



Kiser, John W. *The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria*. New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2003.

Reviewed by Fr Brian Vale

This is a tragic story but one which offers hope of how to live with one's neighbour in today's divided world. The author, John W. Kiser, spent two years researching and interviewing the families and friends of the seven French Trappist monks who were kidnapped from their monastery at Tibhirine, Algeria, in March 1996 and later executed.

The author also traces the history of the monks' monastery and the Church's development in Algeria and the tragedy of thousands of deaths, some of them from amongst the tiny Christian population amidst the 27 million Muslims.

This is a heroic story which offers inspiration and remarkable insight for the spirituality needed for Christians living in Muslim majority countries and for all of us living in our post-modern global village.

It is a story of prophetic contemplation, of how one can continue to show respect and forgiveness for one's neighbours in times of violence. In his Introduction Kiser calls the monks "Martyrs of Hope" and says:

They did not die because they were Christians. They died because they wouldn't leave their Muslim friends, who depended on them and who lived in equal danger.

The simple, everyday lifestyle of a Trappist monastery—prayer, study and manual labour—are an integral rhythm of the story and personal idiosyncrasies of individual monks are not hidden. The lack of vocal talent of some monks when they are appointed to lead the chanting of the daily prayers can become important matters in small communities!

The spirituality of the "dialogue of life" comes alive as the monastery's vegetable garden and its dispensary become the meeting places for Muslims and Christians. It was in the sharing of their hospitality that the Christian monks and Muslims became friends. One bishop called the monks the "lungs" of the Church in Algeria for they brought spiritual oxygen to Christians and Muslims alike.

The motives for the kidnapping and the cause of the monks' deaths remain a mystery. However, the telling of their story up until their kidnapping offers a ray of hope in an area of the world where there is still much unrest today. Most victims of violence seldom get a chance to have their story heard.

After his death the publishing of the moving "*Testament*" of Christian de Chergé, the prior of the community, presents him as a unifier, a visionary who has a deep love for Muslims (see "*Insert*"). He offers an inspiring vision and, under the stress of increasing violence, a commitment to facing death out of love for one's neighbour.

His personal journey into Christian-Muslim dialogue began when, on national service in Algeria, he was rescued by Mohammed, a Muslim friend, on the occasion of an encounter with armed insurgents. His friend Mohammed intervened to protect Christian, pointing out his attachment to Algeria and his sympathy towards Muslims. Christian escaped unharmed but his Muslim friend's dead body was discovered the next day. Christian was devastated by this cruel murder and the experience was to change his life and nurtured a vocation to becoming an interreligious monastic.

Part of this calling led to participation in a prayer group called *Ribat-es-Salaam* (The Bond of Peace) which was initially a group of Christians who wished to deepen their spiritual life by sharing what

they had discovered in their encounter with Islam. Later they were joined by members of a mystical Sufi brotherhood called *Alawiya* who sought the unity that can only happen in prayer. De Chergé said:

The faith of the other is a gift of God, even if I don't really understand that gift and it remains a mystery to me. This gift given to the other is also in a certain way a gift given to me.

Christian de Chergé's reflections on Islam's place in God's plan of salvation come out of the every day encounters of the monks with their neighbours at Tibhirine and of course from their regular routine of prayer and contemplation.

It is a spirituality of the Way, of the path of encounter, rather than a systematic reflection on non-Christian religions.

A tiny community of Trappist monks founded in the year 2000 in Morocco by two monks who were absent at the time of the kidnapping continues the contemplative witness. As at Tibhirine they are a 'praying community among a praying community'.

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