
Doctrinal Religious Pacifism

Mennonite and Murid Comparative Perspectives

Mourtala Mboup

During the weekend of November 24–25, 2023, I was honored to participate in a series of meetings between Mennonites and Murids in Paris, co-hosted by the Paris Mennonite Center and the Islamic Centre of Taverny. The principal objectives of these meetings were to (1) allow Murids and Mennonites to share about their respective faiths, (2) discuss ways of strengthening peace between the church and the mosque in France, and (3) consider the possibility of publishing a collection of articles. All of the above took place in a festive atmosphere marked by the sharing of meals featuring traditional dishes from both communities.

This essay is an extension of a question I raised during my oral presentation at the meetings:

What could have served as an antidote in the theologies specific to each of these two communities that would have neutralized—immediately or progressively over time—any inclination to resort to self-defense in the face of the violence they suffered? And this, despite the fact that resorting to armed resistance would have been easy to justify on theological grounds.

The aim here is to frame this question and share a preliminary analysis of what I believe to be the source of resilience of both communities in the contexts in which they arose—contexts marked by hostilities that severely tested the very foundations of both the Mennonite and Murid respective doctrines of renouncing armed resistance.

A quick survey of the historical contexts in which these ideas arose, followed by an explanation of some of the elements that have shaped the theologies specific to each community, will allow me to illustrate my opinion. This point of view should, of course, be subject to an in-depth scientific analysis.

Mourtala Mboup is an expert in educational science and development studies. He is a graduate of the University of Geneva, and the Institute for International Studies and Development (IHEID), Geneva. As the former general secretary of the Murid Student's Circle of the University of Dakar, he is a Muridiyya specialist and gives numerous conferences, particularly in the Murid diaspora.

I. The Mennonites

A. The Context of the Birth of Anabaptist faith

Anabaptist faith was born during a troubled historical period marked by the Lutheran Reformation, war, and widespread violence. In this context, the community adopted a radical theological stance that ultimately exposed it to abuse by the temporal powers and to strong criticism from religious authorities; the Anabaptists, advocating a “zero compromise” approach toward temporal power that used David’s sword not to defend justice but to oppress, refused to endorse the state’s tradition of infant baptism.

This refusal, an essential characteristic of Anabaptist faith, was at odds with Luther’s triumphant Reformation. The famous reformer fiercely fought against Anabaptist faith because, for him, temporal power existed by divine right. The most significant point of doctrinal disagreement between the Anabaptists and Luther, it seems to me, stemmed from the fact that, as Marianne Schaub wrote, “questioning infant baptism implicitly [meant] the right of the individual to challenge the political order in which he or she lives.”¹ While Luther opposed the hegemony of the papacy, he demonstrated a certain complicity with the princes of Saxony for the sake of the divine character he ascribed to their power. This, among other points of theological difference, provoked the split that led to the defection of his former companions and disciples—Andreas Karstadt and Thomas Müntzer—and the birth of the Radical Reformation in whose wake the Anabaptist movement developed.

It should be noted that the violence in this context was such that the response of a part of the movement was armed insurrection. As Schaub wrote:

This refusal to compromise with the world, a core characteristic of Anabaptist faith, was expressed either by armed insurrection for a great majority of the movement during the peasant uprising of 1525, or by peaceful withdrawal into a community.²

Mennonite faith, which is of interest here by way of its radical doctrinal rejection of all forms of violence, is precisely one of these branches of communitarian Anabaptists.

B. Aspects of Mennonite Theology

In the early 1500s, a Dutch priest named Menno Simons successfully elaborated an authentic body of Anabaptist principles and theological foundations, and

1 Marianne Schaub, “Thomas Müntzer: La nouvelle image de Dieu et le problème de la fin de l’histoire,” in *Histoire de la Philosophie III: La philosophie du monde nouveau XVIe et XVIIe siècles*, François Châtelet (Pluriel, 1999), 132.

2 Schaub, “Thomas Müntzer,” 24.

valorized certain religious practices. This doctrine was widely accepted by believers and contributed significantly to the consolidation of the Mennonite Anabaptist movement.

For Anabaptists, God is both near and far; He is not silent, and when disciples make an effort to look inside themselves, when they break away from their animalistic nature, they become able to receive the Divine Light. From their perspective, God is hidden only to those who are blinded by their selfish desires. He manifests himself to every being who is attentive to His voice. In their view, God's Word transmitted by the prophets of the Bible can be transmitted in the same way by believers who also receive dreams and visions from the Creator, which thus grants them the function of contemporary prophets. As Schaub writes about the Anabaptists:

Insistence on the identity of meaning and values between contemporary prophets and those of Scripture, changes the status of Scripture from a sacred text subject to exegesis to one that becomes a maxim of life and social model to be achieved practically in the immediate future. And for them, Christian freedom consists precisely in this realization of the Word of God.³

In this perspective of deep spirituality, the spirit of the divine message addressed to humanity prevails over its letter, as this passage clearly states: "The Word of God, the inner word, living and life-giving, the very opposite of the letter, cannot be institutionalized without being distorted and corrupted; it lives in action only through those whom it inspires."⁴ The reader will have noticed the anti-church character of this quotation echoing the vision of the reformer Andreas Karlstadt.

II. The Murids

A. The Context of the Birth of the Muridiyya

The history of Senegal has been marked by both internal and external conflicts between three main antagonists: traditional aristocracy, Islam, and French colonialism. The impact of their respective influences on the country's development essentially characterizes the context in which Muridiyya emerged. The most significant phases can be summarized as follows: an Islamization of the courts; violent and shameful despotism; mass Islamization; the abolition of slavery; and French territorial conquest.

The adherence of the kings to Islam, which preceded widespread Islamization of the masses, gradually weakened under the influence and temptations of the slave trade, thus leading the kings to engage unscrupulously in such reprehensible acts as looting, theft, raids, and rape. They did not hesitate to enslave their own

3 Schaub, "Thomas Müntzer," 24.

4 Schaub, "Thomas Müntzer," 133.

subject, in order to trade them for goods such as sugar, tobacco, alcohol, and fabrics that were offered to them by slave traders. “Everything happened,” writes Professor Mbaye Gueye. “As if being unable to effectively address the issues that clearly plagued society, they found nothing better to do than indulge in the pleasures of this lowly world.”⁵

Eventually this division between the common people and the aristocracy gave rise to a series of widespread revolutions led by the marabouts. Senegal went through a period in its history marked by numerous campaigns of armed jihad. After abolishing slavery but not wanting to relinquish its domination, France was forced to resort to trading agricultural products. As this required a minimum of sociopolitical stability, from 1854 onward the French decided to take on territorial conquest of the country under the leadership of general Louis Faidherbe. Until then, his influence had been indirect and was effectively carried out from the coast (St. Louis and Gorée). He used his extensive knowledge of the country and all his strategic skills to take advantage of the discontent among the class of people now represented by the marabout. Writing to Damel Birima, he said:

The day is coming when the marabouts of your country, together with those of the Fouta, will seek to overthrow you, and if no one intervenes, they will succeed. If you are willing to govern your country well, I will join you to fight Fouta and Njambur. But if you govern poorly, I will let them to do whatever they please (June 22, 1853).⁶

For France, yesterday’s ally, the despotic regime, becomes the enemy of today, since it is responsible for the sociopolitical unrest that causes instability. As for the marabouts, if most of them dreamed of peace only so they could devote themselves to farming their lands, some, like El Hadji Omar Tall, chose instead armed jihad against the pagans and the aristocracy.

Grouping together the involvement of the aristocracy, the colonizers, and militant Islam, the armed conflicts—now triangular in scope—became all the more deadly. The Senegalese historian Mbaye Gueye offers an excellent summary of this situation of far-reaching conflict:

The Marabouts, the French, and the *Ceedo*⁷ fought bitterly. The Muslims were bound more fiercely than ever to the success of their vision for society. The French were equally determined to reshape Senegal based on their own

5 Mbaye Gueye, “Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba: Contexte historique et géopolitique,” in *Ahmadou Bamba face aux autorités coloniales (1889–1927)*, Oumar Ba (Dakar, Dar El Fikr, 1979), 205.

6 Oumar Ba, “*La Pénétration française au Cayor: Du règne de Birima N’Goné Latyre à l’intronisation de Madiodo Dégouène Codou, vol. 1, 16 décembre 1854–28 mai 1861*,” in *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer* 64, n. 235 (second trimestre, 1977), 259.

7 Slave warriors.

principles. The old aristocracy was likewise present, desirous to maintain its privileges, and determined to make the sacrifices necessary in order to defend its independence or way of life.⁸

The colonialists knew how to take advantage of their strengths and were determined to emerge victorious in this tripartite war. “In 1890,” Mr. Gueye points out, “one could effectively establish that the Senegalese resistance had failed, at least for those who only took in consideration the results obtained on the battlefield.”⁹ The author justifiably qualifies his remarks because for Islam this was nothing more than a military defeat. The battle was ready to be waged on yet another terrain—that of spiritual brotherhood.

As in the context that marked the rise of Anabaptist faith, here too a toxic climate of colonial aggression and tyrannical abuse by the aristocratic powers led Muslim religious leaders to take up arms in the name of God. It is thus in this context in which Muridiyya was born—a Muslim brotherhood strongly influenced by Sufi doctrine.

B. Aspects of Sufi Theology

At the heart of Sufi cosmology, one finds the fundamental idea that if man is both a profoundly religious being and “capable of knowing God,” it is because God created him in such a way that he would have a natural predisposition for conceiving the existence of the Creator and feel a deep-seated need to know Him. Subsequently, ever since his arrival on Earth, man has sought, albeit even instinctively, to know the circumstances and source of creation, of his own creation. For this reason, the desire to seek the original cause and its divine agent in order to worship the latter is something that flows out of the very nature of human beings. Each one is, therefore, potentially able to recognize his Lord and Creator, thanks to his soul, that fragment of divinity hidden within his fleshly body.

After having conceived man in such a manner, God (Glory to Him, the Exalted) saw fit to establish him as His vicar on Earth. He was entrusted with this “mandate” or “responsibility” (*amāna*), one that confers on him dignity. If the Spirit was sent into this lowly world in an earthly body, it is in order to enable Him to fulfill this mission, which is His true destiny. Yet, God the Almighty—May He be Exalted—in His magnanimity is the one who guides man in order that he escape all existential wanderings and make a triumphant return to Him possible. As the Koran says:

8 Gueye, “Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba,” 206.

9 Gueye, “Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba,” 207.

We said, “Get down out of it, all together; yet there shall come to you guidance from Me, and whosoever follows My guidance, no fear shall be on them neither shall they sorrow. (Qur’an 2:38)¹⁰

This promised “guidance” is nothing other than religion, but religion perceived as an eternal and unchangeable guidance. A guidance of which the prophets have been the interpreters and translators throughout the centuries, thanks to their prophethood (*nubuwwah*) and the divine vessels of prophethood, which, as pointed to in the verse below, are The Book and Wisdom.

Throughout history, it has been considered fact that man has always shown great vulnerability to the multiple influences of corruption, shameful novelties, and conflicts arising out of passion, such as, for example, the desire to wield temporal power. According to Muslim Sufism, this tendency to succumb to lustful temptations justifies the cyclical nature of the coming of the “*mujaddid*” (one who brings “renewal”) of Islam, whose essential mission is the reawakening of the Message of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).¹¹ This unique and transcendent message was first brought by the Prophet Adam and then brought in its definitive, complete, and perfectly universal form by God’s Chosen One, Muhammad (PBUH), who is the last link in the prophetic chain. Nonetheless, after the coming of the last of the prophets, saints will be sent by God to preserve the flame of the Call on Earth. In this regard, Abd al-Raḥmān Djami comments:

God, Most-High, has always proved the prophet’s mission permanent, and has given the Wali the role of serving as instruments in the manifestation of this proof, so as to ensure that the wonders of God and the authentic title attesting to the truth of Muhammad will endure forever.¹²

That is, following in the footsteps of the prophets, these men and women embark on a quest for God,

stripping their souls of the flaws found there, serving God at all times and everywhere, and adding, by their own choice, other forms of worship, and numerous and varied spiritual exercises, all having been approved by an authentic chain of initiation, and added to the legitimate ritual obligations prevailing in their time, and this until Truth becomes their hearing, their sight, their tongue, their words, their hands, and their feet.

10 A. J. Arberry, trans., *The Koran Interpreted*, First Touchstone ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

11 “Peace Be Upon Him” (PBUH) is a blessing that Muslims speak immediately after mentioning the name of any of the prophets.

12 Abd al-Raḥmān Djami, quoted in Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch, *Anthologie du Soufisme* (Paris: Sindbad, 1978), 125.

For the Murid it was one of these honorable Men of God, overflowing with exceptional love for all of the prophets and more particularly for the prophet of Islam (PBUH), who founded the brotherhood toward the end of the nineteenth century. In fact, as shown by his writings, Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba was a true Sufi whose spiritual struggle was aimed at becoming a holder of divine wisdom. He was the one who would complete The Book to be used as tools for the spiritual perfection of his disciples, or, in Sufi terms, the *murids*.

Summary: Was Profound Spirituality the Secret Behind Monotheistic Doctrines of Peace?

The reader will undoubtedly have noticed the quasi-similarity between the conceptions of our two communities in question—the Mennonites and the Murids—regarding the spirit of religion in general and specifically the nature of the process of perfecting through which humans must pass to achieve spiritual fulfillment. The reader will also have observed that, for both communities, if the horizontal transmission of the Word of God takes place through the vicissitudes and uncertainties of history, it risks guaranteeing only the Letter of the Word, but its Spirit will only remain accessible to human beings as long as they strive to attain a deep spirituality—the theology of the Spirit for the Anabaptists, and Sufism for the Muridiyya.

During the meetings in Paris, I asked the Mennonite delegation the following questions: (1) How did your community manage to prevent rebellious Anabaptist faith—one that did not rule out the use of arms—from emerging, and instead establish Mennonite-Anabaptist faith? (2) What theological approach enabled this fundamentally pacifist conception to take root despite a context marked by violence?

In response, one of our Mennonite friends made this preliminary remark: “Regardless of the violent context, those who took up arms were wrong. God did not bless their actions. God blessed the community that chose to suffer during that time. . . . Mennonites are not proud of what happened during that period.” One witnesses here the mark of a transcendent spirituality that seems to relegate historical considerations to the background.

Undoubtedly, the Anabaptist faith owes this spiritual depth within the context of the Radical Reformation to the “theology of the spirit” advocated by Karlstadt. According to Schaub, this theological approach places emphasis on the divine origin of man and considers the removal of carnal desires through asceticism as a spiritual process through which, in the end, man becomes divine. For Karlstadt,

the movement of the Spirit radiates from the Creator to the creature and can then return from the creature to the Creator. Having broken natural attachments, if asceticism creates a void, an emptiness in the soul and the total

elimination of all desires, the believer becomes more receptive and able to reflect the divine light that has been shared with him. (Schaub 1998).

The founder of the Mourid movement, Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba, seized at the very beginning of his spiritual ascent an historic opportunity brought about by one of the country's greatest scholars, Majaxate Kala Jaxate, who challenged him about the status of the Men of God. The occasion led the Shaykh to write a major work commonly known as *Huqqa*. This seventy-eight-verse poem describes the Sufi method as well as the stages of the Jihad of the soul, by which Sufis are able to lead their followers to God after having been chosen by The Almighty.

Huqqa is first and foremost a position that was taken by the Shaykh in a debate that was raging at the time on the status and role of the saints in Islam. In essence, he addressed the following points: the status of the Men of God; their ultimate objective in their quest; their method and strategy of dealing with their enemies; the expected spoils to be gained in the event of victory; and the social value of their fight.

In the event of victory, the Sufis' spoils consist of virtues and gifts they will receive from God. Among their gifts are the knowledge of spiritual ailments; insight with the internal eyes; and an eminent knowledge of God. As for virtues, here are a few: never speak without knowledge of the cause; practice self-criticism exclusively; transcend the injustice of enemies and the severe blows of destiny; and abhor hypocrisy. Finally, their social value lies in their ability to provide guidance to humanity; ensure the spiritual education of the Murids; heal the souls of those who desire vice; and popularize the knowledge of the Men of God through divine inspiration.

As can still be seen today, one cannot simply improvise with the intention of becoming a spiritual guide in the Sufi world. In 1883, while the great Shaykh was directing the teaching center bequeathed to him by his late father, he publicly proclaimed that by mystical means he had received an order from the prophet. With this order he founded the Murid path, calling students and all Muslims, and he walked with those who wished to follow him on the path of spiritual perfection. In Murid hagiography, this command is formulated as follows:

Educate your companions through spiritual will (*Himma*). Stop educating them exclusively through book-based knowledge.

It can be said that through this powerful act, the Shaykh publicly claimed his adhesion to the Areopagus of the holders of *waliyyat* (sainthood). He later clarified his attachment to the movement of the Godly men, while emphasizing the balanced nature of the Islam that he advocated—as do all authentic Sufis, those who never neglect the external aspect of the religion. The Shaykh wrote in this regard:

As for me, I am both in the “pure Sharia” and in the “enlightened *Haqiqa*.” The former covers all that is revealed in the Book; the latter encompasses all that is recorded on the Well-Guarded Tablet, whether it is found in the Book or not. Nevertheless, I recommend to you only what God and His Prophet have recommended: to remain bound to the explicit content of the Sharia, which is nothing other than the *Sunnah* in its purest form. Whoever follows my recommendation will do so in his own interest; whoever acts otherwise will do so at his own expense.¹³

It is thus in accordance with the exoteric aspects of the religion that one embarks on the path of esotericism through the practice of the jihad of the soul. This is done according to a well-codified method and set of rules.

Among the passages in the Shaykh’s writings that teach us about his relationship with God and his prophet is an explicit excerpt where he goes so far as to date the stages of his progression, thus providing us with chronological specifications that leave no room for doubt. Like the great saints, he specifies the gift received from the Lord during his frequent acts of thanksgiving. We learn of his successive mystical states and what the main objective of his fight was at each stage. The Servant of the Prophet explains to us, in fact, that it was God Almighty who inspired him to pledge his allegiance to the Prophet (PBUH) in 1301 (1883); to devote himself exclusively to him (PBUH) until 1311 (1893); then, to set out in 1313 (1895), for his exile filled with *baraka* (blessings, graces) and, during this time, to be only concerned about practicing jihad against the carnal soul, the lower world, Satan, and profane passions . . . until 1330 (1912), and then entirely devoting himself to Gratitude to the Sublime, The Most-High, The Glorious, before making his jihad triumph over all his enemies in 1332 (1914).¹⁴

As this excerpt clearly illustrates, it was the Shaykh’s steadfastness to the doctrine inspired by the Prophet that caused him to suffer exile. But he went even further after his return from exile on November 11, 1902, publishing a famous poem in 1903 in which he refuted the allegations of those who accused him of wanting to wage armed jihad. He immortalized his pacifism, which he defined in unambiguous terms, in the following excerpt:

You deported me, accusing me of preparing for jihad. . . . You claim that I have weapons. . . . According to your statements, I advocate jihad. They are certainly true; however, I wage my jihad through knowledge and fear of God. . . . The sword with which I behead the enemies of God is the proclamation of his

13 Mourta Mboup, (2016) “L’Afrique dans la lutte contre la mouvance jihadiste: Quel rôle sur la pensée de Serigne Touba,” traduction en substance du poème de Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, Haqqa.

14 Diop Amadou Lamine Dagana “L’Abreuvement du Commensal dans la Douce Source d’Amour du Serviteur” (1963), http://khassidaenpdf.free.fr/khassida_pdf/Irwaou%20nadim-fr.pdf.

Oneness. . . . My cannons are the Holy Book and its verses. . . . The lances at my disposal are the hadiths of the Prophet. . . . The various branches of religious science are like penetrating arrows with which I defend the traditions of the Prophets. . . . When it comes to those who spy on me, I oppose them with pure Sufism, clearly defined by noble people.¹⁵

In conclusion, I would say it was indeed necessary for these two communities—both born in contexts where nothing was easier for a theologian than to develop arguments to justify taking up arms—to find a powerful stimulus to ensure that their pacifist doctrines found a place in the hearts of their followers and overcame all challenges they faced. It seems to me that a belief in the possibility for each believer to have access to a “vertical connection” to spiritual perfection—thanks to a deep-seated spirituality rooted in a living and supportive community—was the powerful antidote that made it possible for both the Anabaptists and the Murid movement to maintain a transhistorical vision of religion despite the missteps of human history. It is the only vision capable of freeing believers from the constraints that historical contingencies constantly throw in the path of those returning to their Creator.

¹⁵ *Jaajumlan*, Célèbre poème de Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba (translated by the author from Arabic).