

النشاط التنصيري التعليمي في الجزائر المستعمرة : وسيلة للتنصير

French Missionaries' Education in Colonial Algeria : An Instruments of Evangelization



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الملخص: استجاب التعليم التبشيري للأهداف العامة لسياسة فرنسا في الجزائر المستعمرة. فلقد عمل على نشر اللغة الفرنسية و تلقين مبادئها للأطفال، رغم محدودية انتشاره. إن نشر لغة و ثقافة المستعمر بين الأوساط الجزائرية و خاصة فئة الأطفال هو النتيجة الحتمية التي أرادها المبشرون الفرنسيون و غيرهم بلوغها من وراء محاربة الدين الإسلامي و اللغة العربية في الجزائر. أرادوا أن يكون تفكير الجزائري فرنسيا و لغته فرنسية و عاداته فرنسية مسيحية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النشاط التنصيري- التعليم التنصيري - الجزائر - محاربة اللغة الفرنسية - الدين الاسلامي

Abstract: Missionary education responded to the general objectives of France's policy in colonial Algeria. It has worked to disseminate French and to teach its principles to children, despite its limited prevalence. The dissemination of the language and culture of the colonizer among Algerian communities and, in particular, the category of children is the inevitable result that French missionaries and others want to achieve in order to combat the Islamic religion and the Arabic language in Algeria. They

wanted Algerian thinking to be French, His language is French and his customs are French Christian.

Keywords : _Missionary Activity - Missionary Education - Algeria - French Language - Islamic Religion

Introduction :

The history of western education in colonial Algeria is closely linked with the work of mission societies. The latter were very active and dynamic until the eve of Independence in 1962. In this context, Lavigerie and his followers : the white Fathers and Sisters, in a more particular way, remained the best representatives.

The present paper examines the white Fathers and Sisters educational role in relation to children in Algeria ; and the impact it had on the Algerian society, especially during the colonial era. The latter had a special position from the political and religious point of view. To what extent did the white Fathers' and Sisters' provided education, fight the Arabic language and Islam to implant the French language and culture and implement French colonialism using the religious cover ?

Before considering the role the white Fathers and Sisters played to Christianize Algerian children and prepare Algerian girls to build Christian families that would back French colonial presence in Algeria, it is worth providing a brief historical background in relation to missionaries' presence in Africa in general.

A- The missionaries' presence in Africa

Though the presence of Christian missionaries is traced back to the sixteenth century, their work became very important towards the end of the eighteenth century. This period coincided with the regain of interest in religious matters in Europe which led to the necessity to bring Christianity

to “the heathen people of Africa” and fight any other non-Christian religions, particularly Islam. The latter represented an obstacle that hampered the missionaries’ tremendous efforts to achieve their proselytizing objectives easily. This missionaries’ fear of Islam was expressed openly at a Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh at the beginning of this century : “The whole strategy of Christian missions in Africa should be viewed in relation to Islam.”⁽¹⁾ This period also coincided with the development of imperialism which stressed on the duty to bring the benefit of civilization to Africa. The missionaries, then, believed that European presence in Africa and the development of commerce would gradually change African traditional societies. They also acknowledged that the expansion of western capitalism as it would bring welfare and would then, put an end to their squalid life. In fact, the missionaries thought the expansion of Christianity would not be successful unless it was paired with the expansion of western capitalism.⁽²⁾

Thus, the French missionaries’ presence in Algeria, meant the introduction of European civilization because they did not aim at introducing Christianity without its corollary : European civilization. According to them they could not be dissociated. In fact, it is argued that the missionaries could not have done otherwise because Christianity developed in Europe for fifteen centuries before it could be exported.⁽³⁾ It was natural to let them go hand in hand. If missionaries believed in the superiority of their religion, they also believed in the superiority of European civilization as one of them pointed out in 1883 : “Modern missionaries go from nations whose superiority in culture is absolute”.⁽⁴⁾ In other words, everything in African societies was “... bad and corrupt, and must be pulled down”.⁽⁵⁾ In this respect, everything in Algeria, the Arabic language and the Islamic religion, in a more particular way, were identified as obstacles that were sentenced to disappear and to be replaced by the French language and the Christian religion. This meant total destruction of the Algerian identity.

Such missionaries’ state of mind which saw their paramount motivation to spread Christianity nourished by their wish to eradicate the non-Christian religions and implant European civilization, dictated the use of various well-studied means to convince the Algerians of the

worthlessness of their Islamic culture. Indeed, they built schools, provided health service, offered charity, financial, moral and other assistance in difficult times. For instance, the starvation of 1867-1868, and the other natural catastrophes Algeria knew, represented an opportunity which Cardinal Lavigerie seized to adopt and Christianize a great number of Algerian villages in El Attaf area.⁽⁶⁾

Cardinal Lavigerie was considered as one of the most dynamic and ambitious Christian figures. He deeply evolved the Christian philosophy and was the first to show an interest in spreading Christianity among the Arabs and to believe that the Arab Christians of the Middle East would be helpful in Algeria.⁽⁷⁾ This manifested interest to bring the Arab Christians to Algeria was already questioned by Christian missionaries who were in need of Christian serfs to assist them in their proselytizing mission. In fact, the acceptance of Lavigerie to replace the Clergy Baphie in Algeria by the end of 1866, was mainly motivated by both religious and political reasons ; and to back France's achievements as a colonial power. He considered Algeria Africa's gate to evangelization. Such conviction was clearly shown in a Letter Lavigerie sent to the Clergies of Algeria on May 5th, 1867 in which he said : "Brothers, I am coming in a famous hour of African Christian history ... the Church and France are unified to glorify the past".⁽⁸⁾

However, Lavigerie was not like his predecessor, he was very critical towards the French colonial policy in Algeria because he was prevented from moving quickly to achieve his Christian mission in Kabylia. The latter was a hot field for military rebellion against the French colonial presence. Yet, he succeeded to play a guiding role in favour of the French colonial power and the settlers in Algeria because both sides opposed Napoleon III's attempts to create an Arab kingdom. He believed that such an enterprise would separate the Muslims from the Europeans and hence, protecting them from evangelization. Thus, Lavigerie multiplied his efforts, created and trained the white Fathers and Sisters to implement his ideas and values among Algerians and provided, himself, the advices he judged efficient.

B- The Missionaries' Instrumentalization of Education

The French missionaries were aware of the crucial role education could play to transform their dream into a reality. Indeed, missionary education remained the most dangerous instrument selected to destroy the Algerian Muslim identity. Whenever the French missionaries settled to spread Christianity, they targeted children and the youth. The latter were easily exposed to their Christian influence in schools for they were not sufficiently old and mature to cling to their Islamic roots and be aware of the malicious intentions that wanted to attract them to the Christian faith. Moreover, children constituted a fertile ground for Christian missionaries to implant their ideas and prepare future Christians on whom the National Church would rely in the long-term.⁽⁹⁾

It is clearly obvious that the French missionaries started their work with poor children in general and orphans in a more particular way.⁽¹⁰⁾ For instance, when Algeria knew serious natural and economic catastrophes between 1866 and 1868, Lavigerie collected what he could of Algerian orphan and non-orphan children in Algiers (Ben Aknoun and El Harrach) and sent a lot of them to France.⁽¹¹⁾ It was reported that Cardinal Lavigerie sent 550 Algerian orphans to France to learn a trade. Besides, he used the French newspapers to call both the French and Belgium peoples to adopt those Algerian children.⁽¹²⁾ His purpose behind such behaviour was to ensure a European Christian bringing up to Algerian children rather than out of humanitarian kindness to save them from the starvation Algeria knew in 1867. This can be illustrated by his refusal to bring them back to their country and families when the French colonial Government requested them at the end of 1868, when the starvation ended.

At the local level, Lavigerie trained the white Fathers and Sisters to be good teachers, able to achieve his underlined objectives in missionary schools. He equipped them with the needed skills for successful missions. Indeed, they were prepared to master the languages and slangs of the natives in order to facilitate and accelerate communication with those they intended to Christianize. Moreover, they were required to learn about the science of religions in general and about Islam in a more particular way.⁽¹³⁾ Therefore, it is not surprising to see missionaries of 2014 speaking fluent Arabic, Kabyle, Chaoui and other Algerian slangs, a fact that narrows

the gap between them and the natives. In this context, it was reported that Cardinal Lavigerie advised his missionaries to avoid using the French language when talking to the natives.⁽¹⁴⁾ Such policy aimed at influencing the natives to trust and accept the missionaries as close friends. Once friendships were secured, their mission to convert people became easier.

Besides the religious and linguistic training missionaries received to be good teachers, they were instructed the means to use to attract Algerian children to their missionary schools and to influence their parents to let them attend. Among these means one can cite :

1- Sweets : All of us know how much children, especially those who can not afford to buy them out of poverty, love sweets. Therefore, French missionaries thought to distribute sweets to children when visiting the natives.⁽¹⁵⁾

2- Money : The missionaries used money in their daily contact with children at school. For instance, they gave 50 centimes to every child who succeeded to bring his friends to attend a missionary school ; 1 centime to every child who took his bath before coming to school ; 1 centime to every clever and hard worker child during the lessons time. Other sums of money were given when the results of the Saturday exams were known : 5 centimes for the first of his class ; 4 centimes for the second ; 3 centimes for the third and only 2 centimes for the fourth of his class.⁽¹⁶⁾

Such money-granting policy was used differently in Ighil Ali in Kabylia.⁽¹⁷⁾ 3 centimes for the pupil who was serious and clever the whole week ; mines 2.5 centimes for every pupil who did not attend a course ; mines 1 centime from the account of every pupil who did not attend the revision session. All the vocational missionary schools offered the pupils a salary, a way to ensure their parents' acceptance to leave them attend Christian missionaries' lessons.⁽¹⁸⁾

3- Pleasure : When a pupil gathered a certain sum of money according to his seriousness, hard work, good behaviour and his love of his studies, he

was, then, allowed to buy from the Father boss shop what he wanted : a handkerchief, a blouse or a knife

4- Toys : Like sweets and money, toys were also cherished by children. Therefore, the missionaries put the different toys and games they had in schools at the disposal of the children of the area, where their schools were, during the week-end (Saturday and Sunday), a fact that convinced the curiosity of the children who never came before to the missionaries' school to come to try them.

5- School parties : In addition to the different activities organized in missionaries' schools to attract Algerian children to attend courses or stay there, the missionaries were conscious of the benefit and impact parties could have on the psychological side of children to make them love school. Accordingly, the white Fathers organized a big party every Wednesday afternoon. The latter included all the classes of the school. Besides, the school year was ended with a big party in which prizes were distributed on pupils.⁽¹⁹⁾ It is worth noting that the Christian religious feasts were seized by the missionaries schools to call to Christianity on a wider scale.

6- Exhibitions : The white Sisters on their part, organized exhibitions to show what the girls produced in their sewing course. This means rather convinced the mothers to send their daughters to be taught by the white Sisters.

7- Offering Shelter and food to children who lived far from the missionaries' school or to orphans. The purpose behind was to keep them for longer time in the Christian atmosphere so that their influence was greater on them as they were far from their Muslim conditions and families. Moreover, the missionaries even dared to take away some children far from their towns to their occupied areas in Algiers and also to France, ignoring their families' or relatives' pains and suffering when loosing their children. This inhuman behavior revealed that the missionaries were in Algeria to serve the French colonialism by preparing from the natives weapons to be used against Algeria in due time.

Through the analysis of the used means in missionary school towards children, we conclude that convincing muslims to send their children to Christian schools was so difficult that missionaries had to invent various well-studied means to attract them because as soon as they succeeded to convince them, secured their trust ship and the one of their parents, they jumped to the second step which was working on converting them to Christianity. They launched their project by teaching children the history of African church⁽²⁰⁾ and the use of biblical texts in most of their dictation exercises.

C- The Missionaries' Teaching

The Algerian colonial reality led the white fathers to focus on two main kinds of teaching the theoretical and the vocational training. In both cases, their aim was to consolidate the French colonialism, using the teaching curricula to shape the minds with their religious propaganda and prepare obedient serfs for the colonial government. No civilization, no science was brought, they were rather concentrating on how to convince their pupils that the Christian religious choice would positively affect their life and after death existence.⁽²¹⁾ In fact, such religious propaganda lowered the standard of these pupils.⁽²²⁾ The latter were taught basic skills : reading, writing, mathematics, distorted African history and geography, music, singing and Arabic. The teaching of the latter was obviously a trap to attract Algerians to missionaries' school where most of the teaching was religious and Arabic was badly taught, lacking the required stimulus. Yet, the missionaries translated the Bible into Arabic and Kabyle to make of the Christian texts their teaching tool. Pupils were kept eight hours a day in school. Four hours were devoted to the above cited courses, the other four hours were for the revision and reading-sessions.⁽²³⁾

Witness that Algerian children were accepted in missionary primary schools regardless of their age. No age limitation was imposed. After that, they were divided into three classes : the first class was for the oldest, the second one was for the medium and the third one was for the youngest. These three groups constituted the missionaries' classes in colonial Algeria. Accordingly, different curricula were put for the three classes. The first class was taught something similar to what French public schools

in colonial Algeria provided, that is to say : basic primary teaching and higher primary teaching ; the second class was taught basic grammar and mathematics ; and the third class was taught the alphabetical.

By providing literacy, they created a sort of contempt for manual jobs. It was one of their complaints,⁽²⁴⁾ but they tended to forget that they were partly responsible for this situation. No one can deny that French missionaries tried to develop vocational training and agriculture, but at the same time, they showed through their schools that the acquisition of a literary training could be much rewarding. Young Algerians, then, sought for clerical jobs and neglected agriculture. It was a way of weakening traditional values since vocational education had an important part in native education.

Paradoxically, the undermining of the Algerian Muslim cultural identity by missionary work had unexpected consequences. The educated Algerians who suffered most from the results of this work, namely acculturation and alienation, began to raise questions about the reality of the missionaries. While they had been proud of the French culture and knowledge, educated Algerians began to react to the corrosive effect of missionary work and denounce the contempt held for their people.⁽²⁵⁾

Cultural awareness was a significant step that led to the political attitudes that the educated Algerians took towards the French domination. Indeed, they had first to assess their place as Algerians since they could neither be French in spite of their French education nor Algerian because of this education. Once this was clarified, they became able to face the French colonial power with French weapons.

The French missionaries were the first to provide these weapons : they preached equality and brotherhood but behaved differently. The educated Algerians found out that the missionaries were, indeed, the auxiliaries of the other French in Algeria, namely the colonial government, and all of them began to be identified as Christians. The missionaries were there, according to Algerians, to provide subsistence for the French settlers before the true religion of God they professed to teach. Thus, one wondered if the establishment of farm schools and the teaching of

agricultural techniques by missionaries were not for the French settlers' commercial interest first. In fact, all the French whether agents of commerce, Christian teachers or missionaries encouraged the cultivation of crop which would be sold to Algerians as finished products. The French missionaries' education, then, helped widen Algerian awakening which became directed towards the French domination. It also contributed to the weakening of tribal difference. Algerians, especially in the urban centres could share a common religion and/or educational background. They could, then, share the same frustration being neither Algerian nor French. These multi-tribal communities in big centres were the leaven that would give birth to the political protest sustained by a pan-Algerian consciousness.

In addition to this theoretical education, the white Fathers initiated vocational training to achieve a number of goals, among these one can cite :

1- Such education was mainly for the orphans the white Fathers brought up. The missionaries' purpose behind the creation of vocational schools was both to allow the Algerian orphans to learn a trade to become independent, able to defend their Christianity in the future and to make some savings that could be used for something else in their proselytizing enterprise. In other words, they were prepared to contribute to the missionaries' and settlers' incomes.

2- The converted Algerians were hated and rejected by their relatives. So, if these were excluded from their society, they were prepared to look after themselves and live far from theirs and never comeback to their roots and Islamic religion.⁽²⁶⁾

3- The missionaries' vocational education, the agricultural training in a more particular way, aimed at training skilled workers that would be added to work on the missionaries' or the settlers' lands, a fact that would keep them close to the Europeans and the missionaries to preserve their Christian religion and remain far from their Islamic community.

4- In fact, the missionaries focus on the vocational training was motivated by the quick results it could provide among the natives who once impressed with what the trained children could perform as skills, the majority of them ignored, they were expected to send their own children to such institutions. Thus, they were trapped by the missionaries who taught them to be blacksmiths, cobblers, carpenters, farmers, wine-growers and breeders of animals⁽²⁷⁾ for the benefit of the French settlers who exploited them.

On the other hand, the White Sisters attracted Algerian girls to teach them how to be good house keepers and good future Christian wives to their converted pupils. In other words, they were planting the first seeds of future Algerian Christian generations, expected to promote and defend the French Christian cultural identity. In fact, the Algerian woman was particularly targeted by the missionaries because the latter understood well the efficient role woman could play, as a mother and as a wife, to influence her children and husband. She represented the cornerstone of the Algerian social building which Lavigerie wanted to shake in order to achieve his destructive project against the Algerian Arab Muslim identity.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the French missionaries' education lied with the general French educational policy in colonial Algeria. Thus, it was not without effects on traditional Algerian society. It is obvious that the spread of Christianity in colonial Algeria was mainly achieved through mission schools. The missionaries provided literacy to pave the way for the evangelization of the Algerian society. The latter was taught reading and writing to understand the Bible. Therefore, the establishment of schools was prerequisite. Indeed, literacy was of such importance for the evangelization process that schools were sometimes built before churches to create an Algerian Christian class. The deliberate creation of the latter was the best way to expand not only religious ideas but French cultural, economic and political values as well. This new class was expected to adopt new attitudes and, thereby, be representative of European civilization. It was taught to serve Christianity and transform the Algerian society.

The methods used by the white Fathers and Sisters, as the isolation of the pupils and converts from their natural environment was to get rid as much as fast as possible of the Algerian Muslim past. Shunning the individual from his traditional community meant a break inside that community and its weakening since a unit from an organic whole would be lost. Moreover, the emphasis on the individual and on his own achievement through missionary education, either theoretical or vocational, rather than the emphasis on the group, completed the isolation of the Christian Algerian from his community and made his reintegration difficult, if not impossible.

In addition to this, by providing literacy, the French missionaries initiated a sort of contempt for manual jobs. It was one of their complaints, but they tended to forget that they were partly responsible for this situation. No one can deny that the white Fathers and Sisters tried to develop vocational training and agriculture, but at the same time, they showed through their schools that the acquisition of literary training could be much rewarding.

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