

**AN INTERVIEW WITH MOH-CHRISTOPH BILEK:
ALGERIAN, BERBER, EX-MUSLIM AND CATHOLIC**

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DM: Most people who leave Islam for Christianity become evangelicals of some sort, yet you are Catholic. What would you say to the person thinking about converting to Christianity regarding the Catholic Church?

MCB : To answer this question I will go back quickly to my conversion: when I heard on the radio, in the 60s, of Jesus Christ and the Gospel, I was studying a catechism by mail with the Protestants of Switzerland, I was visiting the beautiful churches of the Middle Ages in Paris. For me, all this was one: there were only Christians, the disciples of Jesus Christ. In brief: like most of the Muslims who convert, I was fascinated by Jesus Christ. It is only after I discovered the division between Christians and that I entered into the Catholic Church, because of saints like Francis of Assisi or Theresa.

Therefore my answer is, Jesus didn't create 36 churches, but only one, and he founded it on Peter who was the first pope.

1) Pope Benedict famously baptized a Muslim convert, Magdi Cristiano Allam, on Easter Eve in 2008 in St Peter's Basilica. He recently announced he was leaving the Roman

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Catholic Church because the Church is too soft on Islam. How do you view this choice of his? Is there anything you would like to say to him?

Not only did I have something to tell him, but I did tell him.² For the rest, if I don't approve of his decision, I understand his disappointment.

Islam, according to the shari'a or Islamic law, condemns to death those who leave its faith. The [Catholic] Church, which is in dialogue with Muslim authorities, does not talk about this subject with them. Why? But maybe it is our duty, we, the new Christians,³ coming from the Muslim tradition, to warn our pastors and to help them resolve this big problem and to push the better-known Muslim authorities to pronounce themselves [on this issue] in front of the international community. What is their definite position: is Islam against the freedom of conscience or not? How can they ask for freedom of religion/worship, yet they don't grant it from their side?

3) It is well-known that most of the new Christians in Algeria are from the Kabyle people in particular. Are Arabs also coming to faith? What can you tell us about the interactions between Arab converts and Berber converts?

There was and there will be for some times more this wrong idea that an Arab is automatically a Muslim. As many Kabyle know, and we let them understand this in case of need, that they are not Arabs, so it was easier for them, in the 80's, to question this religion that was imposed to their ancestors.

But today, to remain on the case in Algeria, there are more and more non-Kabyles who give up Islam and become Christians. It is a deep and broad movement, on the level of the Arabo-Muslim world, that the authorities won't be able to halt soon: Islam is starting to implode. Oh, for sure, not everyone will become Christian, but Islam is leading to a lot of questioning and will become repulsive wherever the shari'a is put in practice.

About the second question, you have to know that an Arab Christian will get along better with a Kabyle and vice versa because Christ commands us to love our neighbor like ourself.

² The entire letter can be read in French at the Notre Dame de Kabylie website : http://notredamedekabylie.net/Autresrubriques/ExpressionAwal/tabid/63/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/909/Fautil-quitter-lEglise-Catholique-pour-quelle-comprenne.aspx#_ftn2.

³ 'New Christians' is the term used by North African converts from Islam to refer to themselves.--DAM

Unfortunately, there is another hostility imported from the West which comes and breaks this possible harmony sometimes, it is the division between Catholics and Protestants.

4) One of the classes I teach here in Nazareth is on Early Church History, and North Africa had some very important churches like Carthage and Hippo, and great saints like Augustine, Perpetua, Felicitas, and Cyprian. Yet indigenous Christianity was almost entirely absent from the region for centuries. Do you feel like that early history means much to the new Christians today? Or is it just an interesting but unimportant historical footnote?

The discovery of the African saints, and mainly the greatest of them, Augustine of Thagaste,⁴ is always vivifying and almost blissful: « If my distant ancestors were Christians, then there is no shame in being one » more than one convert has said to himself. Some have declared after their baptism, « I came back to the religion of my fathers! » But more generally speaking, ancient Christianity enables oneself to ask the question of freedom of choice. If my distant ancestors chose Islam freely, then I can make the same choice myself; but if this religion was imposed on him *bi seif* (by sword), then I do not commit a treason toward my tribe if I quit this religion.

5) Many Catholic priests in the West know very little about Islam and evangelism. What advice would you give to the average priest in Lyons, Manchester, or Chicago who has a Muslim start to come to mass or asks for a Bible or something like that?

Do the same thing as Saint Philip when he asked the Ethiopian, « Do you understand what you are reading ? » (Ac 8 :30) Everything passes through understanding.

When I was young I learned thirteen chapters of the Quran by heart, without understanding anything. In Islam, it is forbidden to seek to understand of the texts, it is not okay to ask questions. But in Christianity, it is the opposite: God want us to adore him in spirit and in truth and he tells us that the truth will set us free.

One has to welcome the questions and inquiries of the Muslim who seeks the truth and we should not hide anything from him. Evidently, he has to apply the same methods to the

⁴ The proof that he was Berber was presented in my book, *St Augustine Talked to my Daughter?* –MCB.

Qur'anic texts and ask himself, for example, why Mary, the mother of Jesus, in the Qur'an has a father named Imran and it says her brother is Aaron, the brother of Moses ?

6) I would like to know more about your website. Why did you start it? What is its purpose? What reaction have you received?

There is nothing more frustrating than not to have answers to one's questions, and nothing more upsetting than looking at a door one is forbidden to open. But when, by the grace of God, you find the answers to your questions and the locked door is opened—if you don't share with your brother what you discovered, you don't love him.

The Internet is wonderful because it reaches above the censors to reach the brother who is seeking truth. It reaches beyond borders and soon it will break the language barrier. Of course, you can find good seed as well as bad, but the Spirit guides the true children of God to find their Savior.

We started at the beginning of 2005. It was difficult but necessary because of the partitioning of the Muslim world. What slows down things is that the Internet is not present in all homes because of cost and poor connections. But the Muslim countries are catching up.

Many opponents just saturate our site by copying and pasting questions to which they don't expect answers. It is a lot of lost time with those people. But a lot of people have been led to baptism thanks to this modest website.

7) A while ago St Francis Magazine published "A Letter to Pope Benedict XVI on Catholic Witness to Muslims." »⁵ If you have read it I would be interested to know what you think about the author's recommendations to the pope.

Two of those suggestions are good. We received a lot of New Testaments (with the Psalms) from the Diocese of Meaux and we have been giving them away for free for right years. Nothing can replace the Gospel for evangelism.

We noticed that there are a lot of dreams and visions which lead Muslims to approach the Church. But there is, in my opinion, not a great necessity to look for people to interpret those

⁵ [http://www.stfrancismagazine.info/ja/images/stories/Abu-Daoud\(October-2010\).pdf](http://www.stfrancismagazine.info/ja/images/stories/Abu-Daoud(October-2010).pdf)

because they quickly understand their meanings and the direction to follow, in a supernatural way.

The third point (to baptize in secret) should be resolved, in my opinion, by allowing well-trained lay people who have the trust of their pastor to baptize secretly when there may be danger for the baptized and for the priest. The baptism itself could be validated later and eventually put in the registry of the Church during a trip to a country with more freedom. On the condition that the Magisterium ratifies such an initiative.

8) The Catholic Church has come under a lot of fire from ex-Muslim Christians for its statement on Islam in the Vatican II document Nostra Aetate⁶, which states that Muslims 'adore the one God, living and subsisting in himself...' and does not recommend evangelizing Muslims, but to 'work sincerely for mutual understanding and preserve...justice and moral welfare...' (section 3). How do you read and interpret the statement of Nostra Aetate ?

We are treating here a crucial matter: Does Vatican II advise us to *not* evangelize Muslims? If this is the case, why risk death by becoming a Christian, if Islam is a way to salvation?

But this interpretation would mean that the Church recognises the segregation commanded by Muslim law between non-Muslims and Muslims, who are not allowed to be reached by the Good News. If this were the case, the Gospel would be null and void because it commands us to go and baptize *all peoples*.

9) Any other remarks or thoughts you would like to share?

Lord Jesus, You know how much I am a sinner, but You had Mercy on me and You came to offer me Your love, which I accepted with joy, and my joy is complete. You know that I wish this happiness to all my brothers and friends in Islam. And because You love them more than me, I trust in You.

As for me, Lord, may my joy last!

⁶ http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html