Guest in the House of Islam: Reflections on Charles de Foucauld

by Bonnie Thurston, PhD

Published in Salaam Magazine by the Islamic Studies Association, Dehli, India July 2017

The French spiritual master and Islamicist, himself, greatly influenced by Charles de Foucauld, Louis Massignon, wrote "To understand the other, one does not need to annex him but to become his guest."[1] The image of the guest, one who is welcomed into another's home, receives its gifts, and defers to its customs, helps us both to understand and to critique Br. Charles' contribution to interfaith understanding. After a brief biographical sketch, we shall ponder the influence of Islam on his return to Catholicism and his attitudes and limitations as a "guest in the house of Islam," then conclude with practical suggestions for "being a good guest" gleaned from Foucauld.

Biography

Charles de Foucauld was born in 1858 to an aristocratic and deeply faithful Roman Catholic Christian family. Six years later both his parents died. He was raised (perhaps spoiled) by his grandparents. Educated at the Lycee in Nancy and by the Jesuits in Paris, he was an indifferent student and barely graduated from the military academy at Saint-Cyr and the cavalry school in Saumur, by which time he had lost his faith and was living profligately. Having received a commission as a second lieutenant in the Fourth Hussars (1879), he was posted to North Africa, briefly put on leave for disobedience, then distinguished himself in Algeria with the African Fourth Infantry.

In 1882 he resigned from the army to explore uncharted territory in Morocco (1883-1884). His book on the exploration (*Reconnaissance au Maroc)* won the gold medal of the French Geographical Society and garnered celebrity in France. Having returned to Paris in 1886, he returned to the Church in October of that year, having sincerely prayed "My God, if you exist, let me know you!"[2] Fr. Henri Huvelin (himself an extraordinary spiritual master) facilitated his return to the Church, became his spiritual director/father, and remained so for the rest of his life. Foucauld later noted "As soon as I believed there was a God, I understood that I could not do anything other than live for him. My religious vocation dates from the same moment as my faith."[3] That he had a vocation was clear. What precisely it was required discovery.

Foucauld explored life as a Trappist monk (1890-1897) but found its traditional form not austere enough. For example, he was horrified when Trappists were given permission to use butter and oil in cooking. Nevertheless, biographer Antoine Chatelard correctly noted that "These years shaped a mentality that he was never able to undo. The Trappist life would always be for him the model and ideal of perfection and the elements that made up the monastic life would always serve as points of reference…". Indeed, "He always used the vocabulary of monasticism to express what he was living…".[4]

Foucauld travelled to the Holy Land and became a servant to the Poor Clares of Nazareth (1897) and then Jerusalem. Subsequently he was ordained a priest (1901) and returned to North Africa where he spent the last 15 years of his life (1901-1916) as an unofficial chaplain to the

French occupying army and a Christian presence among peoples to whom he wished to be a "universal brother." While the precise circumstances of his death are unclear, he was murdered in Tamanrasset at the fortress which he built to protect the local population against marauders and to store the armaments which his killers probably sought.[5]

Foucauld's life pattern is not unfamiliar to those acquainted with Christian saints' lives. The pattern was outlined by St. Gregory the Great. A privileged early life is followed by profligacy and sybaritic behavior that ends with conversion and subsequently saintliness. What is nearly unique about Foucauld is the degree to which Islam influenced (dare I say "fostered"?) his return to the Christian faith.

Conversion[6]

It is important to remember, as Ali Merad (who wrote an evaluation of Foucauld from a Muslim's perspective) noted, that Foucauld was "almost continually confronted with Islam: on his expedition to Morocco (1882-84), on his journey through Algeria… (September 1885-January 1886); as a pilgrim in the Holy Land (1888-1889); at La Trappe in Akbes Syria (1890-1896); in Nazareth and Jerusalem (1897-1900); and finally in the Algerian Sahara (1901-1916)." (Merad 45-46) Foucauld confided to his friend Henri de Castries,[7] "I liked Islam very much…" (Merad 45-46) and "Islam has produced in me a profound upheaval." (Antier 93) Indeed, he wrote "My exposure to this faith…and to the soul living always in God's presence helped me understand that there is something greater and more real than the pleasures of this world."(Ellsberg 17-18)

Foucauld's friends remarked on Islam's influence on him. French General Nieger, asked rhetorically "Should we admit, in private, that Islam influenced Foucauld to the extent of leading him to the brink of conversion?" Nieger speaks of how moving the outward signs of Islamic faith are to those who live surrounded by it, and asserts "The long months of moral solitude among Muslims whose acts are deliberately placed under the aegis of the divine will had led [Foucauld] to the idea of the absolute, to religious mysticism." (Merad 46-47) Another friend of Foucauld's, Emile-Felix Gautier,[8] wrote "When you live among Muslims, you are well aware that Islam has its attraction." (Merad 47) Massignon asserts that Islam "acted as a catalyst to bring his unbelief back to Christian doctrine." (Antier 118)

While many modern students of Foucauld concur with Massignon, Merad is more circumspect. "The exhilarating atmosphere of the desert certainly led the worldly young officer to rediscover, if not the world of prayer, at least that of fervor." He believes Islam played a role in the development of Foucauld's religious awareness. "…Islam was at the starting point of Charles de Foucauld's spiritual journey. …his religious life and work would develop in constant contact with Islam." (Merad 46 and 48) This leads to the very complex subject of Foucauld's work as a Christian presence in the Sahara.

Surprising Attitudes and Limitations

From the outset of his reconversion to Christianity, Foucauld never forgot his early experiences with Islam and the desert. Part of that experience was the reality of the almost total absence of a Christian presence. After his experiment with Cistercian monasticism and after

priestly ordination, Foucauld became convinced that he could *be* that Christian presence. The paradoxical reality was that he was both a son (and soldier) of France and thus committed to French culture and ideals, and a fervent lover of God and child of Christ and thereby committed to being a "universal brother" to others. His was a complex reality.

Biographies of Foucauld, not surprisingly tend toward the hagiographical. Some omit or play down the fact that, although he resigned his military commission, he never rescinded his allegiance to France and her goals. His correspondence with family, friends, and his military and religious superiors make it clear that he felt it France's duty to evangelize its colonies. Like many nationalists in the 19th century, he apparently saw little intrinsic difficulty with colonization per se. For example, he wrote that he thought the railroads would be a powerful means of civilization "and civilization aids Christianization. Savages cannot be Christians."[9] (Antier 290)

Nor did he object to extending and preserving empire by means of military occupation, though he objected to brutal means and exploitation. "I suffer as a Frenchman," he wrote to a friend, "to see the natives not being ruled as they ought." The "…inadequate condition of these peoples is made worse by treating them as no more than a means of material acquisition." (Ellsberg 26) He wrote to his closest friend, confidant, and cousin Marie de Bondy of the scant attention paid to "saving Muslim souls" in the 80 years France had occupied Algeria. "If the Christians of France do not understand that it is part of their duty to evangelize their colonies, it is an error for which they will be accountable, and it will be the cause of losing a great number of souls that could have been spared."(Antier 291)

While Foucauld particularly deplored slavery (and ransomed and manumitted several slaves), he was not immune to the prevailing European views on colonization and its "civilizing" effects. Foucauld believed it was France's duty to Christianize her colonies, but *how* he thought this might be done was remarkable for his times. It grew from his unremitting dedication to following the life of Jesus by living the "hidden life of Nazareth." He strove to unite himself to Jesus by living his life of service in obscure places among ordinary people. He believed "…it is possible to do good to men…without using words, without preaching, without fuss, but by silence and by giving them a good example." "The example of poverty, lowliness, recollection, withdrawal: the obscurity of a life hidden in God, a life of prayer, penance, and withdrawal, completely lost in God, buried deep in him."[10] (Ellsberg 47) This was to be done while living by the labor of one's own hands.

Long before Vatican II or modern "missiological theory," Foucauld understood evangelism could be effectively carried out by living as Jesus among those who do not know Him. He wished to be a Christian presence in a place that had never (or only among military occupiers) experienced Christians. He aspired to be a "universal brother." In 1902 he wrote "I want to accustom all the inhabitants, Christians, Muslims, Jews, and non believers, to look on me as their brother, the universal brother." (Ellsberg 89) In a meditation in 1916, the last year of his life, he wrote "May it be that he [Christ] lives in me. I must proclaim the image of our Lord in his hidden life: I must proclaim, by my life, the Gospel from the rooftops." (Ellsberg 124) Later

the same year he wrote "Be kind and compassionate…. See Jesus in *all* people. …we must humiliate *ourselves* and convert *ourselves*…". (Ellsberg 83. Italics mine.)

This attitude and approach was (and is) particularly appropriate in an Islamic context. Merad points out that the imitation of Jesus "is, from the Muslim point of view, the most eloquent way to espouse the authenticity of the Gospel message." (Merad 21) Imitation of the Prophet Muhammad (upon him be peace) appears in the Holy Qur'an: "…you have in the Messenger of Allah an excellent exemplar…".(33, 21[11]) It was taught by Algerian reformers of the period. Merad believes "The great lesson that emerges from the solitary, silent life of Charles de Foucauld is his humility, his gentleness and his charity." (Merad 23) Christians recognize these as characteristic of Jesus whom the Qur'an commends and Muslims admire as a prophet of God. Indeed, the Qur'an records "…thou wilt find the nearest in friendship to the believers to be those who say, We are Christians. That is because there are priests and monks among them and because they are not proud." (5, 82) Merad believes that the key word for Muslim-Christian relations is precisely "friendship."

The final aspect of Foucauld's witness to Islam I will highlight may be the most troubling for some Christians. He did not understand himself as a "missionary" if that meant one who seeks to convert others. According to Merad his "profound desire" was "to prepare the Saharan souls to receive the word of the Gospel." He quotes Foucauld's letter to Henry de Castries: "It is not Evangelization…in the strict sense of the word. I am neither worthy nor capable of that, and the time has not come. It is the preparatory work for Evangelization, the establishment of confidence, of friendship…". (Merad 41)

Chatelard devotes one of the final chapters of his biography of Foucauld to this point. The chapter is entitled "A new kind of monk with a special mission," (sic) and it stresses Foucauld as primarily a monk who desired to live the "hidden life of Nazareth." Foucauld wrote to Fr. Caron[12] in 1906, "I am not a missionary: the Good Lord did not give me what it takes to be one. I am seeking to live the life of Nazareth here." (Chatelard 272) Then what *was* Foucauld? A neighbor. A friend. A lover.

Father Henri Huvelin, curate at Saint-Augustin's in Paris who facilitated Foucauld's return to the Church, gave talks at that church stressing that " . . . Christ had come first to save the little folk, the suffering and the poor. To love them. 'When we wish to convert a soul, we must not preach: we must show our love.' " (Antier 99) Foucauld took his spiritual father's teaching to heart. Antier noted of Foucauld that "Deep down, he knew that… 'to love is enough.' To love is not to convert; it is first of all to listen, to learn to know…men and women from a different civilization…". (Antier 266) Foucauld's "work set him on a path of attentive listening, the first condition of true sharing." (Chatelard 261) Foucauld himself noted "…it is not necessary at this time to seek isolated conversions" and told Protestant military physician Dr. Dhauteville, "I am here, not to convert the Tuareg in a single stroke, but to try to understand them and improve them. I am certain the Lord will welcome in heaven those who led good and upright lives, without their having to be Roman Catholics." (Antier 266) A similar remark is

recorded as "You are Protestant, Teissere has no religious faith at all, the Tuareg are Muslim. I am convinced that God will welcome all of us if we deserve it." (Chatelard 264)

Not long after Massignon's conversion, he met with Foucauld and reported of his concern "As long as we do not respect the human being in the non-Christian believers we are trying to 'convert', we are betraying God. Conversion is not a shipping permit we attach to the conscience of others. It is a deepening of what is best in their present religious loyalty." (Chatelard 270) This echoes the Holy Qur'an "For every one of you We appointed a law and a way. And if Allah had pleased He would have made you a single people . . . . So vie with another in virtuous deeds." (5, 48) Foucauld's life exemplifies this "vying." As Merad suggests "…Foucauld's Saharan life represents an existence centered on an ideal of holiness that was reflected in renunciation and the humble imitation of Jesus." (Merad 70) As a Muslim, Merad thought it the most authentic way to present the Gospel. Foucauld himself wrote "The sanctification of the peoples of this region is in my hands. They will be saved if I become a holy person." (Antier 326) Holiness of life and imitation of Christ is every Christian's most powerful "missionary" witness and leads us to consider other practical lessons from Foucauld's life and work.

Practical Implications

I close these brief reflections with a few observations on practical the implications of Foucauld's life and "methods" for inter-faith interaction. They are addressed primarily to people who might be privileged to live among or interact with those from different faith traditions from their own. As I am a Christian, these suggestions are necessarily slanted toward my coreligionists, but I think they are more generally applicable and helpful in the wider context.

First, if a Christian lives in a predominantly non-Christian culture the metaphor of a guest in another's home is potent and practical. A good guest observes the conventions of the host's home. She does not impose her ways upon it. It is important if possible to learn the other's language and to respect his or her culture by learning as much as possible about it. When Foucauld described his preparation for the evangelization of the Tuareg he described "settling among them, learning their language, translating the Holy Gospel, entering into friendly relationships…with them…". (Chatelard 173. Much of the original is underlined.) It is not necessary (or perhaps even possible) to participate in every aspect of another's culture or religion. It is necessary to try to understand and thereby to respect it. One is privileged to live among others as one of them, not above them, knowing, if we are Christians, that Foucauld said "…everything we do for our neighbor we do for Jesus himself" and that the "life of Nazareth can be lived everywhere: even there in the place most useful for one's neighbor." (Ellsberg 95 and 91)

Second, Foucauld's understanding of being a "universal brother" defines his "method," and points the way for others. It means we live with others as a sibling among siblings. In the Christian tradition, St. Paul frequently uses the language of family and of siblings for the baptized Christians. Christians have never quite grasped the full meaning of Paul's teaching that Christians owe other Christians exactly the same care, and have the same responsibility for them as for their "blood" relatives. Jesus implied this when He said "Whoever does the will of God is

my brother, and sister, and mother." (Mark 3:35) It is reflected in the parabolic saying that whatever one does "to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me…". (Matthew 25:40) Foucauld said his "mission" was to "look upon *every* human being as a beloved brother." (Antier 325. Italics mine.)

Third, and related, Foucauld's example suggests that Christians should see the world with what I think of as "baptized eyes." He said categorically "See Jesus in *all* people." (Ellsberg 83. Italics mine.) He provides a practical and challenging way to doing this: "To be able to truly see others, we must close our physical eyes and open the eyes of our souls. Let us see what they are from within, not what they appear to be. Let us look at them in the same way as God looks at them."[13] To try to see as God sees, with mercy and compassion, is a principle that applies universally and, if applied, or even attempted, would radically change any society.

Finally, Michel Lafon is exactly correct. Charles de Foucauld, by his life and example, has given us a prime example of inclusivity. (Lafon 51) I do not know how well Foucauld knew the Holy Qur'an, but I think his life reflects its truth: "We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you, and our God and your God is One, and to Him we submit." (29, 46) Certainly the impulse behind Foucauld's famous "Prayer of Abandonment" in which he puts himself entirely in God's hands and submits completely to God's will would have been understood and lauded by his Muslim neighbors.

Bonnie Thurston, Ph.D.
The Anchorage
Wheeling, WV, USA

---

[1] Quoted in Ali Merad, *Christian Hermit in an Islamic World: A Muslim's View of Charles de Foucauld ,* Zoe Hersov, transl. (New York: Paulist Press, 1999) 88.
Hereafter, after the first citation in the notes, references will appear parenthetically in the text.

[2]Quoted in Jean-Jacques Antier, *Charles de Foucauld,* Julia Shirek Smith, transl. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999) 97, 98.

[3] Robert Ellsberg (ed.), *Charles de Foucauld* (Modern Spiritual Masters Series) (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999) 18.

[4] Antoine Chatelard, *Charles de Foucauld: Journey to Tamanrasset*, Cathy Wright, LSJ, transl. (Bangelore, India: Claretian Publications, 2013) 271.

[5] The 2016 *News Notes* of the Chicago, USA Little Sisters of Jesus opens with the helpful article "The Death of Charles de Foucauld" (*News Notes*, #46, September, 2016, 4-11).

[6] Antier's biography provides a very detailed account of the circumstances of Foucauld's return to the Church. See 98-103.

[7] Castries (d. 1927) was a French official in North Africa, interested in the ethnography, geography, and politics of the region. He began a correspondence with Foucauld in 1901.

[8] Emile-Felix Gautier (d. 1940) was an explorer and geographer and later professor at the University of Algiers. He travelled across the Sahara with Foucauld in 1905 and provided important analyses of his life.

[9] Foucauld used the French word *apprivoisement* (*apprivoiser*) to describe what was required. The word is often translated into English as "tame," but it also means "grow accustomed to," "become more sociable," or "get used to," all of which connote something very different from "domesticate."

[10] So complete was his desire to "disappear" that he forbade his important Tuareg dictionary, linguistic studies, and literary translations to be published under his own name.

[11] Quotations from the Holy Qur'an are from the translation with notes of Maulana Muhammad Ali, 4th edition, Lahore, Pakistan, 1951.

[12] Fr. Max Caron was Superior of the Minor Seminary in Versailles. He corresponded with Foucauld who hoped for his help in establishing a lay association.

[13] Quoted in Michael Lafon, *Fifteen Days of Prayer with Charles de Foucauld* , Victoria Hebert and Denis Sabourin, transl. (Liguori, MO: Liguori Press, 1999) 53.