywhere!), in the church and, of course, in the world. That said, let me add that our congregation has discerned the "signs of the times" in the past and discerns them today, and that interreligious dialogue is part of what "the Spirit says to the churches" at this time. This discernment along the way and in our history has consequences for the mission of our congregation today.

### Some Flashes from the distant Past

Fr. Libermann's letter to King Eliman of Dakar is one of the few, perhaps only sources, written by one of our founders to a non-Christian political and religious authority.<sup>1</sup> The tone is polite and respectful, the form is simple. The attitude is positive and has a statesmanlike impact. The tone is close to that described when the first Spiritans arrived in Zanzibar where they earned the esteem of the Sultan.

Another period in history led me to consult the *General Directory of Missions*, written by Bishop Le Roy, former superior general, and published in 1930 by his successor, Bishop Le Hunsec. This book, sent to Spiritans throughout the world to provide guidelines for the various situations in their life and their apostolate, contains a description of the public that the missionary will meet. Number 66 refers to Muslims. Bishop Le Roy begins with a global view: "Islam is a bloc whose religion is the cement and which takes man in his individual, family, and social life: that is its strength." He develops his point, then concludes harshly: "Islam sterilizes the land it invades."<sup>2</sup> He then discusses the situations of people who, taken individually, can be of divergent

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tendencies. He even talks about the situation of the dying: he generally recommends not to baptize them because a clandestine baptism would not allow a Christian funeral and could lead to hostile movements against the mission. Finally, his conclusion on Muslims sheds light on the thought of the confrere I mentioned in the introduction and helped me understand his reaction: “in any case, as long as we have real unfaithful to evangelize, we should not waste our time, our sorrow, and our money on the Muslim populations: it will already be a lot to try to stop the progress of their propaganda.”<sup>3</sup>

Number 67 follows, titled “Animists and Fetishists”; about these he writes:

Here we are on our true ground, the one we have long glimpsed and sought ... The workers of the Gospel will have to know the native language, the country, the evangelized tribe, their religion, and local superstitions, family and social customs, not to mention the names of the villages and their leaders. This can only be accomplished gradually but continuously, with the help of a notebook and notecards that can be used as needed for letters, reports, and ongoing studies. In any case, they will be useful to their successors.<sup>4</sup>

*Respect local customs in so far as they are good or indifferent*

Bishop Le Roy practiced this method himself and he was known for his ethnological works. He then addresses the attitudes to have: “Inspire respect, affection, and trust ...”<sup>5</sup> Respect local customs in so far as they are good or indifferent ...”<sup>6</sup>

But let’s not forget that during the Second Vatican Council, Archbishop Lefebvre, who represented the Congregation of the Holy Spirit as superior general, opposed the overtures made to other religions,<sup>7</sup> including a clear rejection of the texts of *Dignitatis humanae* on religious freedom, a text he considered to be a strong deviation from tradition, and *Nostra aetate*, on non-Christian religions, which is in some ways a continuation of it.

I conclude from this history leading up to the Second Vatican Council that the positions, convictions, and attitudes of the Spiritans on interreligious dialogue could vary, but that they seem to have involved simultaneously a great firmness of principles, a priori, rather negative of other religions, and behaviors on the ground that could be more

respectful of situations and people.

### **The Council's Contribution and the Succeeding Years**

It is not possible to develop here how the Second Vatican Council addressed the relationship to other believers and how that relates to a paradigm shift in the church's relation to the world. We'll limit ourselves to referring to the two texts mentioned above, as well as to the Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, published by Paul VI in 1964. The latter, in my view, provides a hermeneutical key to reading the spirit of the Council, particularly the introduction of the notion of dialogue.

I would like to recall, however, two famous phrases of the Council. First, that which opens the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, no. 1:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds.<sup>8</sup>

This text implies solidarity with all, which also includes religious diversity, even if it is not explicitly named. Then this part of *Lumen gentium* which defines the role of the church in the world: "by her relationship with Christ, the church is like a sacrament or sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of all mankind" (no. 1). The point which seems important to me here is that the mission of the church cannot be reduced to the defense of the sole interests of a group, even a local Catholic community. But it can happen that this local community has difficulty understanding that its leader is active in a consideration or collaboration with other believers ...

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Nor can we neglect the impact of a text like that which followed a Synod on Justice (1971) and where the work for justice would henceforth be declared as a "constitutive" element of the proclamation of the Gospel.

The proclamation of the Gospel is therefore done in various ways, in word and in deed.

These various texts impact the way of conceiving the mission of the church and they would gradually be accepted in the life of the congregation, which came to express the actualization of its charism in a more varied way than before. While studying the archives of Bishop Michel Bernard in the general archives of the congregation in Chevilly-Larue (France), I could see how he sought to put into practice these new recommendations in the framework of an Islamic Republic. Bernard was bishop of Mauritania from 1966 to 1973 after having been bishop in Congo (Brazzaville). He consulted and reflected with others at the regional level (West Africa) and within the congregation, then proposed original pastoral orientations for its context, providing on the one hand certain priests for pastoral service to the Christian communities (of foreign origins) and other priests called to invest in a greater knowledge of the country, its cultures, and its religion (Islam).

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It should also be noted that the congregation has had several personalities who worked for interreligious dialogue to become part of the Spiritan mission, often combining field experience with theological or pastoral reflection. I will mention in particular: René You (Algeria), Raymond Zimmermann (Mauritius), John O'Brien (Pakistan), Robert Ellison (The Gambia), Patrick Holland (Senegal), but we could also include those, probably more numerous, who expressed a deep interest in meeting with traditional religions.

### **The New Spiritan Rule of Life**

This theological work coupled with pastoral experience in the field made it possible to incorporate interreligious dialogue as an integral part of the congregation's mission in the edition of the *Spiritual Rule of Life* (SRL), the content of which was discussed during of the general chapter of 1986.<sup>9</sup> The relevant numbers are the following:

- SRL 13.1: "We take as our own the points that the church is currently stressing in mission: ... mission as dialogue." The argument is strong because it does not situate dialogue (understood here as interreligious) as a means, but as a possible goal of the mission!
- SRL 15.3: "In certain circumstances it is not possible for us to preach the gospel by word. In such cases our

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motivation is the conviction that the Holy Spirit is already present and that our presence is witness and service in the name of the gospel for the Kingdom (*Ad gentes*, 6).” This article seems to me to directly target the experience of Spiritans present in a very strongly Islamized context such as Algeria or Mauritania. The inscription of these experiences in the Rule of Life therefore authenticates their missionary reality as truly Spiritan.

- SRL 16.3: “We try in dialogue to co-operate honestly with the leaders and the faithful of other religions as well as with those who do not believe in God. We put our trust in the Holy Spirit, leading both us and them ‘to the complete truth’ (John 16:13).”
- It is also worth mentioning SRL 16.1: “So that the Christian witness may become integrated in the culture, reach people from within and become a force for liberation in their contemporary history, we strive in every way we can for a fruitful coming together of local cultural and religious traditions with the gospel of Christ.” This article is probably aimed primarily at the relationship with traditional religions, but it does not exclude a fruitful dialogue with the great religious traditions of humanity. This dialogue sometimes deals with relatively external elements, but we must also see in this text the allusion to these many inner dialogues that are lived in believers confronted to the very depths of themselves by various memberships, allegiances or convictions.

### **Major Changes in Religions Around the World**

Since the time of the Council, several developments have radically transformed the world, especially with regard to religions, and this had an impact on the congregation’s way of thinking. These include the end of the grip of the Marxist and atheistic paradigm which presented religions as systems of oppression that were inexorably coming to their end; a strong demographic growth which continues to upset the world religious balances through migrations; and finally, within Islam, profound changes still in progress: the emergence of a political Islam after the Iranian revolution (1979), the diffusion of a Wahhabi Islam thanks to the oil money of the Gulf countries, and the ever more radical developments of ultra-violent millenarian groups<sup>10</sup> (al-Qaeda, Daesh, Boko Haram, Ash-Shabab, etc.). The Islam of today is no longer that of the 1970s.

Obviously among the recent religious changes we should also mention are growing secularization, especially but perhaps not exclusively in the West; the formidable vitality of the Protestant revivalist churches; and the impact of the internet and current communications on religion.

### **Spiritan International Meetings Devoted to Interreligious Dialogue and Some Publications**

Several international meetings were organized by the congregation to share experiences, to learn about people and situations, and to integrate the dimension of interreligious dialogue into the concrete life of the congregation. Several of these meetings gave rise to publications.<sup>11</sup> Recall in particular:

*Several international meetings were organized by the congregation to share experiences, to learn about people and situations, and to integrate the dimension of interreligious dialogue into the concrete life of the congregation*

- Dakar (Senegal), July 1986, “Session on Mission and Islam,” bringing together confreres from Algeria, Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Nigeria, and Mauritius.<sup>12</sup>
- Chevilly-Larue (France), November 1991, “Spiritual Encounter on First Evangelization,” which largely covered the reality of traditional religions.<sup>13</sup>
- Banjul (Gambia), July 2002, Symposium “The Spiritans and Islam.”<sup>14</sup>
- Rome (Italy), September 2011, “Meeting on Interreligious Dialogue and Dialogue with Cultures.”<sup>15</sup>

The 1989 Dakar meeting had initiated a process of exchange and mutual support for confreres living in Islamized contexts. The Banjul symposium occurred a few months after the events of September 11, 2001. It had global dimensions (now with participants from Europe, the Philippines, etc.) and further integrated the rise of political Islam with its violent expressions in various locations, including Nigeria and Algeria. It also noted that the Spiritan commitment to the relationship with Islam was now widely accepted in the congregation. The meeting in Rome went beyond the Islamic framework to open up to wider interreligious horizons, such as the meeting of cultures. It also incorporated critical views on religious expressions and formulated concrete proposals that were then largely adopted by the 2012 General Chapter in Bagamoyo.

This critical look deserves to be maintained in order to not spill over into naivete and illusions. I therefore recall a few phrases:

*religious practices can themselves be sources of oppression and marginalization*

*if dialogue is a spirit and a way of life, our daily life and our way of working say more about ourselves than our words*

This focus also highlights how religious practices can themselves be sources of oppression and marginalization. It's no longer a question of simply knowing the situations, but instead of having a *critical* look at these operations in order to challenge them and become advocates for the poor. Obviously this also concerns life in the church (clericalism, communitarianism, exploitation). To be credible, interreligious dialogue cannot limit itself to ideas or speeches. It involves the transformation of everyday life and *the improvement of people's life conditions*. Common initiatives can be many: development projects, poverty alleviation, environmental protection and reforestation, maintenance work and public sanitation, etc. Finally, if dialogue is a spirit and a *way of life*, our daily life and our *way of working* say more about ourselves than our words. Are our methods dialogue or not?<sup>16</sup>

### **My Experience as Spiritan Coordinator for Dialogue with Muslims**

The Banjul meeting (2002) called for the appointment of a confrere to establish a network between the participants and more broadly with all Spiritans involved in the encounter with Muslims. René You was chosen and began its realization (2002-2006). The development of the internet began to facilitate contacts and the dissemination of information. Particular attention was paid to the question of specialized training, with research into places likely to welcome confreres invested or ready to invest in the Islamic-Christian dialogue.

I succeeded him in this responsibility and I sent out four to six annual messages using a contact list and a specific email address (csspislam@gmail.com). The distributed content included shared experiences, various texts (including the text circulated annually by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue on the occasion of *Ayd al-Adha / Tabaski*, more rarely the dissemination of a video, etc. I stopped sending messages in 2015, when I was elected provincial of France, no longer having the time needed for this work. Following the general chapter of Bagamoyo, the general council had already proposed that we broaden the topic and the circle of correspondents to include all interreligious dialogue, but I resisted this appeal which exceeded my knowledge and abilities.



What conclusions can I draw from this experience? It is certainly useful to have a minimum of coordination between Spiritans working in interreligious dialogue. Indeed, this allows us both to collect and distribute useful information on a fairly large scale (about 200 addresses during my time). Translation of texts (French and English) could, however, prove difficult. We gave priority to establishing a distribution list of interested confreres rather than sending it to everyone, in order not to make the information so general as to render it useless. We therefore focused on a specific audience, though some confreres were not directly in a situation of dialogue. A coordinator allows for the initiation of newcomers in this area, through advice or the sharing of information already disseminated previously.

It seems to me necessary that the published content return regularly to the Christian and spiritual foundations of dialogue and to our motivations, because there are many resistances both among the Christians we encounter and among other believers. As Bishop Augustine Shao of Zanzibar says, working in dialogue means often going against the grain. It is tiring to do so, hence the need to develop a spirituality of dialogue that is nourished by the encounters made.

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Having a coordinator finally makes it possible to remain vigilant about formation, particularly specialized training in Arabic language or Islamic studies or more general formation in interreligious dialogue. This also allows us to know if confreres are actually trained!

It is logical that the coordinator already be well informed and that this subject be part of his usual work, otherwise he will only do research for this broadcast and he won't allow himself enough time ...

### **Conclusion**

I'll make four points in conclusion as well as an opening:

1. The Spiritan assembly meeting in December 2018 in Zanzibar (Tanzania) to exchange experiences of interreligious dialogue was composed of many young confreres from various backgrounds, Africans in particular. This is a clear sign that young Spiritans have invested themselves in interfaith dialogue in recent years. The initiators, frequently European, have often passed away, but today the action has been taken over from horizons far and wide.

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*It is not religions that dialogue, it is people. To remain in dialogue it is necessary to deepen relations with certain concrete people, in a word to make friends*

2. The work pays. To bear fruit in the field of interreligious dialogue, staying and investing in a relationship that involves both work on the ground and study ultimately pays off. As the Gospel says: “Whoever sows sparingly, reaps sparingly. Whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” To be interested in the language, cultures, and religion of those who welcome us expresses, more than our words can, the interest that we take in them.

3. Today we reap the fruits that have been years in the making. The appointment to cardinal of Bishops Maurice Piat from Mauritius and Dieudonné Nzapalainga of Bangui (Central Africa) signifies that the spiritual investment in interfaith dialogue is fruitful. It is now recognized by the universal church and in certain places (Belgium, France, Cameroon, Mauritania, Mauritius); such competence and know-how on the Spiritans’ part are now expected.

4. It is not religions that dialogue, it is people. To remain in dialogue it is necessary to deepen relations with certain concrete people, in a word to make friends: very simple people, poor people perhaps, or religious leaders. Without the living touch and conviviality of friendship, it is difficult to persist and continue to believe that a relationship is possible. It is therefore a question of “receiving” in these dialogues what we live with others.

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#### **Abbreviations**

I/D Information/Documentation. General Council, Rome

ND *Notes et Documents relatifs à la vie et à l'oeuvre du Vénérable François Marie Paul Libermann.* 16 vols.

#### **References**

Congrégation du Saint Esprit et du Saint Cœur de Marie, *Directoire général des Missions.* Paris : Maison-Mère, 1930.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Letter dated January 1, 1848. A draft has also been preserved. See ND, X, 22–26. Paris, 1940.

<sup>2</sup>*Directoire général des Missions*, 114.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>Here is the rest of the quote: “... making it an obligation of conscience to avoid anything that could distance us from the religion we represent; hence the need to be always just, faithful to the word given, patient, free from all anger or brutality, without rancor, without preference, and without weakness.”

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>His opposition to certain evolutions of the Council was not representative of the thought of all the confreres, nor even of that of the Spiritan bishops present at the Council. It is difficult to imagine, however, that he was the only one to think thus ...

<sup>8</sup>Vatican II Documents are translated according to Walter Abbot, S. J. London: Chapman, 1966.

<sup>9</sup>The promulgation of the new SRL was preceded by a few months by the publication of I/D 39, Rome, June 1985, “Dialogue – At the Frontiers of Evangelization” (4 pp.). This publication was probably intended for the preparation of the general chapter.

<sup>10</sup>We call millenarian some contemporary Islamic movements that develop a symbolic imaginary and action that corresponds to an understanding of the times in which we live as the end times, a time of final struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. In our opinion, these radical and hyper-violent movements mark a departure from the political Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood, insofar as a political vision like that of the Muslim Brotherhood is accompanied by a project of society, of progressive phases of realization, an organization into parties, the acceptance of compromises, etc.

<sup>11</sup>Three successive publications were devoted to the theme of dialogue. Two of them dealt with interreligious dialogue as we will see a document I/D 47, Rome, January 1991, will even deal with “Mission and dialogue: dialogue with the modern world” (4 pp.).

<sup>12</sup>See *Informations spiritaines*, No. 78, 1989 and I/D 46, Rome, November 1990, “Mission et dialogue: dialogue avec les religions non-chrétiennes” (4 pp.).

<sup>13</sup>This meeting resulted in the publication of I/D

50, Rome, June 1992, “Dialogue with Traditional Religions” (4 pp.).

<sup>14</sup>*Spiritan Life*, 14, “Spiritains and Islam,” Rome, December 2002.

<sup>15</sup>See *Spiritan Life*, 24, “Interreligious Dialogue,” Rome, September 2014.

<sup>16</sup>Final text of the Rome meeting, reproduced in the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the XX General Chapter, 38–39.