

## **DIALOGUE WITH ISLAM: MISSION or OMISSION?**

**By Sublime N. Mabila**

Alum of Centre Universitaire de Missiologie, Kinshasa, DR Congo and MB Biblical Seminary, Fresno. He is recently admitted at School of Intercultural Studies, Fuller Seminary, Pasadena, California, USA.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Futurists and Experts of Mission entirely confirm, while discerning the End Times' signs that the religious pluralism and the legitimacy of Evangelism will constitute the main challenges in decades ahead for the Global Christendom living in this multicultural and complex world with the visible and growing impact of non Christian religions.

The present article will focus on the correlation between two concepts "Mission" and "Interfaith dialogue" in a context where Islam dominates along with its two-fold worldview: *Al Islam, Din wa Dawla*, "*Islam as both Religion and Community*" (L. Gardet 1967:273) illustrated by my modest missionary experience (1995-2010) centripetally in Democratic Republic of Congo and centrifugally with African American Muslims in Fresno, California, USA and among Senoufo Folk Muslims of West Africa.

### **A HISTORICAL ISSUE**

Islam remains a challenge for the Church and the history of this problem constitutes a problem of history. Reflection on the encounter of the Church and Islam should take seriously account of 14 centuries cohabitation marked by presuppositions, misunderstandings and quarrels. Arab theologian G.C. Moucarry approved this statement as follows:

There is a serious historical tension between Christians and Muslims, since crusades till recent colonialism, with some exceptions, Christian Mission walked on the footsteps of the military invader...In fact Christians were not the only persons to be involved in this passive or active complicity. Muslims also adopted the same way since their military conquest in the first century of Hegira until the Ottoman invasion at the end of Middle Age (1991:76)

The first contacts between the Church and Islamic *Ummah* occurred on the visit of Najran Yemenite Christians to Muhammad himself (Sura 3:61). This meeting was almost a failure because of doctrinal controversies about Christ. From this visit until now Muslims and Christians consider one another as rivals and enemies.

Despite the armed confrontation between Muslims and Christians, the history of Christian Mission retains the names of some pioneers who positively overcame this barrier without violence at the intellectual and cultural levels.

As illustrations, we may mention the meeting in the court of Bagdad in 781 between Caliph Al-Mahdi and the Nestorian patriarch Timothy 1<sup>st</sup>, abbot of Cluny in 1146, the attempt of Francis of Assisi in 1219-1220 to dialogue with the Caliph of Egypt to end the crusade's hostilities. Conscious of the pertinence of missionary endeavor among Muslims and theological challenge requiring the knowledge of Islam and Arabic, the Dominican priests founded boarding schools to train active missionaries in Spain and Holy Land. Ricoldus de Monte Crusis (died in 1320) with deep knowledge of Arabic language and Islamic theology, committed himself as missionary in Middle East initiating dialogue with Muslims, Raymond Lull the most important figure of Middle-Age toward Muslims (1235-1315) who inaugurated the first pulpits of oriental languages in Europe, recently Louis Massignon (1888-1962) considered as the precursor of Muslim-Christian dialogue.

## **A CONCEPTUAL AND THEOLOGICAL ISSUE**

### **Essay of definition**

The term "mission" is a large concept with several components whose evangelism is the central and essential pivot. The task of the Church crossing spiritual, cultural, linguistic and geographical barriers to propose the way of Salvation in Jesus Christ for free adhesion to His Kingdom. It may take many forms: presence, proclamation, persuasion and participation.

The interreligious dialogue is more restricted concept whose goal is to chat. An interpersonal encounter based on mutual understanding and tolerance

### **Theological trends**

What is the objective of interreligious dialogue: conversion or conversation? Nowadays, media emphasizes on the concept of Globalization leading to the mix of cultures and religions. The Muslim-Christian dialogue is both encouraged and rejected. Most of its promoters at Christian side consider it as an apologetic opportunity of Christian faith with an effort of mutual tolerance.

Theologians who discourage dialogue between Muslims and Christians mention the risk of syncretism and conceive Conversion as indispensable mode and the main goal of any meeting with Muslims.

Both trends take account of the legitimacy and the truth of the Gospel while crossing religious boundaries with an evangelical attitude as prescribed by the Lord in Matthew 5:3-12. Should we renounce to evangelize due to the abuses of proselytism? Or should we avoid to dialogue by fear of relativism?

At this level of reflection, it is very important to clarify the link or correlation between the exploited concepts: Dialogue and Mission.

Jean Claude Basset suggests with reason the term “witness” used commonly in the Bible and in the Qur’an. Presence, Evangelism, Interreligious dialogue and Service reflect different sparks that Christian witness should and can take according the Holy Spirit gifts and talents of recipients of missionary mandate regarding the Great Commission of the Lord to His disciples: “ *You will be my witnesses*” (Acts 1:8).

In fact, dialogue appears as an essential exigency for any encounter between Christians and Muslims giving to both groups the opportunity to witness about their respective faith challenging mutually their beliefs with a critical and tolerant attitude. Regarding this reality G.C. Moucarray comments:

Tolerance between Christians and Muslims would be possible when both sides agree that the dialogue may lead to conversion to Christianity or to Islam. True tolerance accept the interlocutor not by reducing the gap but to consider the line while giving right and freedom to whoever wants to cross it with consciousness (1991:79)

Consequently, the immediate goal of interreligious dialogue is conversation and not conversion which, however constitutes the result of divine initiative and work, as an eventuality through the power of the Holy Spirit and not as a human manipulation. What is then the place of dialogue in God’s design for the salvation of mankind?

### **Dialogue and Salvation**

The biblical God is a relational and compassionate Person. The creation exteriorizes the immensity of His love and His need of love. Through several forms et contexts ,YHWH relates with the human being to reveal His redemptive plan via self-manifestations , dreams, visions and oracles. The climax of this salvation project is Incarnation.

Christ, eternally divine Word crosses spiritual (John 1:9) and cultural (John 1:14) boundaries to dwell as a human being initiating dialogue with sinners (John 8:46) transforming God-Mankind Conflict through the sufferings of His Incarnation with ethical implications. Believers of the Early Church followed the same footsteps, Paul of Tarsus, at the beginning of his third missionary journey engaged conversation with inhabitants of the multi-religious and cosmopolitan city of Ephesus. God revealed Himself with great miracles, the Bible asserts:

Then Paul went to the synagogue and preached boldly for the next three months, arguing persuasively about the Kingdom of God...he began preaching daily at the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for the next two years, so that people

throughout the province of Asia—both Jews and Greeks, heard the Lord's message.  
(Acts 19:8-10)

Briefly, the finality of dialogue is to serve the Kingdom of God and occupies a distinct and legitimate place in Christian witness.

In the same viewpoint, Muslim-Christian dialogue can play a prerequisite and auxiliary role for mission escorting Muslim friends at the gates of God's Kingdom. As a human activity, it requires a practical methodology.

## **A PRACTICAL ISSUE**

### **From discord to dialogue (1995-2010)**

While attending a conference about Islam held in April 1995 at the University of Kinshasa, we were deeply struck by the verbal and gestural violence of Christians toward Muslim attendees and vice versa. This conflicting atmosphere during the meeting compelled and inspired us as peacemakers to initiate and promote a peaceful cohabitation through dialogue with the Muslim community targeting four sub-groups: Arabic-speaking refugees, West African businessmen, Islamic leaders and scholars, and accredited Muslim diplomats in DR Congo.

### **Dialogue with Arabic-Speaking refugees**

Contacts between the Pacifist Christians of Congo and Muslim refugees produced encouraging fruits. The first convert among them is Ali El Shariff Abdallah later baptized with a Christian name Emmanuel. He committed himself to the Lord on July 27, 1995 after many sessions of dialogue.

Here is the testimony of this Muslim background believer:

I was born in a highly devoted Muslim family; my father was a great religious leader until his death and has initiated me in my early childhood to the memorization and the reading of the Qur'an. I fled my native country, Sudan for political reasons while remaining a devoted Muslim. Regarding my conversion to Christ, I can say that it was a process however there are three elements which attracted my attention while the pastor and the two sisters who came to share the Gospel with me: their sincere love despite my aggressive attitude, their knowledge about the Qur'an and their ability to focus their message on Christ without denigrating Islam, my former religion (January 1998)

Our brother Emmanuel, who is currently living and serving the Lord in Canada as missionary, was introduced to the local church for the first time on August 3<sup>rd</sup> 1995; church members who attended this devotional service thanked and praised the Lord for this authentic conversion with positive repercussion and flux of many other Arabic-Speaking unbelievers to Christ.

## **Dialogue with West African Businessmen**

Pacifist Christians of Congo actively reached West African businessmen working in the great market of Kinshasa each Tuesday and Thursday broadcasting the Gospel in French and Lingala (local dialect) translated in Arabic via the Radio program called "maximum" located in pavilion N°2. Emmanuel Ali El Shariff, a Muslim Background Believer played a considerable role in this outreach program.

From July 21 to 27, 1998, Pacifist Christians of Congo intensified this program mobilizing as many Christian congregations as possible and organized a series of teachings with a compelling topic: "*How to Win Muslims for Christ peacefully*" developed by different speakers and sections based on peace-oriented strategies.

This Gospel drive preceded by a week of prayers with fasting was called "*operation table to table*", the first cross-cultural and interdenominational initiative toward Muslims living and working in the city of Kinshasa and in Democratic Republic of Congo. The operation took place from July 27 to 29 with a financial support from University Center of Missiology and effective participation of missionary clubs, students of Mission schools, soldiers of the Cross and several local churches. 51 persons whose names are mentioned on the list in annexes dialogued with 151 Muslims in three days bringing 28 Islamic believers to Christ.

The success of the outreach program "Operation table to table" toward Muslims resides on three facts: Intercession, Non violent strategy of Evangelism and the Unity of the body of Christ, values promoted by Anabaptists.

## **Dialogue with Muslim scholars and leaders.**

Broadcasting and outreach programs among Muslims opened doors for contacts with influential urban Islamic scholars and theologians. The first christocentric dialogue with them happened on July 22, 1997 from 8 am to 6pm in the compound of the principal Cheikh of National Muslim community with some students from Saudi Arabia. We focused the debate on the divinity of Jesus Christ in the Bible and the Qur'an without offending Muslim attendees. One of the scholars, whose name was Idriss Sefou, accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior and Lord few days after this conversation.

The seed of this peaceful Muslim-Christian cohabitation produced encouraging and positive results in 1998:

- Dialogue of January 17, during the month of Ramadan around the topic: "*The Impact of Fasting on the spiritual and social life according to the Bible and Qur'an*" with two speakers, a Pacifist Christian and Muslim Cheikh in front of a mixed audience.

- Reacting to our initiative of promoting dialogue and peaceful cohabitation, Campagne Islamique Badrou au Congo (CIBC) organized for the first time a dialogue gathering the two religious communities with this theme: “*Jesus! Who is He?*” The impact of this pacifist movement toward Muslims finds echoes in the content of the letter of invitation written by the President of CIBC. More than 1,000 Muslims and 700 Christians attended this meeting.
- Dialogue on December 25<sup>th</sup> (Christmas-day) organized by Pacifist Christians of Congo in Muslim Majority agglomeration with two speakers, Christian and Muslim debating and sharing about the birth of Jesus Christ in biblical and qur’anic perspective (Matthew 1:18-25) and (Sura 19: 16-33) firstly read in Arabic and explained in French. When the dialogue ended, Christians offered a fast-breaking meal to 500 Muslim attendees (*Iftar*) because the meeting took place during the month of Ramadan.

This unconditional expression of love and generosity toward Muslims allowed most of them to view Christianity in positive and flesh way in contrast of their stereotype about us. All the mentioned Muslim-Christian meetings evolved in peace and mutual respect in accordance with the biblical recommendations: (1Peter 3:15-16)

Regarding these preceding facts, we agree wholeheartedly that the Truth, once conveyed with love, transcends dividing walls and consolidates peaceful cohabitation.

#### **Dialogue with accredited Muslim diplomats in DR Congo**

Pacifist Christians of Congo shared the Gospel of Christ with diplomats of Chad and Turkish Republic. Benchâa Dani, Ambassador of Algeria in DR Congo was the main guest. This Muslim Arab diplomat gave a conference within the local church compound about the place of Religions in the Algerian National Constitution. After his speech, Muslim delegates from the embassy, guests and Christian attendees interceded in favor of peace in Algeria and shared a meal as an expression of friendship and love regardless to religious backgrounds for the promotion of peace through interreligious dialogue.

#### **Dialogue: Peace-Oriented Strategy**

This section will take account of former investigations and field survey among Muslim Background Believers with 10 samples (S) representing the Islamic community:

N°	Names	Type	Time spent in Islam
Sample1	Emmanuel	Refugee	27 years
Sample2	Abou Bakr Mutung	Priest (Imam)	22 years
Sample3	Yasin Homoyo	Marabout	6 years
Sample4	Muana Wanene	Extremist Muslim	20 years
Sample5	Ibn Amani	Moderate Muslim and married to a Christian wife	35 years
Sample6	R. Wale Mombili	Became Muslim for secular reasons	8 years
Sample7	Aminata Wadi	Muslim woman married to a Christian	18 years
Sample8	Bolene Gala	Muslim Businessman	12 years
Sample9	Khadidja Djamila	Muslim woman (foreigner)	-
Sample 10	Idriss Sefu	Muslim with a Christian Background	-

Here is the database of our field survey:

Way of attraction to God	Samples										Percentage
	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	
Surnatural		X	X	X		X		X	X		60%
Dialogue	X	X		X	X		X	X	X	X	80%
Reading the Bible	X		X			X					30%
Reading the Qur'an	X										20%
Audio-Visual											0%
Literacy					X						10
Correspondence											0%

Here is the structure of this strategic way of Muslims conversion movement to Christ applied centripetally in Kinshasa DR Congo, centrifugally in Fresno, CA, USA among

African American Muslims and Folk Muslims in Burkina, Mali, Ivory Coast (West Africa) from 1995 to 2010.

Dialogue remains the appropriate way to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ to Muslims who claim that Islam is the final religion of God, superseding all previous revelations (Sura 3:19). Regarding our modest experience in this domain, there are three main preambles for a productive and successful dialogue between Muslims and Christians:

- Sincere friendship and consideration of our Muslim neighbor or interlocutor as a human being created in the image of God and for whom Jesus Christ died on the Cross.
- Official declaration of the biblical monotheism (Deut 6:4; Jn 17:3; 1Tim 2:5) and the uncompromised nature of the “true” Church of Christ since the Pentecost Day.
- Clarification about the theological position of the Church concerning the equivalence between “spiritual” and “temporal” as viewed in the Bible (John 19:36).

Structurally we recommend a “*parable of strategic dialogue*” with seven following steps:

**1<sup>st</sup> step:** Find a comfortable, favorable and appropriate place for a friendly conversation (neither in a local church nor in a mosque)

**2<sup>nd</sup> step:** Choose one topic (not several issues in the same time) which is important and draws the attention of Muslims and Christians with the conviction that both parts have many things to learn from one another despite of their doctrinal divergences. This attitude promotes reflection and mutual understanding. N.B: The Person of Jesus Christ remains the backbone of Muslim-Christian debate.

**3<sup>rd</sup> step:** Avoid any denigration about Islam and its prophet Muhammad, any harsh word, term, expression and attitude able to raise hindrances and dividing walls. For examples, Christians can use the term “*Word of God*” (Sura 3:45; 4:171) in lieu of “*Son of God*” which generally offends our Muslim neighbors. The French scholar Louis Gardet warns us underlying that “*such an encounter implies wisdom, self-control, ability to listen and understand according to the interlocutor’s worldview*” (1967:420)

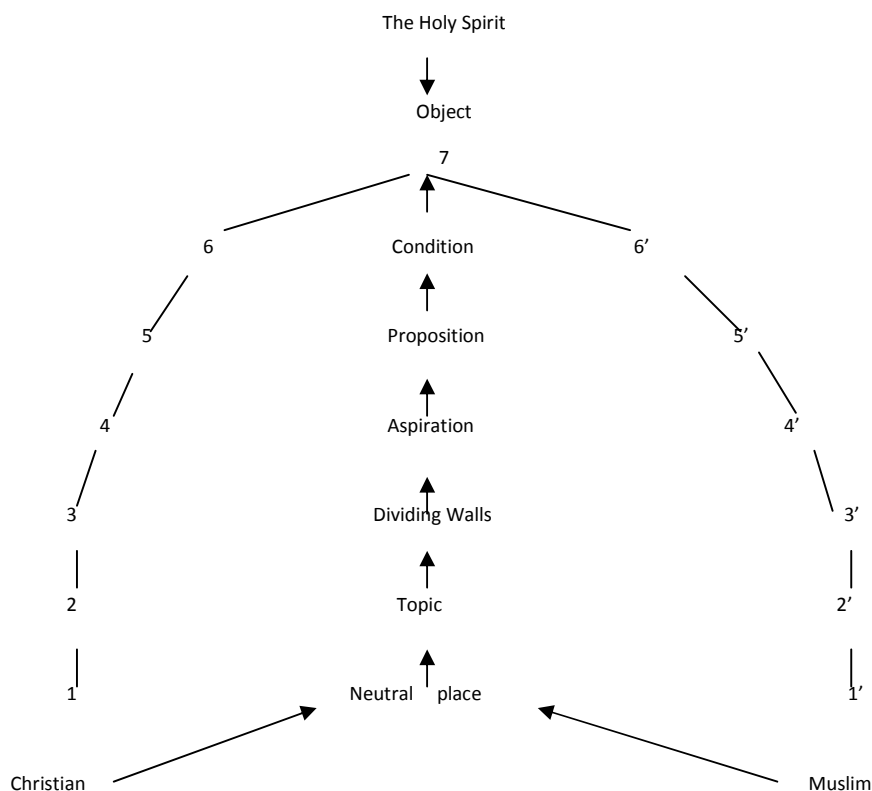
**4<sup>th</sup> step:** Insist on the spiritual aspirations and felt-needs of Muslims to which Islam provides no solutions and satisfaction. For example, the Qur’an mentions several times the expression “ may be or perhaps” in Arabic “*la’alla*” which explicitly refers to the uncertainty of salvation despite the observance of the five pillars and submission to Allah, the Qur’an and Muhammad (Sura 2: 183, 3:131-132; 6:155).

**5<sup>th</sup> step:** Mention positive points in the Qur'an to convey biblical truths and propositions (like Apostle Paul at Aeropagis Act 17:16-34). For example, we can use Quranic titles of Jesus underlying His uniqueness as testified in the Bible (Sura 3:45 and Luke 4:18-19).

**6<sup>th</sup> step:** Highlight the biblical conditions which will enable Muslims to find solutions to their aspirations and felt-needs, still unsatisfied by Islam as the assurance of salvation, the victory over Devil (Iblis, Shaïtan) and sin (danb), peace with God, healing, evil-eye...

**7<sup>th</sup> step:** Emphasize on human incapacity to please God according to the Law (Rom 3:20; James 2:10) and on the unique divine solution in Jesus Christ (John 3:17) illustrating this reality by your own conversion experience and relying on the persuasive power of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8).

This dialectical process called “parable of strategic dialogue” may be schematized as follows:



Here is the application of this 7 step parable of strategic dialogue between a Congolese Christian (S.N.M.) and Mamadou Badiaga, a Muslim from Mali during the operation “table to table” in the Great Market of Kinshasa.

**Christian:** Hello, my friend!

**Muslim:** Hello ! (with a West African accent)

**Christian:** How much does this white boubou (west African cloth) cost?

**Muslim:** fifty Congolese Francs

**Christian:** it is really expensive!! What is the difference with other clothes on your table? Is it an imported one?

**Muslim:** Yes! This is high quality boubou made by talented West African tailors

**Christian:** Do you come from West Africa?

**Muslim:** Oh! Yes, I come from Mali and I have been living in Kinshasa for two years.

**Christian:** Do you know many Congolese like your fellow-citizen Amadou Toumany Touré for taking the power and has left the presidency as a military officer without bloodshed confrontation. I personally appreciate him regarding his commitment for the restoration of Peace in Africa. He is really a model for African leaders, isn't it?

**Muslim:** Yes! Malian people are also very proud of him.

**Christian:** Could I ask you a question in my status of a pacifist Christian living in Africa?

**Muslim:** No problem! But you have to know that I'm Muslim

**Christian:** Regarding what's happening in this continent and in the world, I'm very concerned with the extreme violence which characterizes our generation and crucial problems in Africa like civil wars, ethnic conflicts with bloodshed confrontations, deprivation of habits and customs, uncured sicknesses, HIV etc. According to you, who is responsible?

**Muslim:** this is a very difficult question but I think that Africans are themselves responsible of all these facts you mentioned.

**Christian:** What compels human beings to behave like that or to commit such sins?

**Muslim:** It is Satan (after a time of silence)

**Christian:** While respecting your religious convictions, can I know what the Qur'an recommends to humankind in order to overcome Satan and avoid sinning?

**Muslim:** Uuh!!! Sincerely... I don't have an answer to this question.

**Christian:** Don't you personally aspire for holiness and to overcome the works of Devil in your life?

**Muslim:** Yes I do, but it is really a big and difficult deal!!

**Christian:** You are right saying that because the Bible and the Qur'an underline that sin is inherent in human nature while being under dominion of Satan; however this is a solution for this problem!

**Muslim:** which one? (With high expectation)

**Christian:** We can discover this solution explicitly mentioned in Hadiths and the Qur'an, sacred references of Islam.

**Muslim:** Really!! Is it true?

**Christian:** Muhammad, Prophet of Islam asserts that every human being (including himself) has a scar of Devil's bite (Sin) since birthday except Jesus, pure son of Mary (Sura 19:19) who committed no sin during his journey on the earth. Being sinless, Jesus remains the only prophet with the power to set humankind free from burdens (sins) (Sura 39:7).

In the same optic, the Bible teaches us that Jesus appears on earth to destroy the works of Devil and there is no sin in Him (1 Jn 3:5, 8). Dear friend, I would like to ask you a question while expecting your sincere answer. If you are burdened and weary, two persons come to you, the first is free with nothing on his shoulders but the second one carries his own loads. To whom will you go for help and who will be able to discharge your burdens?

**Muslim:** To the first person who is free and bears nothing!!!

**Christian:** I don't want to compare or deny the prophets as mentioned in Islam but taking account of Quranic verses sustained by biblical passages and the preceding illustration, we notice that Jesus (*Issa*) remains the unique divine solution for the salvation of Mankind and unique liberator (*Al Masih*) of captive souls of Satan *Iblis*, source of sin.

**Muslim:** What can I do in order to benefit of this favor?

**Christian:** Recognize only your status of a sinner and believe that Jesus rose up at the right hand side of God to forgive sins and grant the eternal life to whoever trusts in Him by faith, even the Qur'an recommends Muslims to follow exclusively Jesus in order to escape from eternal damnation (Sura 3:55-57). Do you want to implore the grace of God in Jesus Christ for your personal deliverance and salvation?

**Muslim:** Voluntarily! (Stretching his hands up like someone who is expecting to receive a gift from heaven).

**Christian:** Heavenly Father, Glory and honor to you for the grace upon my friend Badiaga and for your self-revelation while setting him free from Devil's dominion, I thank you for his adhesion to the new family in Jesus Christ. Pour Your Holy Spirit upon his heart enabling him to love and serve you in season or out. I pray so in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen!!

We would like to emphasize that engaging a dialogue with Muslims doesn't lead to an omission of mission, neither a decline of Christian faith nor a deviation to syncretism but it purifies the proclamation of the Gospel from any verbal or gestural violence.

Michael Green quotes that such a ministry requires “*humility, trust and obedience, tact and knowledge of scriptures, Jesus-oriented topics, ability to lead the Muslim neighbor to make a choice*” (1981:271).

Regarding what preceded, we may conclude that interreligious dialogue and mission are two distinct realities but don't exclude mutually. Dialogue is a lifestyle, an attitude, a predisposition for obeying the missionary imperative (John 20:21), the authentic form of conversation rooted on human relationships and mutual tolerance. This is a school of respect for his/her neighbor as created in the image of God despite his/her religious background.

We suggest Mission agencies and sending local churches to re-examine their Muslim outreach methods and promote the Muslim-Christian dialogue which offers three opportunities:

- The remise en question of our own life and faith system
- Better understanding of Islam as viewed and practiced by its own adherents, and not how we perceive it or we want it to be
- Peaceful approach to this religious barrier for an effective communication of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to Muslims.

If church leaders share this peace-oriented paradigm to the Christendom and if mission agencies recommend it to the workers ministering in Muslim context, we are convinced that Muslims and Christians will live harmoniously and increase the attractiveness of the Gospel leading to the inclusion of Muslims in the kingdom of God by faith in Jesus Christ, the true posterity of Abraham (Gal 3: 17, 19).

May the Holy Spirit reflect in our hearts smoothness and mercy *ra'fatan wa rahma*, values by which the Qur'an, sacred reference of Islam, identify true disciples of Jesus (Sura 5:82, 57:27) Amen!

## **Bibliography**

### **Reference books**

Fahd Ibn Abdel' Aziz Al Saud. *The Holy Qur'an*. Saudi Arabia: PGDR 1410 Hegira

Gardet, Louis. *Islam : Religion and Community*. Paris : Desclée de Brower 1967

Green, Michaël. *L'Évangélisation dans l'Église Primitive*. St Léger : GM 1981

Moucarry, Georges C. *Un Arabe Chrétien Face à l'Islam*. Paris : Presses Universitaires 1991

Segond, Louis. *La Sainte Bible révisée*. France: Alliance Universelle 1989

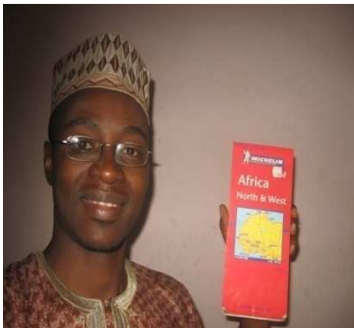
Woodberry, J.Dudley. *Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus' Road*. Monrovia: MARC 1989

## Published Article

Basset, Claude « Musulmans et Chrétiens. Quelle rencontre et quelle mission » in  
*Perspectives Missionnaires* n°13 1987

## Unpublished document

Mabiala, Sublime N., *African Pacifism, Mission and Islam* (Course/Conferences Notes). 2010



Sublime N. Mabiala, Alum of Centre Universitaire de Missiologie Kinshasa/DR Congo and Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary/Fresno , former missionary among Folk Muslims in West Africa and Afro-American Muslim community. He is currently admitted at advanced program at the School of Intercultural Studies, Fuller Seminary, Pasadena, California, USA.

For any comment, question or reaction to this article, please write to this email address: [sublimemabiala@fuller.edu](mailto:sublimemabiala@fuller.edu)