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# Christian de Chergé

A Theology of Hope

By

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# Foreword

This book is offered as a modest essay. It proceeds from the author's spiritual and intellectual experience and leads the reader in a way that is at once demanding and accessible into the same experience. Christian Salenson, director of the Institute for Sciences and Theology of Religions in Marseille, was brought to this experience when, "by a combination of circumstances," he began to study the writings of Christian de Chergé and to let himself be touched by the thought and spirituality of the prior of Tibhirine and his community. "Few meetings are the result of chance."

In a small book that is now a standard reference, Christian Salenson has already explored the spiritual richness of the texts of Christian de Chergé.<sup>1</sup> In that volume he demonstrates how this man could be considered a pioneer given by God to our time to help the Church discern the way on which the Spirit of Jesus wants to lead it. What is this way? It is, in a word, a new openness to the foundational evangelical experience of what de Chergé calls "Visitation."

The cultural and religious diversity that marks our era inevitably leads believers of all religions to confront the temptation of relativism. The evangelical witness of Visitation—the very experience of encountering the other—is offered as a way to transform this temptation into a promise. The mystery of encounter, which is at the heart of the apostolic life, is a sign of the Church's essential

1. Christian Salenson, *Prier 15 jours avec Christian de Chergé, prieur des moines de Tibhirine* (Paris: Nouvelle cité, 2006).

vocation: the God whom it professes is revealed in the encounters that this same God instigates.

Christian de Chergé understood this mystery and this vocation the day when a Muslim village policeman, a father of ten and a wise man, gave his life to save de Chergé's, then a young seminarian confronted, along with the rest of his generation, with the hard realities of the Algerian war. This friendship sealed in blood determined de Chergé's vocation and the spiritual direction of his life. "Few meetings are the result of chance."

The question Christian Salenson now invites us to ask is the following: can de Chergé's spiritual intuitions, emerging out of long experience of monastic life in a Muslim context, ripened in personal and community prayer, and nourished by the most ordinary, everyday things—work in the fields and the welcoming of guests—be theologically fruitful for the work of "faith seeking understanding"? Christian Salenson wrote this new book because he was convinced that the answer to this question is affirmative. And we owe him our thanks.

Briefly, this is the book's argument: while the theme of the Visitation defines the spiritual posture of Christian de Chergé, it is the theme of *hope* that distills his theological reflection. Indeed, just as the story of the Visitation (Luke 1:39-56) offers an evangelical interpretative key for living out as promise the sometimes disconcerting experience of existential encounter with brothers and sisters of other religions, so the category of hope is the resolutely eschatological center of gravity on which to build a contemporary theology of religious encounter.

Christian Salenson leads the reader patiently and surely through Christian de Chergé's writings, often luminous in their conciseness. On questions as difficult as the place of Islam in the plan of God, Christology, ecclesiology, and especially eschatology, Salenson, with only the briefest, but pertinent, comments of his own, lets us appreciate the theological richness of de Chergé's texts, texts that are far more monastic than academic. By introducing into the contemporary debate on the theology of religions a voice formed within the setting of monastic life, Salenson has done a great service. This particular monastic voice, arising from

the deep waters of contemplation and daily fraternal life, is bold, sometimes even dazzling.

This is not the first time in the history of theology that new routes have been opened by the monasteries and not by the universities. I say this not to disqualify academic work but rather to highlight the fact that there are other ways of arriving at theological knowledge. By introducing us to the theological richness of de Chergé's writings, Christian Salenson, alert to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches through the experience of a tiny monastery lost in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains in Algeria, makes a major contribution to the debates of contemporary theology, a contribution, moreover, that is much broader than the sole question of interreligious dialogue.

I would like to end these few opening lines with a more personal note. As a result of a "combination of circumstances" that is doubtless not "the result of chance," I have been working with the author for more than fifteen years now. I know his desire to contribute, with courage and modesty, to the debates shaking society, the Church, and theology. He contributes from a stance in real life, taking into account pastoral questions on the existential terrain of spiritual experience. I know his determination to accompany theologically the local Churches, convinced as he is of the necessary link between theological work at the university and the concrete life of these Churches, their pastoral questionings, their experiences of precariousness, their search for paths faithful to the Lord's call.

With this book, conceived after a long personal maturation, based on solid teamwork within the framework of the Institute of Sciences and Theology of Religions of Marseille, and refined in the practice of teaching, Christian Salenson allows us not only to appreciate the theological relevance of the writings of Christian de Chergé but also to taste the joy and fruitfulness of an ecclesial and fraternal work of understanding of the faith. He deserves our profound appreciation.

Jean-Marc Aveline  
Director of the Institut Catholique de la Méditerranée



# Introduction

When, by a combination of circumstances, I was led to study the writings of Christian de Chergé, I had no idea what sort of personal adventure I was going to find myself embarked upon. Through my years of involvement with the Institut de Sciences et de Théologie des Religions of Marseille (ISTR), I had already been sensitized to religious diversity and its relevance to an understanding of theology as a whole. In de Chergé I found a witness and a pioneer capable of leading me on this path both by his thought and by his spirituality. After I published some of de Chergé's texts and meditations<sup>1</sup> I realized that my interest in Christian de Chergé was widely shared by others. The conviction that his theological reflections could connect with an even greater number of Christians and that his theology ought to be presented and made accessible led me to produce the present book.

This modest work was born out of a conjunction of several realities. On the one hand, there was the unavoidable recognition of the fact that our societies are irreversibly pluralistic, both religiously and culturally. On the other hand, there was the foundational experience in my personal life that the encounter with the other, in the most diverse forms, is the privileged locus of God's self-revelation. The journeys of numerous people whom I accompanied in my ministry gave me the opportunity to verify this experience.

1. Christian Salenson, *Prier 15 jours avec Christian de Chergé, prieur des moines de Tibhirine*, Praying 15 Days Series (Paris: Nouvelle Cité, 2006).

Finally, this book was born of a faith conviction—namely, because the master of history is no stranger to this cultural and religious plurality, we can receive plurality as an opportunity offered to our societies and to the Church, an opportunity bearing a promise for each individual and for humankind as a whole.

God does not abandon God's Church; on the contrary, I believe God gives to each era the pioneers it needs. In our own era, God has given Christian de Chergé and the brothers of Tibhirine. For my part, I would like simply to contribute one small building block to the project by introducing the thought of Christian de Chergé. For me this is more a joy to be shared than a duty to be fulfilled, despite the hours when writing becomes laborious.

The context of the book's gestation was the growth and development of the Institut de Sciences et de Théologie des Religions of Marseille and of the Institut Catholique de la Méditerranée.<sup>2</sup> The climate of research and of mutual questioning, the interface with civil society through the many organizational bodies maintained by the Institute, the effective collaboration with the pastoral services of the local Churches of the region all furthered this work. I have enjoyed for years the fraternal atmosphere of a team rich in diverse competencies, animated by a serene confidence in the tradition of the Church, desirous of serving local Churches, and alert to the latest research. In short, I have benefited from a university and Church microclimate that is more than favorable.

Finally, this book is born from my relationship with the Cistercian Abbey of Our Lady of Aiguebelle, the motherhouse of Tibhirine. After the dramatic events of 1996, the archives and the writings of the monks were brought back to Aiguebelle. A working group was founded at the ISTR that, in conjunction with the Abbey of Aiguebelle, had the double objective of publishing the writings of the monks and of working on the thought of Christian de Chergé. I have benefited from the work and research of this

2. The Institute of Sciences and Theology of Religions (ISTR) of Marseille was founded in 1992 at the instigation of Cardinal Coffy and under the direction of Jean-Marc Aveline. Today, it is part of the Catholic Institute of the Mediterranean (ICM).

group as much from the fraternal support of those who participated in it: Françoise Durand, André Barbeau, Anne-Noëlle Clément, Roger Michel, and Christophe Purgu. Fraternal bonds unite us to the monastic community of Our Lady of Atlas at Midelt in Morocco. We cannot fail to see, given the presence there of the two brothers, Amédée and Jean-Pierre who survived the dramatic events of the murder of seven monks of the community in 1996, that in that place the experience of Tibhirine lives on.

This book is intended as an introduction to Christian de Chergé's theology of religious encounter. How to describe his theology? I prefer the term "theology of encounter" because Christian de Chergé develops not simply a theology of religions but a theology of the *encounter* of religions, particularly the encounter between Christianity and Islam. By theology of encounter, I want to indicate that it is a matter not solely of considering Islam from the point of view of Christian faith but also of how this encounter allows Christian faith to be deepened. The more appropriate term is, therefore, "theology of encounter." One could just as well say, "theology of encounter with Islam." I use the term "theology of religious encounter" because what de Chergé experienced in his encounter with Islam is broadly valid for a theology of the encounter of the religions in general.

I have arranged this introduction to de Chergé's theology of religious encounter in three parts. In the first part, I present Christian de Chergé and sketch his theological and political context. In the second part, which will take up the major portion of this work, I show how the engagement of de Chergé with dialogue with Islam led him to develop a way of thinking theologically about the place of Islam in the plan of God and in interreligious dialogue, and about Christ and the Church. Finally, I show how de Chergé's thought builds to an understanding of eschatology. In the third part, I highlight, with regard to certain selected topics, the impact a theology of religious encounter can have on our way of living and understanding Christian life and ecclesial life.



## Chapter 1

# The Context

Christian de Chergé was the prior of the community of the monks of Tibhirine, a Cistercian monastery in the Atlas Mountains of Algeria.<sup>1</sup> In 1996, during the years of the Algerian troubles, seven of the Atlas community were abducted, officially by the GIA,<sup>2</sup> and held prisoner for two months<sup>3</sup> before coming to a tragic

1. This monastery, founded in 1938, was the successor of the monastery of Staouéli, founded in 1843 and closed in 1904 at the time of the antireligious laws. [The Third Republic enforced *laïcité* (secularism) by formally separating Church and state in 1905, taking over religious buildings and properties, and ending state funding of religious bodies. Education had been removed from Church control in the 1880s. – Tr.] Tibhirine became an abbey in 1947 and was later reduced again to the status of priory.

2. *Groupe Islamiste Armé* [Armed Islamist Group]. The extent of responsibility for the monks' death of the GIA and of the French and Algerian governments has not been established to date. A "complaint against a person or persons unknown" was lodged at the Superior Court of Paris in the names of Dom Armand Veilleux, OCSO, the abbot of Scourmont, Belgium, and of the family members of Fr. Christophe Lebreton, with no outcome as yet. [An article in the British Jesuit journal *The Tablet* by Alain Woodrow (December 4, 2010, pp. 10–11) reports Dom Armand's conclusions from his own investigation: The Algerian military used Djamel Zitouni, a double agent, and an infiltrated GIA cell to capture the monks. The idea was then to "liberate" them and force them to leave the country for their own safety. But the plan backfired when another terrorist cell stole the monks from their original captors. The monks probably died as "collateral damage" when the army strafed the second group from helicopters with bullets and napalm in a botched rescue attempt. Only the monks' severed heads were recovered and put in coffins to make it look like a terrorist execution: the bodies would have borne the marks of military weaponry. – Tr.]

3. They were abducted the night of March 26–27. On April 26, communiqué no. 43 of the GIA, dated April 18, signed by the Emir Abu Abdel Rahman

end. Two brothers, Amédée and Jean-Pierre, survived.<sup>4</sup> Thanks to them, Our Lady of Atlas continues, no longer in Algeria but in Morocco, at the monastery of Midelt.

Christian de Chergé entered Our Lady of Atlas in 1971.<sup>5</sup> He had been ordained a priest for the Diocese of Paris and, after five years of ministry, entered the Cistercian abbey of Our Lady of Aiguebelle<sup>6</sup> in 1969. Soon after, he joined the community at Tibhirine and thereby answered the call to live in Algeria as “one who prays among others who pray.”

De Chergé entered the monastery with a solid theological formation acquired at the Institut Catholique de Paris.<sup>7</sup> He went on to study two years in Rome at PISAI,<sup>8</sup> an institute run by the White Fathers. There, he studied under Robert Caspar and Maurice Boormans, with whom he established lasting friendships despite their divergent views. He lived as a monk in the community of Tibhirine for twenty-five years, and he spent the final twelve years

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Amin, alias Djamel Zitouni, and published in the London daily *Al Hayat*, gave “theological” reasons for the abduction. On April 30, a certain Abdullah delivered an audiocassette to the French embassy in Algiers on which the voices of the seven monks had been recorded the night of April 20. They were executed the morning of May 21. On May 23, communiqué 44 of the GIA announced their death. On June 2, their funeral was celebrated in the basilica of Our Lady of Africa, at the same time as that of Cardinal Duval. They were buried at Tibhirine on June 4.

4. [Tr. note: Amédée died in July 2008 at the age of 87.]

5. He was ordained a priest on March 21, 1964, at the Church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris. For his biography, see especially Marie-Christine Ray, *Christian de Chergé, prieur de Tibhirine* [*Christian de Chergé: Prior of Tibhirine*] (Paris: Bayard/Centurion, 1998); and John Kiser, *The Monks of Tibhirine* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2002); *Passion pour l'Algérie, les moines de Tibhirine* [*A Passion for Algeria: The Monks of Tibhirine*], trans. Henry Quinson (Paris: Nouvelle Cité, 2006).

6. [Tr. note: A French monastery of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance (= Trappists), and mother house of Our Lady of Atlas in Tibhirine.]

7. De Chergé was a student at the Catholic Institute of Paris from October 1956 to June 1964.

8. He was a student at PISAI, Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi et Islamistica, from August 1972 to the summer of 1974. The aim of this institute is to promote interreligious dialogue. It was founded in 1926 in Tunis and transferred to Rome in 1964.

as prior.<sup>9</sup> We possess a certain number of his writings, mostly homilies,<sup>10</sup> chapter talks given during the twelve years he was prior, and a few lectures<sup>11</sup> or retreats<sup>12</sup> that he delivered.

We are convinced that Christian de Chergé's theology of religious encounter is sufficiently original and rich so as to be a valuable contribution to current theological reflection and to the lives of Christians and communities in a context of religious diversity. This conviction has guided our efforts, and this work is intended to share the results of our research with all those who, for whatever reasons, are interested in religious encounter.<sup>13</sup>

## The Engagement of the Church

The theology of religious encounter is still in its infancy. We believe, however, that this admission is not simply an elegant manner of laying down one's cards and saying that the sides

9. From 1984 to 1996.

10. In the context of the research laboratory at the Institut de Sciences et de Théologie des Religions of Marseille, in cooperation with the Abbey of Our Lady of Aiguebelle, and thanks to the work of Dom André Barbeau, a certain number of the writings of Christian de Chergé have been published. To date: Christian de Chergé, *Dieu pour tout jour, chapitres du père Christian de Chergé à la communauté de Tibhirine (1985–1996)* [*God for Each Day (or "All Time"—cf. toujours, "always")*]: Chapter Talks of Fr. Christian de Chergé to the Community of Tibhirine], 2nd ed., Les cahiers de Tibhirine (Montjoyer: Abbé d'Aiguebelle, 2006); Christian de Chergé, *L'autre que nous attendons, homélies du père Christian de Chergé (1970–1996)* [*The Other Whom We Await: Homilies of Fr. Christian de Chergé*], Les cahiers de Tibhirine (Montjoyer: Abbé d'Aiguebelle, 2006); the article Christian de Chergé, "Prier en Église à l'écoute de l'islam" ["Praying as Church While Listening to Islam"], *Chemins de dialogue* 27 (2006).

11. Some of these have been published by Bruno Chenu in *L'invincible espérance* [*Hope Unconquerable*] (Paris: Bayard, 1996); and in *Sept vies pour Dieu et l'Algérie* [*Seven Lives for God and Algeria*] (Paris: Bayard, 1996).

12. Forthcoming.

13. The research laboratory at the ISTR of Marseille has published a collection of studies on Christian de Chergé: "Relecture de l'expérience de Tibhirine" ["A Rereading of the Experience of Tibhirine"], *Chemins de dialogue* 24 (2004), with contributions from Anne-Noëlle Clément, Françoise Durand, Roger Michel, Christophe Purgu, and Christian Salenson. Also of interest is *Chemins de dialogue* 27 (2006), on the theme "L'Écho de Tibhirine."

have been heard and the case is closed. Rather, it should serve as a stimulus for research. The same clear-eyed view prompts us to affirm that in the course of a few years, thanks especially to Pope John Paul II and certain prophetic acts of his ministry<sup>14</sup> and, though less visible, to the work accomplished within the Church (in particular, within the Church of France, to which the ISTR has made a significant contribution), Christian communities have steadily increased their awareness of the situation of religious diversity to the point that it can rightly be said that religious diversity is the new reality of Christian existence. Though there is no lack of difficulties, in view of the remarkable progress that has been made and of the changes that have taken place in this area in a relatively short period of time, difficulties should not discourage us. There is every reason to marvel, despite our legitimate frustrations, at the fact that an institution as massive as the Catholic Church has managed, in the space of a few years, to reconsider its relationship to Judaism, Islam, and the other world religions, despite the weight of centuries. The field lies open.

### The International Situation

These changes are all the more remarkable in view of the fact that the present context is not promising. The international situation has become increasingly tense over the last several years, especially since September 11, 2001. The “clash of civilizations,”<sup>15</sup> dreaded by the most lucid minds, is welcomed by others, and not solely by al-Qaeda networks. We were filled with admiration at the political clear-sightedness and commitment to peace displayed by John Paul II during the events of September 11, not only in his choosing not

14. To which must be added the acts of the ministry of Benedict XVI, in particular his prayer in the Blue Mosque of Istanbul: “Pausing for a few minutes of recollection in that place of prayer, I addressed the One Lord” (General Audience, December 6, 2006. [Tr. note: An official English version is available at the Vatican web site: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/audiences/2006/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20061206\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20061206_en.html)]).

15. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

to align himself with the Machiavellian ideology implied by the identification of a so-called axis of evil, but also in his calling upon Catholics to fast on the last day of Ramadan<sup>16</sup> and his invitation to leaders of the world to convene at Assisi on January 24, 2002.<sup>17</sup> These gestures did not have all the impact they should have had, neither inside the Church (fasting one day of Ramadan seemed so incredible that many people could not even understand the pope's request) nor in society (because the media, so often at the service of the dominant thinking, were unable to let an initiative that failed to correspond to the ideology of the moment be heard).

It is into this context that a theology of religious encounter inserts itself. The political dimension of religious diversity—where what is at stake is nothing less than peace—is sufficient to explain this theology's importance, urgency, and originality. Establishing a just relationship with other believers, one that is rooted in Christian revelation, is both a necessity and an excellent means of working, independent from passing trends, for a durable peace.

Working for a just peace is a sufficient motive for legitimizing a theology of religious encounter, but it is not the principal one. In fact, it behooves us to ensure that the political stakes remain secondary with respect to the theological stakes. Politics have not hesitated to make a tool of religion, and today there is no shortage of political leaders who highlight the role that religions can play in our present social context. Our vigilance should be all the greater because history teaches us that representatives of religions are not good at resisting the siren song of power. They love to have the front row seat and to believe themselves influential in current affairs, and so they quickly forget that religion's worth lies elsewhere. Many times over the course of the centuries, religious leaders have not shrunk from obtaining a certain kind of notoriety from their alignment with power. This is happening today with American Protestant Evangelicals and with the political exploitation of Islam.

16. December 14, 2001.

17. The invitation was made during the *Angelus*, on Sunday, November 18, 2001. On January 24, the religious leaders joined in signing a charter of peace that was sent to all governments. It was published in *Chemins de dialogue* 20 (2002): 195.

## Aim of Religious Encounter

A theology of religious encounter does not have political issues as its primary aim, however important these may be. On the contrary, the meaning of political issues is revealed only when they are resituated within the authentic vocation of world religions. The meeting at Assisi on October 27, 1986, an emblematic and symbolic act of a theology of encounter, set the tone. To be sure, this meeting took place as a response to the International Year of Peace, a year decreed by the United Nations, but the response proper to the religions was to celebrate a day of prayer. Some observers of the encounter at Assisi might have asked if there were not more urgent and effective things to do than pray. Ought not the participants rather to have given priority to action plans, organized international colloquia, and stepped up the fight against injustice? The fact is, they had tried all of this at previous meetings<sup>18</sup> without striking the right chord; they succeeded only in turning the religions into facsimiles of nongovernmental organizations.

The genius of Assisi, which gave birth to what has since been called the "spirit of Assisi,"<sup>19</sup> was, among other things, to give religions their rightful place and allow them to respond to their common vocation.<sup>20</sup> Once assembled, the religions affirmed their common vocation: to open humanity to transcendence. The aim of interreligious dialogue is not peace in a sociopolitical sense of the word. To be sure, religions have an original contribution

18. For instance, at the international meeting at Kyoto in 1970.

19. "[The meeting at Assisi] was a prophetic intuition and a moment of grace. . . . The 'spirit of Assisi,' which has continued to spread throughout the world since that event." (Benedict XVI, Pastoral Visit to Assisi, Homily at the Eucharistic Concelebration, June 17, 2007. Official English version available at Vatican web site, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/homilies/2007/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20070617\\_assisi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20070617_assisi_en.html).)

20. John Paul II, Address to the Cardinals and Members of the Roman Curia, December 2, 1986. To the Roman Curia at the Exchange of Christmas Wishes, December 22, 1986. [Tr. note: The official version is only in Italian on the Vatican web site (but see the English edition of *L'Osservatore Romano* for January 5, 1987): [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/speeches/1986/december/index.htm](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1986/december/index.htm).]

to make, so that peace is unimaginable without dialogue among them. Nevertheless, it would be reductionist to assign this aim to interreligious dialogue. The goal of interreligious dialogue is theological. The proper aim of interreligious dialogue is to call all sides to turn more resolutely to the One, the Ineffable, the Ultimate.

Trends change quickly. Within the Church interreligious dialogue has been, for some, one trend among others: to talk about it, to write an article on it. It was the thing to do before moving on to other things. In the meantime, in spite of trends and independent of them, the real work of religious dialogue goes. Religious diversity is always with us. If interreligious encounter had not provoked at the very heart of the Christian faith theological reflection upon questions about the vocation of the religions in the world and their place in the plan of God, we would have missed the opportunity that our sensitivity to the questions offers us today; we would have deprived ourselves of knowing what “the Spirit is saying to the Churches”<sup>21</sup> in and through this unprecedented situation of religious diversity. Thus, it is important to continue the work of dialogue in order to give a Christian account of religious diversity and its theological consequences that both is faithful to the Church’s living tradition and avoids relativizing it.

A Christian theology of religious encounter takes into account that it is not only from the point of view of the Christian faith that the theological questions raised by the fact of diversity, some of them delicate, are addressed. All parties of the encounter should be open to questions, to going deeper into their own traditions, and to new and unexpected developments that the encounter itself might give rise to. In other words, the confrontation with other religions has the potential to be theologically fruitful for all.

The encounter can even be considered a veritable *kairos*<sup>22</sup> for the Churches. In any case, I concur with the opinion of Paul Tillich: “[A] Christian theology which is not able to enter into a creative dialogue with the theological thought of other religions misses

21. [Tr. note: Compare Rev 2:7–3:22.]

22. The word *kairos* can be translated as “favorable time” [as in 2 Cor 6:2 – Tr.]. It is the moment of the in-breaking of revelation.

a world-historical occasion and remains provincial."<sup>23</sup> This judgment is accompanied by a promise: a theology that takes up this challenge is a theology that can hope to enter more deeply into the mystery of the covenant between God and humanity.

## Interreligious Dialogue

It suffices for now to mention in this regard the dialogue between Jews and Christians since the Second Vatican Council. The determination of both John XXIII and Paul VI is well known, as is the remarkable work of Augustine Cardinal B ea in managing to produce the text of *Nostra Aetate*<sup>24</sup>—originally intended as a friendly gesture directed to the Jews.<sup>25</sup> Centuries of resistance had to be overcome in order for the great majority of the council fathers, little by little, to glimpse the importance of Jewish-Christian relations. Today, several decades later, even though there is still much ground to cover before arriving at a more accurate approach toward Judaism, the Catholic Church truly has been engaged in a positive consideration of Judaism, something many see as a veritable Copernican revolution. The results of this conversion have been beneficial on many levels beyond the Church's relations with the Jewish world and thought: for instance, the Church's

23. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 6. On Paul Tillich and the theology of religions, we cannot recommend highly enough the noteworthy thesis of Jean-Marc Aveline, *L'enjeu christologique en th ologie des religions* [*What Is at Stake for Christology in the Theology of Religions*] Cogitatio Fidei Series 227 (Paris: Cerf, 2003). Also, Jean-Marc Aveline, *Paul Tillich* (Marseille: Publications Chemin de dialogue, 2007), in which the author refers to the famous lecture of Paul Tillich at T bingen in 1963 on "Christianity's Claim to Absoluteness and the World Religions."

24. *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions), October 28, 1965.

25. On the history of the elaboration of the text and the numerous debates it occasioned, see G.-M. Cottier, "Historique de la declaration" ["A Review of the Declaration"], in *Les relations de l' glise avec les religions non-chr tiennes: Nostra Aetate; texte latin et traduction fran aise* [*The Relations of the Church with Non-Christian Religions: Nostra Aetate; Latin Text and French Translation*], Unam Sanctam Series 61 (Paris: Cerf, 1966).

relationship to and understanding of its own Scriptures, its sacramental rites, and its mission; its knowledge of Jesus; and even its own ecclesial identity. There is much yet to be done in order to construct a true Christian theology of Judaism,<sup>26</sup> and vigilance is still necessary, but it is reasonable to suppose that the work that has been undertaken will be continued.

Interreligious dialogue cannot be limited to Jewish-Christian dialogue. It is urgent for the Church to establish a solid foundation for dialogue with other religious traditions, whether Islam or the great religions of Southeast Asia, as well as the traditional religions of Africa and the Americas. The Church must avoid the temptation to reduce interreligious dialogue to the single dialogue between Jews and Christians, whose foundations have begun to be established, and to consider the relationship with other religions exclusively on the basis of social welfare by affirming certain ethical convergences concerning justice or respect for life. To be sure, the relationship with Judaism is decisive for Christian revelation and, from this standpoint, it is unique. But if we were to reduce interreligious dialogue to Jewish-Christian dialogue, we would turn our back on a promise made to both Jews and Christians, and, frankly, we would distort the very relationship between Jews and Christians, for we exist together only by virtue of a relationship with others, with "the nations." Jewish-Christian dialogue is validated by its capacity to consider other religions and to enter into relationship with them. That is why an all-embracing interreligious dialogue is important to Christians and why everything that has up to the present contributed to moving it forward merits admiration. The Church's history of dialogue is influenced by its pioneers in eras when hardly anyone gave it any thought. Christians are learning to reread their history. Not all its moments were glorious, and though it behooves us to avoid making anachronistic judgments on the past from our contemporary viewpoint, it is also important to be clear-sighted and face our history squarely in order to accept it in its totality.

26. Clémens Thoma, *A Christian Theology of Judaism: Studies in Judaism and Christianity*, trans. Helga B. Croner (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980).

Only by rejecting nothing and weighing the value of everything do Christians show their love for the Church.

## Precursors

This history has a pedigree and ancestors. They are like gifts God has given to the Church and to humanity. On the one hand, they opened a way forward, traced out a path, set off a chain of thought. Sometimes the significance of their actions did not become apparent until much later.<sup>27</sup> We are the happy beneficiaries of all that. The ancestors of Christian interreligious dialogue are many and diverse. They include vowed religious like Francis of Assisi; monks like Peter the Venerable, Henri Le Saux, and Thomas Merton; popes like Gregory VII and John Paul II; as well as the long list of those who experienced the full brunt of another culture and were transformed by it: Charles de Foucauld, Louis Massignon, Jules Monchanin, among others. Above all, there are those whose names are unknown but who with trust and in faith put themselves at risk in the encounter, drawing from the Gospel the boldness to confront the prejudices of their time.

It is against the backdrop of this great cloud of witnesses that the life and thought of Christian de Chergé is situated. None of these witnesses could have claimed to have understood everything they experienced and were asked to do. Some were precursors without even knowing it, simply by being faithful to their own vocation, by trying to respond day by day to what life offered and asked of them. Others, like Christian de Chergé, brought their experience to the level of thought and language. What they experienced did not belong exclusively to them. Christian could not have said and written what he did if he had not been embedded in a monastic community, within a local Church, and with Muslim friends and neighbors.

27. Gwénolé Jeusset, "François d'Assise et les musulmans" ["Francis of Assisi and the Muslims"], *Chemins de dialogue* 18 (2001): 89–103. Francis's meeting with the sultan Al Malik al-Kamil was not understood by his contemporaries.

In this context, too briefly described, I would like to introduce the reader to a few determinative elements in de Chergé's thought in the hopes that his witness may profit all those who, in the Church or elsewhere, whatever their position and function, their charism and state of life, sense that there is something important at stake here and wish to try, despite hindrances, to take some steps along this path of encounter with the Other.

Today's social and ecclesial contexts are changing rapidly. The future of theology is open to question and its role in the Church and the world is developing. No one knows what form the Catholic Church will take in the coming years. Now and in the future, an understanding of faith in relation to culture will always be necessary. The thought of Christian de Chergé is original. It was born, nurtured, and purified in the crucible of a profound human experience, a spiritual experience. His thought cannot be grasped without understanding and constantly revisiting his context and that grounding experience. Thus, I would like to begin by tracing the conditions that made de Chergé's theology possible and to eliminate at the same time some *a priori* assumptions.