

**A RESPONSE TO CATHERINE CORNILLE’S
“WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?”
RETHINKING THE PARTICULARITY
OF CHRISTIANITY THROUGH
THE RELIGIOUS OTHER”**

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**RETHINKING CHRISTIAN UNIQUENESS
FROM EXPERIENCE**

NOUGOUTNA NORBERT LITOING, S.J.
*Harvard Divinity School
Cambridge, Massachusetts*

With the clarity and insight characteristic of her writing, Catherine Cornille seeks to breathe new life into the question of the uniqueness or particularity of Christianity by suggesting three ways in which engagement with the *religious other* can help rethink Christian uniqueness or the uniqueness of any other religious tradition for that matter. These three paths are: (1) experiences of nostalgia of religious hybrids; (2) holy envy or spiritual regret of religious others; and (3) reaffirmation of one’s particularity through deep engagement with religious others of contextual and comparative theologians. In my brief response, I would like to reflect on these paths from where I stand, a stance defined both by the experiences that have shaped my worldview and the academic endeavors born from those experiences.

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE ON CHRISTIAN UNIQUENESS

Prior to joining the Jesuits (2002), I was majoring in math in my native Cameroon and, after joining them, I aspired to be a math teacher at a Jesuit high school. However, an event in my family would change those plans. An older cousin of mine, whom I love and admire greatly, received the sacrament of confirmation just before the beginning of my novitiate training. When I returned two years later, he was a devout Muslim. He had converted to Islam out of love for the one who is now his wife. I was taken aback: “Can one go from one religious tradition to the other the same way you would change shirts at the end of the day? What had gone wrong in my cousin’s RCIA class for him to be so shallow in his Christian commitment?” These are some of the questions I battled with. My young and zealous self was worried about my cousin’s salvation. I decided to learn more about Islam with the sole purpose of convincing my cousin that he needed to return to the “right path,” the Catholic faith. This desire was

fueled by my perception of the superiority of Christianity. I started reading about Islam. I haven't stopped ever since.

The more I read, the less I was inclined to have the conversation I had planned on having with my cousin. That conversation has not taken place to this day, at least not in the terms I had initially envisaged. Not because I am establishing some cheap equivalence between Islam and Christianity. I am still aware of what Christianity has to offer but I no longer feel the need to negate another tradition to establish the uniqueness of the gift of Christianity. Instead, I perceive and embrace ways in which my understanding of Christianity and my Christian practice stand to benefit from constructive engagement with Muslims.

When the boundaries between faith traditions are not just out there but cut across your family, the terms in which you speak about the uniqueness of your faith tradition are bound to change. In this regard, theological reflection on Christian uniqueness would benefit greatly if it were accompanied by an openness to the gift of friendship that allows the religious other to somehow become a sibling, a fellow human being before anything else. When our social circle includes the religious other, that will inevitably be reflected in the language of our theology. A spirituality of friendship should consequently be part of our efforts to think Catholic Interreligiously.

A VIEW ON HYBRIDITY FROM THE "SONS OF THE CHAMELEON"

Fast forward three years, as a young Jesuit regent, I served in the Southeast of Senegal in a region mainly populated by the Bassari, one of the many ethno-linguistic communities populating Senegal. The first year of my regency, I noticed that our parish was completely deserted one weekend in April. From the usual hundreds of parishioners we had at Mass every weekend, we were barely fifty for Mass that weekend. Even the catechists and translators, our most dedicated parishioners, were absent. I later found out that it was the weekend marking the end of that year's initiation rituals during which young boys are ushered into adulthood. Our parishioners had consequently traveled to Salemata, a town at the border with Guinea Conakry, to be present for what was the annual high point of cultural and religious festivities for the Bassari people.

The following year, around the same period, when the parish was emptying itself, I took my motorbike and decided to follow our parishioners to Salemata. I spent the weekend with them at the camp site next to the sacred forest where the initiation took place. The camp site was used as a staging area for the families of the boys undergoing initiation. That's where the festivities related to the initiation took place. Each family had a hut where it could entertain its guests. The initiation rituals proper took place in the sacred forest a few kilometers away from the camp site. The pastor of the parish of Salemata, a Bassari himself, moved the weekend Mass to the camp site telling me that no one would show up if he held it at the parish church in town. Even at the camp site, only a dozen or so showed up for Mass. In my conversations with some of those present, I tried to learn from them how they viewed Christianity in relation to their cultural and religious roots. It came out that embracing Christianity helped them adjust and adapt to the complex life of the city. However, when it comes to what defines them deeply, their indigenous tradition remains their guiding light.

The Bassari have the chameleon as their totem and are known as “sons of the chameleon.” It is well known that some species of chameleon can change their skin color for social signaling among chameleons, but equally as a camouflage as part of their survival and defense mechanism. The Bassari with whom I talked viewed Christianity as helping them adapt to a complex world, the world of the cities.¹ Some said: “We do not know where your Jesus is taking us but this [meaning their tradition] tells us who we are and where we are coming from.”

One could be tempted to view the symbol of the chameleon and the adoption of Christianity as a survival mechanism as indicative of a lack of real conversion to Christianity. But the Bassari view it differently. They perceive their indigenous tradition and Christianity as fulfilling two different roles. In their assessment, there are questions for which Christianity can provide adequate answers but there are other questions where the efficacious solutions can only come from their indigenous traditions. The uniqueness of Christianity resides not in what it says or stands for but in what it can do, the role it fulfills for them in the real world. How does it help them cope with the challenges of life in a complex and often inhospitable world? In this light, Christian uniqueness can be thought of in terms of the function or role Christianity fulfills in the world. For instance, what is unique about Christianity’s contribution to issues of social justice?

SEEING ONESELF THROUGH THE OTHER’S EYES

I carry out research on Muslim and Catholic pilgrimage practices in Senegal. On the Muslim side, I study the Grand Magal of Touba, a religious celebration of the Mourides, a Sufi *tariqa* or path, founded in the nineteenth century by Sheikh Ahmadu Bamba. The Grand Magal falls within the category of pilgrimage known as *Ziyara* or “pious visitation”. In its most widespread form, *Ziyara* consists in visits to the tomb of a saintly figure, seeking a share in the *baraka*, the blessing or divine favor believed to be an enduring deposit of these figures, perpetuated in their biological and spiritual lineage. *Ziyara* does not replace the *hajj*, the canonical pilgrimage to Mecca, or the *umrah*, the lesser pilgrimage. However, it is a foremost symbol of the regional and cultural expressions of Islam, especially in the non-Arab world. The Catholic pilgrimage I study is associated with a Marian shrine dedicated to *Notre-Dame de la Delivrande* in a village called Ponguine. Devotion to *Notre Dame de la Delivrande*, a Black Madonna, originates from Normandy in Northwestern France. It was brought to Senegal by Spiritan missionaries desirous to supplant the cult of Koumba Thioupan, a jinn venerated by the Serere of the coastal region of Senegal, the same way devotion to her had been used to supplant the cult of the goddess Demeter in Normandy. Both pilgrimages started in the nineteenth century at the peak of the French colonial presence in West Africa.

My study of these pilgrimages includes auto-ethnography. My experience visiting these shrines back and forth is, indeed an important part of my theological reflection on their meaning. When visiting the Muslim shrine, my Catholic identity is both a source of opportunities underscoring the common ground on which we stood and challenges that highlighted our differences. Regarding opportunities, as a person with

¹ N.B.: Not all Bassari Christians will agree with this interpretation.

a faith commitment, I communicated with my Muslim hosts within shared plausibility structures. This is particularly useful when assessing hagiographical accounts about Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba. Stories about him spreading his prayer mat on the ocean to perform his *salat*, surviving being thrown into a cage of hungry lions, etc. These stories might not stand the test of historical criticism. However, they are important as constitutive narratives for the community. They enhance the status of Bamba as a *Wali* or friend of Allah in the eyes of his disciples. Factual or not, they are important for the Mourides' sense of identity. My ability to listen to these stories is helped by the fact that I belong to a faith community in which some of the narratives that structure the life of the community and foster identity-building may, similarly, not necessarily pass the test of historical criticism.

However, being a Catholic while visiting a Muslim shrine presents some challenges. This is particularly evident in ritual participation. There are limits to what I can do ritually. The limits of my participation ultimately depend on the one hand, on the extent of the ritual hospitality extended to me by my hosts, and, on the other hand, my level of spiritual and theological comfort within the boundaries defined by my hosts. This experience of discomfort is revelatory of what I hold as uniquely dear to me, the point beyond which I cannot go without ceasing to be me. That discomfort is only made possible by the encounter with the other.

A FINAL NOTE

In Senegal, the encounter between Christianity and Islam takes place within a cultural crucible defined by African traditional religion. Within this context, *terànga* or hospitality is very important. It is the cultural glue of the Senegalese social contract. In this regard, asked about the religious make up of his country, Leopold Sedar Senghor, the first president of independent Senegal famously said that Senegalese are 90% Muslims, 10% Christians and 100% adepts of African indigenous traditions. In this context, beyond doctrinal differences, the uniqueness of each religious tradition is expressed in what they have come to expect of each other over time. This is as simple as Senegalese Muslims' expectation on Good Friday that their Christian friends would offer them *ngalax*, a porridge made from millet. In like manner, during the celebration of *eid al adha* (the feast of sacrifice), Christians expect their Muslim neighbors to offer them some meat. These expectations are not connected to things that are essential to either Muslims' or Christians' self-understanding. However, in the social context of Senegal, they have become expressions of what they are uniquely placed to offer each other to foster *terànga*.