

INVITED SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

Toumliline’s Experiment—Benedictine Monasticism and Interfaith Dialogue in Postcolonial Morocco (1952–1968): A Site of Incarnational Dialogue Between Christianity, Islam, and Amazigh Identity at the Crossroads of Decolonization

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Abstract

The Benedictine Monastery of Toumliline, founded in 1952 in the Middle Atlas mountains of Morocco, represents one of the most remarkable yet understudied episodes of Christian-Muslim encounter in the twentieth century. Operating at the intersection of decolonization, religious reform, and civilizational dialogue, the monastery rapidly evolved from a conventional monastic institution into a pioneering intercultural space. This reflection examines Toumliline through the lens of the sociology of religion, arguing that its famous *Rencontres Internationales*—launched in 1956 under royal patronage and drawing intellectuals such as Louis Massignon and Emmanuel Levinas—anticipated the ecumenical spirit of Vatican II by nearly a decade. Anchored by Quranic verse 49:13 (Surah al-Hujurat), which the site’s contemporary preservation project has placed at its entrance as a threshold inscription, the article develops the concept of *incarnational dialogue*: religious encounter grounded in material solidarity rather than theological abstraction. Evidence is drawn from eight photographs taken at the site in 2025 documenting multilingual plaques, the boarding school, the monastery cemetery,

and USAID-funded preservation infrastructure. This article contributes to the comparative sociology of religion by offering a historically grounded model for rethinking interreligious coexistence in the postcolonial Maghreb.

Keywords

Toumliline, Benedictine monasticism, interfaith dialogue, Quran 49:13, ta'āruf, postcolonial Morocco, Rencontres Internationales, Louis Massignon, incarnational dialogue, Amazigh identity, multicultural memory

Epigraph: The Quranic Threshold

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا ۚ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ

O mankind! Indeed, We have created you from male and female and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you.

—Quran 49:13, Surah al-Hujurāt—inscribed at the entrance of the Toumliline site

Introduction

I first learned of Toumliline the way, I suspect, most outsiders do: sideways, in a conversation about something else entirely.¹ I had gone into the Middle Atlas in 2025 to look into a different question concerning Amazigh heritage sites, and a colleague's passing remark sent me instead toward a half-forgotten monastery above Azrou where, I was told, Christian monks and Muslim scholars had once debated the future of the postcolonial world under royal patronage. I had trained in the sociology of religion and had read reasonably widely in the comparative literature on Christian-Muslim encounter; that I had never once come across the name Toumliline struck me less as a personal gap than as a symptom worth investigating. So, I made

1 The author wishes to acknowledge the association Toumliline's Friends, the USAID DAKIRA program, and the communities of Azrou who preserve the memory of this site. The author declares no conflict of interest. No external funding was received for this research.

the drive up from Azrou. What follows is the result of that visit, and of the reading it set in motion.

In October 1952, twenty Benedictine monks descended from the Abbey of En-Calcat near Toulouse and settled in the forested hills above Azrou, in Morocco's Middle Atlas. Their arrival coincided precisely with a rupture between the Catholic Church and French protectorate authorities—a rupture that created, paradoxically, an opening for a new kind of religious presence. Rather than aligning with colonial power, these monks oriented themselves toward the Moroccan people: learning Arabic and Berber, practicing medicine, farming the land, and hosting a boarding school for Moroccan children (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. The outer wall of the Toumliline site bearing Quranic verse 49:13 (Surah al-Ḥujurāt) in Arabic calligraphy and English translation. Its placement as the visitor's first encounter frames the monastery's entire legacy through an Islamic lens of universal human dignity and mutual recognition. Photograph by the author, 2025.

What emerged over the next sixteen years was a Christian monastic community that reimagined its vocation not as the conversion of others, but as the practice of dialogue itself. Toumliline was, in the fullest sense, a laboratory—a contained experimental space where the boundaries between religious traditions were not dissolved but thoughtfully negotiated. It is therefore deeply significant that the first thing a visitor encounters at the site today is not a cross or a monument to the monks, but a wall-mounted inscription of Quranic verse 49:13 (see Figure 2). This choice by the contemporary preservation project is a hermeneutic declaration, viz., the

meaning of Toumliline cannot be grasped from within Christianity alone. It must be read through Islam.



Figure 2. Entrance sign of the Former Benedictine Monastery of Toumliline rendered in Arabic, Tifinagh, and French. The trilingual inscription performs the cultural coexistence the monastery sought to embody during its active years (1952–1968). Photograph by the author, 2025.

The monastery’s story has remained largely absent from anglophone scholarship and mainstream histories of the Catholic Church in Africa and the Maghreb. This article argues that Toumliline deserves far more sustained attention—not merely as an interesting historical anomaly, but as a theoretically generative case for the sociology of religion, postcolonial studies, and the emerging field of interreligious ethics.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 *The Sociology of Interreligious Encounter*

The study of interfaith dialogue as a sociological phenomenon has undergone significant development since the 1990s. Robert Wuthnow established the vocabulary of “bridging” and “bonding” social capital in religious contexts, identifying conditions under which religious communities

either entrench or dissolve their boundaries.² However, his framework translates imperfectly to colonial and postcolonial settings where religious difference is overdetermined by political asymmetry. José Casanova introduced the concept of “deprivatization”—the re-entry of religion into public life to give moral voice to social forces—which is essential for understanding Toumliline’s alignment with Moroccan nationalism.³ Jürgen Habermas offers a complementary framework through the theory of the public sphere as a discursive space insulated from state and market logic, directly applicable to the *Rencontres Internationales*.⁴

Marianne Moyaert develops interreligious hospitality as an ethical and embodied practice, particularly relevant for theorizing Toumliline’s dialogue through shared space and daily life rather than doctrinal exchange.⁵ Catherine Cornille identifies humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy, and hospitality as the five conditions of genuine interreligious dialogue.⁶ Toumliline satisfies all five in historically unusually pure form.

2.2 Christianity, Colonialism, and Postcolonial Critique

Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff established the now-standard critique of Christian mission as a vector of cultural imperialism.⁷ Within this paradigm, the Toumliline monks initially appear as a predictable instance of colonial religious presence. Yet this reading is too simple. Julian Bourg situates the French Catholic left’s engagement with decolonization within the broader intellectual context of postwar French thought, providing crucial background for understanding the milieu from which Toumliline’s founders emerged.⁸ Louis Massignon offers the theological horizon of the experiment; his concept of *substitution*—spiritual solidarity with the other through shared suffering—anticipates what this article terms incarnational dialogue.⁹

2 Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenge of Religious Diversity* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

3 José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (University of Chicago Press, 1994).

4 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Square*, trans. T. Burger (MIT Press, 1989; German version published in 1962).

5 Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality* (Brill, 2011).

6 Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (Crossroad Publishing Company, 2008).

7 Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, Vol. 1–2 (University of Chicago Press, 1991 [vol. 1]; 1997 [vol. 2]).

8 Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007).

9 Louis Massignon, *Parole donnée* (Julliard, 1963).

2.3 Moroccan Cultural and Intellectual History

Mohammed Kenbib has opened space for nuanced accounts of religious pluralism in Moroccan history, while Pierre Nora provides the framework of *lieux de mémoire*—sites where memory crystallizes and secretes itself—directly applicable to the contemporary preservation of Toumliline.¹⁰ The gap this article addresses is the absence of sustained interdisciplinary analysis of Toumliline itself, which appears neither in the major comparative studies of Christian-Muslim dialogue nor in standard accounts of postcolonial Moroccan culture.

This scholarly gap is not for want of surviving material. The association Toumliline’s Friends and the Fondation Mémoires pour l’Avenir, a Moroccan heritage NGO founded in 2008, have since maintained a dedicated “Reinventer Toumliline” project that gathers photographs, plaques, and testimony from the monastery’s active years, and the USAID-backed DAKIRA program has extended this preservation effort through new multilingual signage at the site itself.¹¹ A contemporaneous participant account also survives. This is Peter Beach and Williams Dunphy’s 1960 book on the monastery’s early years, cited on the site’s own signage.¹² Periodic journalistic coverage, including a 2022 retrospective marking the monastery’s fiftieth anniversary of closure, has likewise kept the “spirit of Toumliline” in circulation outside academic channels. What is missing, in other words, is not documentation but disciplinary attention. Heritage practitioners and travel writers have preserved and publicized Toumliline faster than scholars of religion have theorized it.

10 Mohammed Kenbib, *Juifs et Musulmans au Maroc 1859–1948*, Thèses et mémoires 21 (Publications de la Faculté des lettres et des sciences humaines, Université Mohammed V, 1994); Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Représentations* 26 (1989): 7–24.

11 Fondation Mémoires pour l’Avenir, “Toumliline: Un Itinéraire Mémoriel,” *Fondation Mémoires pour l’Avenir*, 30 May 2022, describing the installation of 13 explanatory totems in Arabic, Amazigh, English, and French, each incorporating period photographs; see also Fondation Mémoires pour l’Avenir, “Diffusion de la Mémoire à travers les publications,” documenting its collection and preservation of the history of the Toumliline monastery and its International Meetings.

12 Peter Beach and William Dunphy, *Benedictine and Moor: A Christian Adventure in Moslem Morocco* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1960).

3. Methodology

This article adopts a historical-sociological approach combining close reading of primary sources with theoretical frameworks from the sociology of religion and postcolonial studies. Four methodological commitments structure the analysis.

The first is historical reconstruction. The Monastery’s trajectory is reconstructed through multilingual historical plaques at the site (Figures 3–4), archival materials from the Abbey of En-Calcat, and published accounts by participants in the *Rencontres Internationales*. The plaques, photographed by the author during a field visit in 2025, constitute a primary source encoding deliberate interpretive choices about identity and legacy.

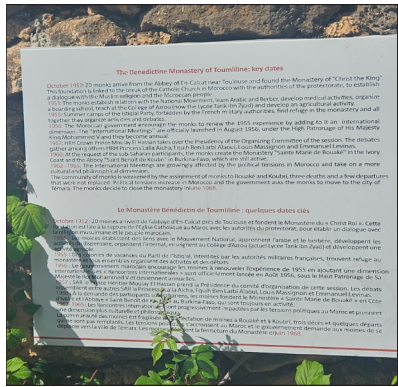


Figure 3. Bilingual (English/French) historical plaque listing key dates of the monastery’s history, including the monks’ civic engagement and the evolution of the *Rencontres Internationales*. Photograph by the author, 2025.



Figure 4. The same historical narrative rendered in Arabic and Tifnagh (Amazigh) script, attesting to the deliberate multilingual framing of the monastery’s memory by the contemporary preservation project. Photograph by the author, 2025.

The second is thick description. Following Clifford Geertz, I attend to the webs of meaning within which events were embedded.¹³ Institutional practices—the boarding school, the dispensary, the summer camp refuge—are read as semiotic acts whose significance exceeds their practical function.

The third is Quranic hermeneutics as analytical lens. The placement of Quran 49:13 at the entrance is treated not as decoration but as a post-hoc

13 Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 3–30 (Basic Books, 1973).

interpretive act that reveals how the monastery's legacy is being re-read through Islamic ethical categories of mutual recognition and human dignity—a hermeneutic approach informed by the tradition of Fazlur Rahman and Amina Wadud.

The fourth is materiality of memory. The preservation infrastructure—multilingual signage, cemetery commemoration (Figure 6), USAID partnership (Figures 7–8)—is treated as a primary object of analysis, examining how physical remnants produce and contest meanings about Morocco's multicultural past.

A final note on positionality is warranted. Primary photographic documentation was collected during a field visit to the Toumliline site in 2025. The researcher's positionality as an outside observer of both the Moroccan context and the Catholic tradition is acknowledged as a limit of this study. Future collaborative research with Moroccan scholars and community members should address this limitation.

4.1 "That You May Know One Another": *Quran 49:13 as the Theological Key*

The Verse and its Placement

Surah al-Ḥujurāt, verse 13—commonly rendered as the “verse of mutual recognition”—is among the most cited Quranic passages in contemporary interfaith discourse. It addresses not believers but humanity as a whole (*yā ayyuhā al-nās*), grounding human dignity not in religious identity but in the universal fact of creaturely diversity. The verse performs a remarkable theological move by transforming difference from a problem to be overcome into the very mechanism of knowledge. Diversity is not an obstacle to communion; it is its precondition.

That this verse now greets every visitor to the former Benedictine monastery of Toumliline was not decided by the monks themselves—they departed by 1968—but by the contemporary preservation partnership including USAID's DAKIRA program and the association Toumliline's Friends. The choice is thus a retrospective interpretation. It reads the monastery's sixteen-year experiment through the lens of Islamic scripture and finds there a convergent ethics of encounter (see Figure 2).

Ta'aruf: Knowing across Difference

The key term in the verse is *ta'aruf*—mutual recognition or acquaintance—derived from the root *ʿ-r-f* (to know, to recognize). In classical Quranic exegesis, *ta'aruf* has been interpreted as a divine command to engage in active, sustained encounter with those who differ from oneself. It is not a

passive tolerance but an active striving for knowledge of the other in their particularity. This concept maps precisely onto what the Toumliline monks practiced. They learned Arabic and Berber, entering the cognitive and affective world of their neighbors. They ran a school for Muslim children (Figure 5). They sheltered political movements not their own, demonstrating that recognition extends to the sharing of risk and refuge.



Figure 5. The boarding school (Dākhiliyya / Internat) plaque at Toumliline. The text preserves the testimony of Azrou parents who sent a delegation to consult the Fqih Bel Larbi about the propriety of their children visiting the Christian monks. His reply—“They are men of God”—encapsulates the social trust at the heart of the Toumliline experiment. Photograph by the author, 2025.

From a sociological standpoint, this convergence between Quranic ethics and monastic practice suggests that Toumliline was not merely an

experiment in tolerance, but in mutual transformation through sustained encounter. Neither the monks nor the Moroccan community around them emerged unchanged from sixteen years of shared life. This is the deepest meaning of *ta'aruf* and, thus, the deepest meaning of Toumliline.¹⁴

4.2 Historical Context: Decolonization and the Politics of Religious Space

The founding of Toumliline cannot be understood apart from the broader political crisis engulfing Morocco in the early 1950s. By 1952, the French protectorate had entered its terminal phase. The nationalist Istiqlal Party was gaining mass support, and the relationship between the colonial administration and Moroccan society had become increasingly antagonistic. It was in this fractured landscape that the Benedictine monks chose to align themselves not with the colonial establishment but with the Moroccan national movement.

As the historical placard at the site records (Figures 3 and 4), the monks established relations with the National Movement, learned Arabic and Berber, developed medical activities, organized a boarding school, and taught at the Collège d'Azrou—today the Lycée Tarik Ibn Ziyad. In 1955, when summer camps of the Istiqlal Party were forbidden by French military authorities, the monastery became a refuge. This positioned Toumliline as a site of civic courage at a moment of colonial repression—reflecting what Casanova calls the “deprivatization” of religion, in which religious institutions re-enter public life to give moral voice to marginalized social forces.¹⁵

4.3 Incarnational Dialogue: Living Together as a Theological Act

Beyond Doctrinal Exchange

The concept of interfaith dialogue is often understood in terms of formal theological exchange. Toumliline's most radical contribution was to demonstrate that dialogue could be something far more embodied. This article proposes the term *incarnational dialogue* to capture this mode: A form of interreligious encounter grounded not in abstract theological negotiation but in the sharing of daily life, labor, and civic responsibility. The monks lived alongside Muslim Moroccans—treating their sick, educating their children, cultivating their fields, and sheltering their political movements. This immersive cohabitation enacted a theology of presence that anticipated the formal ecumenical frameworks Vatican II would articulate in *Nostra Aetate* by

14 Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*; Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*.

15 Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*.

more than a decade, and aligns closely with Moyaert's concept of interreligious hospitality.¹⁶

The Boarding School: Dialogue as Pedagogy

Among the most concrete expressions of incarnational dialogue was the boarding school—the *Dākhiliyya*—run by the monks at the Collège d'Azrou. That Muslim parents in Azrou sent their children to be educated by Christian monks speaks to a level of community trust built year by year through accumulated acts of *ta'āwuf*. The plaque at Figure 5 preserves a remarkable testimony, viz., some Azrou parents, concerned about their children visiting the monastery, sent a delegation to Fez to consult the Fqih Bel Larbi. The theologian's reply—preserved across four languages on the site's signage—is the most succinct verdict ever pronounced on Toumliline: "Not at all. They are men of God."¹⁷

This episode reveals three sociologically significant dimensions: first, the community's trust was not uncritical—parents exercised religious due diligence; second, Islamic scholarly opinion, when properly consulted, validated the monks' presence as compatible with Muslim values; third, the monastery had accumulated sufficient social capital—through years of shared life, medical service, and civic solidarity—to earn this endorsement.

4.4 The Rencontres Internationales: A Forum Before Its Time

Launched in August 1956 under the High Patronage of King Mohammed V, the *Rencontres Internationales* brought together Christian monks, Muslim scholars, Jewish philosophers, and secular intellectuals. Among those who participated were Louis Massignon and Emmanuel Levinas—whose combined presence placed this Middle Atlas monastery at the intersection of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thought at a moment when such triangular dialogue was almost without precedent. The chronology of the monastery's key events is presented in Table 1.

16 Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, (Holy See, 1965), <https://www.vatican.va/content/vatican/en.html>; Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*.

17 Fqih Bel Larbi cited in Beach and Dunphy, *Benedictine and Moor*.

Table 1. Key chronology of the Benedictine Monastery of Toumliline (1952–1968)

Date	Event
Oct. 1952	20 monks arrive from En-Calcat (near Toulouse) and found the Monastery of Christ the King near Azrou, Morocco.
1953–1955	Monks establish civic relations with the National Movement, run the Collège d’Azrou, develop medical activities, and shelter members of the banned Istiqlal Party.
Aug. 1956	Rencontres Internationales officially launched under the patronage of King Mohammed V, attracting Massignon, Levinas, and other international intellectuals.
1957	HRH Crown Prince Moulay El Hassan assumes presidency of the organizing committee of the Rencontres.
1960	At the request of sub-Saharan African participants, monks found a sister monastery in Ivory Coast.
1962–1965	Political tensions increasingly affect the Rencontres Internationales, which shift toward a more cultural and philosophical focus.
June 1968	The monastery closes following three deaths, several monk departures, and mounting political pressure from the Moroccan government.

Source: Compiled by author from site plaques and archival sources, 2025.

From a sociological standpoint, the *Rencontres* represent a striking example of what Habermas theorizes as the “public sphere”—a discursive space insulated from both state power and market logic.¹⁸ The monastery’s physical and institutional autonomy provided precisely such insulation, while its royal patronage lent the gatherings legitimacy that protected them, at least initially, from political interference.

4.5 *The Human Cost: Death, Departure, and the Monastery Cemetery*

The history of Toumliline is not only a history of ideas and institutions. It is also a history of bodies—of men who chose to live and die in a foreign land in the service of an experiment whose outcome they could not foresee. The cemetery plaque (Figure 6) commemorates three monks buried at Toumliline: Frère Jean-Michel Reder (Dutch, architect, 1919–1959); Frère Félix Biollay (Belgian, diplomat, 1885–1962); and Frère Edouard Le Bel (French, lawyer, 1914–1966). The diversity of national origins and

18 Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Square*.

professional backgrounds speaks to the cosmopolitan character of the Toumliline community.



Figure 6. The cemetery plaque bearing photographs and biographical details of the monks buried at the site, and the founding motto: “Neither pastors nor chaplains, but men of prayer” (Monsignor Amédée Lefèvre, October 1952), rendered in four languages. Photograph by the author, 2025.

The plaque also preserves the founding motto of the monastery, spoken by Monsignor Amédée Lefèvre, Apostolic Vicar of Morocco and Archbishop of the Diocese of Rabat, at the inauguration of October 1952: “Neither pastors nor chaplains, but men of prayer.”¹⁹

By explicitly refusing the roles of pastor (charged with converting) and chaplain (charged with serving an existing Christian community), Lefèvre was announcing something theologically precise. The monks were not sent to change Morocco, rather, they were sent to pray within it. The three graves in Moroccan soil are the most literal expression of incarnational dialogue, serving as a presence so embodied that it ends in burial.



Figure 7. USAID DAKIRA monument at the Toumliline site. DAKIRA (Arabic: dhākira, “memory”) aims to preserve Morocco’s multicultural history through collective community efforts, positioning Toumliline as a node in a broader national heritage project. Photograph by the author, 2025.



Figure 8. Sign for “Toumliline’s Friends” (Les Amis de Toumliline / أصدقاء تومليلين) in Arabic, Tifinagh, English, and French, with supporting organization logos including MIT and USAID. The use of Tifinagh signals deliberate alignment of the monastery’s legacy with contemporary Amazigh cultural recognition in Morocco. Photograph by the author, 2025.

19 Monsignor Amédée Lefèvre, “Inauguration of the Toumliline Monastery,” October, 1952.

4.6 Contemporary Memory: Preservation as a Pluralist Act

The material presence of preservation infrastructure at Toumliline today is striking. The USAID-funded DAKIRA program (*dhākira*, Arabic for “memory”) has erected multilingual signage across the site (Figures 7 and 8). The association “Toumliline’s Friends” has mobilized support from MIT, ANFF, and numerous civil society organizations. The inclusion of Tifinagh—the ancient Amazigh script granted official constitutional recognition in Morocco’s 2011 constitution—reframes Toumliline not merely as a site of Christian-Muslim dialogue but as a space of Amazigh cultural affirmation.

From a sociological standpoint, what we are witnessing at Toumliline today is the construction of what Nora calls a *lieu de mémoire*—a site where memory crystallizes and secretes itself.²⁰ The monastery has become a palimpsest of identities: Benedictine, Moroccan, Amazigh, Catholic, postcolonial, and global. The choice of Quran 49:13 as the threshold inscription recruits Islamic scripture as the guarantor of the experiment’s contemporary relevance.

4.7 Toumliline and Tibhirine: Convergent and Divergent Fates

The most illuminating comparison for Toumliline lies not in Morocco but a few hundred kilometers to the east, at the Trappist monastery of Notre-Dame de l’Atlas in Tibhirine, Algeria. Founded in 1938, Tibhirine pursued a project strikingly similar in spirit: a small community of French monks living, farming, and offering medical care alongside a Muslim rural population, in a posture of coexistence rather than conversion.²¹ The two monasteries are connected by more than analogy. Several secondary accounts report that Christian de Chergé, who became Tibhirine’s prior and the best known of the seven monks kidnapped and killed there in 1996, spent youthful summers at Toumliline during the very years the *Rencontres Internationales* were taking shape, a biographical thread linking the Moroccan experiment to the Algerian one it is sometimes said to have anticipated, though this detail would benefit from fuller archival confirmation. More firmly documented is a second link: when the French director Xavier Beauvois came to film *Of Gods and Men* (2010), the Cannes Grand Prix-winning dramatization of the Tibhirine killings, he shot the monastery scenes not in Algeria, where filming was impracticable, but at Toumliline itself, which had by then stood empty for over four decades. The abandoned Moroccan

20 Nora, “Between Memory and History.”

21 John W. Kiser, *The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria* (St. Martin’s Press, 2002).

cloisters stood in, on screen, for their martyred Algerian counterpart.

The comparison also throws into relief how differently the two sites have been remembered. Tibhirine's story ended in atrocity, and atrocity generates its own memory-work. Accordingly, there emerged a substantial popular and journalistic literature, an internationally awarded film, and, in December 2018, and the Catholic Church's beatification of the murdered monks alongside twelve other Algerian religious martyrs.²² Toumliline's story ended more discreetly, in closure and four decades of near-total neglect, and neglect does not generate its own literature. The disparity in attention the two sites have received is itself sociologically instructive. Violence produces durable commemorative infrastructure in a way that peaceful dissolution does not, so that a monastery which is martyred is remembered while a monastery which merely closes must be rediscovered. Read in this light, the DAKIRA program and Toumliline's Friends are attempting something unusual, viz., to build for Toumliline the kind of memorial architecture that Tibhirine acquired involuntarily, without the tragedy that would ordinarily seem required to justify it.

5. Conclusion

Toumliline lasted sixteen years—a brief flicker by the scale of institutional history. And yet its intensity belies its brevity. In those sixteen years, a small community of Benedictine monks demonstrated that religious difference need not be an obstacle to shared life, that a monastery could be a civic institution, and that dialogue could be practiced as much in a field, a classroom, or a cemetery as in a theological seminar.

The Quranic verse now standing at the entrance offers the most precise formulation available of what the monks were doing: *ta'aruf*—the active practice of knowing one another across difference. The convergence of Benedictine hospitality, Massignonian *substitution*, and Quranic *ta'aruf* on the same fundamental ethics of encounter is precisely what makes Toumliline such a rich case for the comparative sociology of religion.²³ What the sociology of religion can learn from Toumliline is that the most durable forms of interfaith dialogue are not those that bracket religious difference in the name of a thin liberal universalism, but those that allow that difference to

22 Kiser, *The Monks of Tibhirine*.

23 Massignon, *Parole donnée*.

be fully present—and to become, precisely in its presence, the ground for something new.²⁴

The three monks buried above Azrou are the most eloquent witnesses to this claim. They did not merely study Morocco. They became, in the most irreversible sense possible, part of it.

I did not expect, when I climbed the path to that small cemetery, to be as moved as I was by three foreign names carved into Moroccan stone. Whatever else this article argues, it began in a plain fact, that a place I had never heard of turned out to hold one of the more instructive chapters in the twentieth-century history of religious coexistence, and it had been left largely to plaques, NGOs, and passing travelers to keep that chapter legible. If this article persuades even a handful of colleagues to make the same drive up from Azrou, or to open the archives that Toumliline's Friends and the DAKIRA program have already begun to assemble, it will have done its job.



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24 Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*; Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*.

