
Anabaptist–Murid Conference in Paris

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Awakening from a dream, I sat up on the edge of my bed and said aloud, “If I could speak with Macron, I would tell him about two minority communities in France that could help make peace.”

The impression was so strong that in the next few days I called a Mennonite friend in Canada and a Murid friend in the USA, both of whom encouraged me to explore the idea. I began to pray and talk about it with various Murid and Anabaptist friends, and eventually an organizing committee was formed. After three years of planning and hoping, we—Anabaptists and Murids from the USA, UK, Europe, and Senegal—joined together for a one-day event in Taverny, a small town in the suburbs of Paris.

That the genesis of this first-ever meeting of Anabaptists and Murids (and, to the best of the knowledge of those participating, the first formal meeting between Christians and Murids) would be a dream is not as surprising as it first appears. Anabaptists believe deeply in the “leading of the Spirit.”

Origins of Anabaptism and The Muridiyya

1. Anabaptism: A Spiritual Reform Movement

The Anabaptist movement emerged as a spiritual reform movement in the Catholic context of Europe in the early 1500s, with strong influence from Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, Switzerland. Early leaders in the Anabaptist movement were, as Jamie Pitts and Luis Tapia Rubio note, “apocalyptic preachers, mystics, and

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spiritualists [who] proclaimed a profusion of messages centred on the immediate presence of the Holy Spirit. Anabaptism was born in this mix.”¹

Pitts and Rubio go on to describe how apocalyptic, humanist, and mystical elements—combined with a strong focus on community and the imitation of Christ—helped to shape the Anabaptists. In modern Anabaptist expressions, mysticism is largely lost except for a remaining belief in the “leading of the Holy Spirit” and the imitation of Christ, both of which are understood to be discerned in the context of the community of believers.

2. The Muridiyya: A Mystical Reform Movement

The Muridiyya can be understood as a Sufi reform movement among Muslims in Senegal, West Africa. In the mid-1800s, internal conflicts in the Wolof kingdoms combined with the external forces of the colonial power grab in Senegambia created a crisis and a context ripe for reform. During this time, Shaykh Amadu Bamba appeared as a *qutb* (axis)² with a message of renewal.

Bamba invited Wolof people “to embrace the Murid identity not as something entirely new or foreign, but rather as a spiritual renaissance which responded to the problems of the time.”³ This could easily be said as well about the preaching of Michael Sattler or others of the Anabaptist preachers who sought a spiritual awakening of all believers.

Discipleship

1. The Muridiyya

The Muridiyya have a strong commitment to the imitation of Bamba and a strong emphasis on community. The mystical spiritual elements of the shaykh–disciple relationship that lie at the core of being a Murid (disciple) are both familiar and foreign to Anabaptists.

1 Jamie Pitts and Luis Tapia Rubio, “Anabaptist Theology,” in *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, eds. Brendan N. Wolfe et al, October 19, 2023, <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/AnabaptistTheology>.

2 In Sufism, a *qutb* is the perfect human being. The *qutb* is the Sufi spiritual leader who has a divine connection with God and passes knowledge on, which makes him central to, or the axis of, Sufism, but he is unknown to the world. E. J. Brill, *Encyclopaedia of Islam: A Dictionary of the Geography, Ethnography and Biography of the Muhammadan Peoples* (Netherlands: Leiden, 1938), 1165–66.

3 Alex Zito, “Prosperity and Purpose, Today and Tomorrow: Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba and Discourses of Work and Salvation in the Muridiyya Sufi Order of Senegal” (PhD diss., Boston University, 2012), 93.

2. The Anabaptists

Anabaptists understand the spiritual master–disciple relationship as between the believer and Christ but do not recognize this dynamic in person-to-person relationships. In the Anabaptist context, discipleship and disciple-making is about helping people become disciples of Jesus, not disciples of a current leader or preacher.

From Dream to Reality: First Meeting of Anabaptists and Murids

1. The Dream: Discerning in Community

My mystical experience—my dream about speaking to Emmanuel Macron, president of France—in the days immediately following the murder of Samuel Paty,⁴ was followed by a period of community discernment with both Murid and Anabaptist friends. Since stepping out alone was never an option I would consider, I wanted to know if there were people ready to discern the way forward with me. To my surprise, a small group quickly formed and began discussing how to bring to reality the idea that had started as a dream.

I am profoundly grateful to Djiby Diagne, Mame Gora Diop, Max Wiedmer, and Matthew Krabill, all of whom, along with me, became the working group. I am thankful for the encouragement of Michael Hostetler, and I praise Dr. Cheikh Babou, without whose influence this gathering of Anabaptists and Murids would not have been possible.

2. Sharing the Abrahamic Faith Tradition

While the genesis of our meeting was rooted in a dream, a second, real-world element helped it become reality—that Anabaptists and Murids both belong to the Abrahamic faith tradition. Abraham, who believed God and acted upon that belief, is the father of the tradition’s profound commitment to God.

As Muslims and Christians, we share many beliefs about the nature and character of God, and we are also aware of profound differences. At our meeting in Taverny we acknowledged both aspects. We also share similarities and differences in our practices, our lived response to the One God, and yet we feel a certain basic affinity. As children of Abraham, we are set apart both from those who believe in many gods and those who believe in no god at all. We share deep roots in the books of Moses and the Ten Commandments. We love and honor all the prophets God sent to his people. Differences could divide, but perhaps the affinities are stronger!

⁴ On October 16, 2020, Samuel Paty, a French secondary school teacher, was attacked and killed in Éragny, Val-d’Oise, Île-de-France, France, by an Islamic terrorist.

3. Sharing Friendship

Friendship is a third crucial element that brought us together in Taverny. On my first visit to Little Senegal in Harlem, New York, I encountered Abdoulaye Thiam on the sidewalk in front of the *Association des Senegalese en Amerique* (ASA). When I told him I wanted to research Murid commitments to nonviolence, he gave me a name—“Djiby”—and a phone number. Sitting on the steps of the post office across from Penn Station, I called that number, and Djiby and I talked for twenty minutes.

Since that moment, we have been friends. Djiby gave me seemingly unlimited access to people and resources that helped me in my research. Similarly, historian Dr. Cheikh Babou, one of my supervisors for my PhD thesis, opened relational doors for me to connect with Imam Souleymane Diouf and Mame Gora Diop at the Centre Islamic du Taverny on the outskirts of Paris. Diouf, Diop, and Babou also invited their friends, leading to the important participation of Dr. Mboup and Abdoullah Fahmi.

Among Mennonites, my friend Michael Hostetler told me to call his friend Max Wiedmer, who opened the door to connect with French Anabaptists. Likewise, my friend Matthew Krabill at the Centre Mennonite du Paris connected me with the pastors Jean Claude and Roman Erisman.

These friendships can be placed in a historical context of a long history of friendship between Muslims and Christians. Islamic history remembers kindly the Syrian Christian Monk, Bahira, who recognized Muhammed as a prophet while yet a boy. Many years later, following Muhammed’s first revelation, the Prophet’s wife took him to consult with a Christian. A hadith records:

Aisha also said: “The Prophet returned to Khadija while his heart was beating rapidly. She took him to Waraqah bin Naufal who was a Christian convert and used to read the Gospel in Arabic. Waraqah asked (the Prophet), ‘What do you see?’ When he told him, Waraqah said, ‘That is the same angel whom Allah sent to the Prophet Moses. Should I live till you receive the Divine Message, I will support you strongly.’”⁵

And the first Hijrah was that of Meccan Muslims seeking refuge in Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia) with the Negus (king) of the Christian Kingdom of Aksum. We remember these stories with gratitude. The intervening 1,400 years is full of ups and downs of positive and negative interactions between Christians and Muslims. But is it good to recall that the very first encounters between Christians and Muslims were peaceful and positive.

5 Bukhari 4:55:605.

Partnering for Peace

Today in the twenty-first century we all need peace. We long for peace. Our meeting in Taverny was described by Dr. Cheikh Babou as “a cry” for peace. Can Murids and Anabaptists write a new history as peacemaking partners?

The state of the world, our current context, our particular moment in history all point toward a need for new kinds of engagements if we are to resist and overcome evil with good.⁶ The overwhelming and ever-increasing disparity between rich and poor is part of human experience everywhere. The challenge of religious nationalisms (Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Jewish) is negatively impacting billions. Artificial Intelligence (AI) as an emerging unknown technology threatens us at our very core—are we no longer uniquely intelligent? Will our own creation destroy us? The use of AI in warfare (AI is currently deciding who to kill in Gaza)⁷ fuels apocalyptic fears. Climate change exacerbates all the other problems. Many people turn to identity politics in response, further widening the gaps and preying on fear.

Together, Christians and Muslims make up half of the world’s population. If we agree to cooperate for the common good, we might, together, meet the challenges we face. The macro problems all have their counterparts on the micro level: Muslims and Christians live together as neighbors. Local politics touch both groups, as do finding good jobs, securing decent housing, assuring clean drinking water, and combating crime. I feel in my gut that we need each other. David W. Shenk, an irenic pioneer of Christian-Muslim dialogue liked to say, “Every Christian needs a Muslim friend, and every Muslim needs a Christian friend.”

Disciples of Jesus need Muslim friends and partners. We need their testimony about trusting God’s sovereignty. We need the Murid testimony about forgiveness and nonviolence learned from Shaykh Amadu Bamba. Real relationship with Muslims calls Christians to live more fully the way of Jesus the Messiah, one of whose titles is “Prince of Peace.” This relationship puts easy, unexamined assumptions about faith practice into question. Friendship between Muslims and Christians challenges our lazy tendencies to speak in platitudes. We need each other to clarify the nature of our shared mission in the world.

Rather than look at Muslims and Christians in general (all 4.6 billion of us), I will consider Anabaptist Christians and Murid Sufi Muslims specifically. I found friends in the Murid Sufi Muslim community in Harlem, New York, who

6 Romans 12:21. [All scripture references in this essay are from the New International Version.]

7 Geoff Brumfiel, “Israel Is Using an AI System to Find Targets in Gaza: Experts Say It’s Just the Start,” NPR, December 14, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/12/14/1218643254/israel-is-using-an-ai-system-to-find-targets-in-gaza-experts-say-its-just-the-st#:~:text=The%20Israeli%20military%20says%20it's,of%20thousands%20of%20Palestinian%20civilians>.

live out their convictions of nonviolence and forgiveness, contributing to the transformation and well-being of the city. As an Anabaptist committed to peace and nonviolence, I am attracted both to this community that is in some ways similar to my own and to this friendship. I feel we need each other.

Missionary Faiths: Emulating the Master

Islam and Christianity are both missionary faiths. Is it possible to hold together the tension of a missionary calling to a specific faith and an awareness that peace demands partners from different faiths who work together for the common good? Disciples seek to emulate their master. This is equally true of Anabaptist followers of Jesus and Murid disciples of Serin Touba⁸ (I will leave this second part to Murid writers).

From an Anabaptist perspective, I look at the way Jesus lived and interacted with non-Jewish people and then apply that learning to my premise that Anabaptists need Murid friends.

Jesus's Childhood as Refugee

The first years of Jesus's childhood were in Egypt as a Jewish refugee; his personal experience included being sheltered from persecution in Egypt, with part of his early childhood among people who were not of his own ethnic group.

Jesus's Mission: Welcoming Everyone

In his adult years, Jesus was an itinerant Jewish rabbi with a band of followers. The Jewish people at the time were ruled by the Roman empire and surrounded by many other peoples and religions.

When Jesus announced his mission (Luke 4), he included a story of the widow of Zarephath, who fed Elijah, and the Syrian General Naaman, who was healed. His first public teaching drew lessons from these two foreigners, portraying the outsiders as having faith while implying a lack of faith among the insiders. His positive referencing of the two ancient stories drew hatred from his hometown Jewish audience!

From the very beginning of his teaching ministry, Jesus deliberately included the “others.” He spent time in neighboring Syria and in the region known as the Decapolis, where he taught ways of the kingdom of God, healed the sick, and freed those with evil spirits. Jesus delivered a man from demons in the Gerasenes region and then sent him to tell all that God had done.⁹ Thus, a non-Jewish man (an outsider) became a sent one.

8 An affectionate title for Shaykh Amadu Bambu, used frequently by his disciples.

9 Mark 5.

We might mention in passing two other interactions: (1) the Roman centurion of whom Jesus says, “I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.”¹⁰ And (2) the healing of the daughter of a Canaanite woman.¹¹ In all these examples, Jesus’s attitude and words toward the non-Jewish people are positive. He includes them and welcomes them to participate in his kingdom-of-God ministry: they benefit from his touch; they are healed and delivered; and they are offered as positive examples of faith, of people we should emulate.

But the biblical record does not stop here; it continues with Jesus’s interaction with Samaritans—the much-hated religious and ethnic cousins of the Jews. The longest narrative¹² from the life and teaching of Jesus begins:

Now he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?”

This is the set-up for a long dialogue between the Samaritan woman and Jesus, two persons who, in normal life at that time, should never even have spoken to each other. The story ends with many Samaritans in the town of Sychar putting their faith in Jesus, in part because of the woman’s witness.

In another teaching moment, when Jesus meets a group of outcasts all suffering from leprosy and he heals them, the only one who turns back to thank him is a Samaritan.¹³ Jesus draws attention to this by saying, “Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?” And then blesses him with kind words, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.”

Perhaps the most famous parable of Jesus is The Good Samaritan.¹⁴ In this story, the Samaritan businessman becomes the hero and the Jewish religious leaders the villains. Jesus’s deliberate inclusion of those whom his own ethic/religious group excluded revealed the brokenness in his own community while expanding the vision of God’s kingdom to include everyone, not just those in his own ethnic/religious community.

Jesus also was a master teacher and a prophetic witness against injustice. He announced freedom and salvation for all people, regardless of ethnicity or status. His teachings called everyone to a new standard (see Sermon on the Mount),¹⁵ inviting all to a new kingdom-of-God way of living. By including Syrophoenicians,

10 Luke 7.

11 Matthew 15.

12 John 4.

13 Luke 17:11–19.

14 Luke 10:25–37.

15 Matthew 5—7.

Syrians, Romans, Canaanites, and Samaritans as friends, his invitation to a new, kingdom-of-God way of life and its implications became clear—everyone is welcome to participate.

If Jesus befriended and partnered with the “others,” if he needed them to communicate God’s message, then, perhaps, might we not say that Anabaptist followers of Jesus need friendship with Murids, our spiritual/religious cousins? Perhaps our friendship can amplify and augment our calling as peacemakers and ministers of reconciliation.

Friendship as the Core: “All the Way back to Abraham, the Friend of God”

The meeting of Anabaptists and Murids at the Centre Islamique de Taverny was an opportunity to begin exploring these ideas. At the very core of our meeting—the organizing principle of the event—was friendship. Everyone present was there either because they knew and trusted each other already or they knew and trusted someone who had invited them into this meeting of friends. We might even say we were friends of friends all the way back to Abraham, the friend of God.

In summary, our remarkable meeting was prompted by a dream, organized by friends, and based on the affinities we—Anabaptists and Murids—share as people of the Abrahamic faiths.