

Book Reviews

Christian de Chergé - Spiritual Writings

Christian Krokus and Habib Zanzania (eds)

Modern Spiritual Masters Series

Orbis Books, Mary Knoll, NY, 2025

ISBN 9781626986091 (pbk) 164 + xxxviii pages

£19.58

I imagine that for most people an exploration of the life, work and witness of Christian de Chergé starts with the facts of his abduction and murder, along with six of his fellow Trappist monks from the monastery at Tibhirine, in May 1996 - as depicted in the film *Of Gods and Men* (2010). The path that led him there is briefly recounted in the introduction to this book, but for a fuller picture of de Chergé's life I would point the reader to *The Monks of Tibhirine* by John Kiser (2002). De Chergé's total commitment to interreligious dialogue with his Muslim neighbours and the theology thereof is best explored by reading *Christian de Chergé - A Theology of Hope* by Christian Salenson (2012).

But this book is something different. It presents us with a generous selection from de Chergé's written legacy - chapter talks, letters, retreat addresses, homilies and articles - nearly all of which have been made available in English translations for the first time. Krokus and Zanzania see there being three distinct contexts to his writings:

He was a monk, that his monastic vocation was thoroughly integrated with his encounter with Islam and dialogue with Muslims, and that he was acutely aware of France's legacy of colonialist exploitation and violence, including his and his monastery's part in that legacy (p.xxix).

The first two contexts are explored in this volume, the third barely touched upon.

Perhaps the best place to start for those coming to explore de

Chergé's ideas for the first time would be with the three articles of a more academic nature. In 'Praying the Church: Listening to Islam' (1982) de Chergé explains how he began 'a pilgrimage toward communion of saints where Christians and Muslims, and many others, share the same filial joy' (p.109), and goes on to share his joy in discovering so many parallels between the Bible and the Qur'an. In 'The Mystical Ladder of Dialogue' (1989) de Chergé, in a beautiful image, sees Christianity and Islam as two parallel poles, meeting at infinity. They are connected by successive rungs, each deeply anchored into the two uprights, to make a ladder. He names some of the rungs:

the giving of oneself to the Absolute God, regular prayer, fasting, sharing of alms, conversion of heart, unceasing remembrance of the Presence that bears a Name (dhikr, ejaculatory prayer, the Jesus prayer), trust in Providence, the urgency of hospitality without boundaries, the calls to spiritual combat and to pilgrimage, which can also be interior. (pp.133-4)

In the final article, 'Intermonastic Dialogue and Islam' (1995), de Chergé asks, 'Is there a place for an INTER-MONASTIC dialogue with Islam since, it is said, there is no "monasticism" in Islam?', a view propagated by Massignon. (p.159) But de Chergé lists three vital ties between Islam and the monastic tradition:

Obedience - It is *Islam* since the very word means 'surrender to God'.

Ritual prayer (*opus dei*) - Muslims are called to pray five times a day, to fast and to give alms.

Lectio divina - together we are engaged in an adventure of meaning. In our way of reading Scripture there is a path of sharing. (pp.160-1)

The volume contains 9 letters to Maurice Borrmans, an arabist professor in Rome whom de Chergé had met there as a student. They reveal de Chergé's Eucharistic devotion and intimations of its counterpart in Islam: 'One may be inclined to seek in the daily life of Muslims the Eucharistic trace of this shared vocation to the Reality that transcends the sacrament.' (p.42) Not that the two men always saw eye to eye. De Chergé at times seems impatient with Borrmans' rather cautious and timid approach: 'I was a bit sad, moreover, because of your insistent suggestion to "listen to your brothers." I must ask: Which ones?' (p.51) De Chergé saw not only his fellow monks, but also all fellow Christians and Muslims as his brothers.

The selection of de Chergé's chapter talks in this volume cover a wide variety of topics, including community, brotherhood, Islam and martyrdom. Those on martyrdom are particularly poignant in view of the daily threats that the monks lived under and their ultimate murder. In his talk on November 7, 1995, de Chergé took issue with the counsel given to him by Father Bernardo, the abbot general who told him: 'The order needs MONKS more than martyrs. So you must do everything you can to avoid a tragic end that would benefit no one.' For de Chergé and his fellow monks, the monastic vocation itself was a martyrdom, a complete surrender to God, and that Tibhirine was 'our place for the moment,' and that 'we must remain faithful to our conscience, our monastic ideal, to our environment, and to our church.' (pp.27-8)

The homilies included in this volume, unlike the chapter talks which were written out verbatim, are more a set of lengthy notes, with key words capitalised, and with each homily prefaced by the Bible passages proclaimed that day. As such they are a demanding, but also a far more rewarding read, best treated as a form of *lectio divina*. Like the chapter talks the themes range widely, but those on martyrdom are most moving. The one for Pentecost 1994, 'The Martyrdom of the Holy Spirit', is a wonderful piece, capturing so clearly how far de Chergé had gone in dialogue with Islam:

Pentecost ... on the day after *Eid al-Adha*, the 'Feast of Sacrifice,' the 'greater feast' (*Eid al-Kabîr*). Pentecost is also a 'great feast'! 'So, what do you sacrifice, what do you slaughter?', a young [Muslim] neighbour asked me. I am inclined to answer, 'I offer the multitude of WITNESSES who, ever since the event we are celebrating, have never ceased to give their lives for the proclamation of the gospel, following the example of their Master and Lord.'

Indeed, isn't Pentecost first and foremost the great feast of WITNESS, that is, of 'martyrdom' (in Greek), of *shahâda* (in Arabic)? (p.93)

Krokus and Zanzana are to be congratulated on bringing to us this wide-ranging and thought provoking selection from de Chergé's writings. I would recommend this book to anyone with an interest in or engaged with Christian-Muslim relations and dialogue, and also to all those seeking spiritual insights into brotherhood, community, commitment, and fidelity even unto death.

Stephen Dunhill is the book reviews editor of *The Merton Journal* and has been a committee member of The Merton Society since 2006.