

## **Inter-Religious Dialogue: The Relationship Between Christians and Muslims in the Central African Republic**

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### **Abstract**

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Since the pre-independence settlement in the Central African Republic (CAR), Muslims (1870) and Christians (1894) lived in harmony until 1980, when the arrival of foreign-trained doctors of Islamic law took place. The influence of these foreign-trained persons caused divisions in the country, with Muslims taking over all major sectors of the country. On December 10, 2012, Chadian, Sudanese and Central African Muslims formed a coalition that massacred people, especially Christians, until taking over power on March 24, 2013. They destroyed most Christians' property and institutions. In response, individuals claiming to be Christians responded vigorously in revenge to inflict damage on the Muslim camps in Bangui and in the interior of the country. This occurrence resulted in enmity between Christians and Muslims to date. Christians no longer feel free to share the gospel with their Muslim neighbours. Therefore, for inter-religious dialogue to happen, this article, on the one hand, uses excerpts from the suras of the Qur'an, the Hadits and the life of Muhammad that offer a call for co-existence and dialogue. On the other hand, the study references Bible verses and the life of Jesus on the issue of harmonious living. According to Christians, peaceful atmospheres will enable them to fulfil their missionary mandate as salt and light of the world (Matt 5:13–16). The methodology used is historical-analytical and textual.

**Keywords:** Inter-religious Dialogue; Christian-Muslim Relations; Religious Freedom; Tolerance; Forgiveness; Christian Witness.

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### **Introduction**

The history of Christian-Muslim relations around the world has been widely debated. Goddard (2008, 96) observes that: "It is something of a truism to say that the question of the relationship between the Christian faith and other faiths, and perhaps the relationship between Christianity and Islam in particular, has been, and remains a controversial one, with very



widely different opinions being presented." This observation by Goddard mirrors the situation in the Central African Republic (CAR). From the entry of Islam and Christianity in the CAR (1870 and 1894, respectively), Muslims and Christians have lived mainly in harmony. This situation continued until the advent of the Seleka coalition in 2012, when living together became increasingly impossible. Since 2012, the CAR has been experiencing cycles of violence and revenge between Muslims and Christians (Observatoire Pharos, 2014; FIDH, 2014; Africa Security, 2017; Africa Services, n.d.). For this reason, this work aims to articulate the role of Christians as salt and light of the world (Matt 5:13-16) despite the prejudices they suffer in their context.

This paper presents a brief history of religions in the CAR, followed by the history of Christian and Muslim relationships. The account will be in two parts: before and after 2012, the date of the deterioration of the relationship between Christians and Muslims (December 10, 2012, is the entry date of the Seleka coalition into Ndele in the north of CAR; it has gradually descended to the south, east and west. The Seleka armed group comprises Muslims from neighbouring CAR countries: Chad and Sudan). Finally, the last part will be a practical approach based on the Bible, aiming to encourage Christians to a relational life glorifying God.

### **Methodology**

The study uses a historical-analytical and textual approach. In its historical aspect, the study will describe the history of the events based on some documents and testimonies while analysing the facts studied. Assie and Kouassi (n.d., 6) believe that "the historical approach is based on documentary research." The study will also refer to sacred texts of Christians and Muslims to explore arguments that encourage co-existence.

### **Literature Review**

According to Terrel (2016, 5), a literature review makes it possible to "provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the problem area, discuss prior research that has been conducted, and provide a basis for a sound research methodology upon which to investigate the problem."

#### ***The Christian-Muslim Relationship Question***

Goddard (2000, 2) traces the origin of these two major religions from the Middle East, which have spread globally. He noted, "In many situations, however, encounter and interchange lead



not to the growth of mutual understanding and sympathy but to conflict." Goddard (2000, 3) states that,

The legacy of the past conflicts, from the Muslim Age Expansion in the early centuries to the Crusades and European imperialism, thus continues to wield a powerful influence. Some of the mutual misunderstandings which have arisen in the past seem to persist with great vigour despite the efforts of some in both communities to foster a more accurate understanding of the other and a more positive attitude towards members of the other community.

Singh (2005, 52-55) presents some problems that may raise tensions between Christians and Muslims. These are the West-Islam conflict, seeing the West as a Christian society seeking to destroy Islam, and the critique of modernity, seen when the experience of modernity involves resignation and disconnection with religious tradition. In addition, the conflict of values is critical because, for the preservation of Islam as a traditional religion, it is necessary to criticise the values granted by liberalism, like putting humans as the centre of the universe and exalting his freedom. Singh (2005, 55-60) also presents the approaches Christians have tried to employ in their relationship with Muslims. It includes the ministry of Christian missionaries among Muslims or an ethnic group of minority Muslims; polemics, which is based on the public debate between Christianity and Islam; charity acts towards Muslims in circumstances of war or conflict; leisure, presenting the gospel to people in recreation, adventure, and holiday; and living Christianity.

### ***Understanding Islam***

The book *Toward Respectful Understanding and Witness among Muslims*, written by Christian scholars of Islam in memory of J. Dudley Woodberry, shared their reflections on Islam. The book has three parts; the first part encourages Christians to maintain a good relationship with Muslims. The second part presents the foundation of the Muslim faith to help Christians understand. The third part shows how Christians can witness Christ to Muslims. John Azumah wrote the book *My Neighbour's Faith: Islam Explained for Christians*, dealing with how a Christian can coexist with his Muslim neighbour and undertake relationships that cannot alienate him. Azumah (2008, 6-14) highlights existential challenges, for instance, the physical presence of Muslims even in areas formerly recognised as Christian and alleges that traditional African values do well with the Arab-Islam tradition, unlike Christianity. Subsequently, Azumah (2008, 15-121) discusses the history, faith, and pillars of the Muslim faith and some teachings of Islam on Christianity. The relevance of this presentation is that it equips all Christians who want to work in the Muslim environment with the necessary warnings to guarantee the ministry's success. Azumah (2008, 122-156) concludes with how Christians should respond to Muslims in the non-Muslim world and in



the Muslim majority World in the context of Islam Christology or Shari'ah. Azumah looks at theological and missiological questions for Christian reflection and discusses the question of Christians' and Muslims' God, the Prophet Muhammad, the Muslims' salvation, and Christians' witness to Muslims.

### ***Communicating the Gospel to Muslim***

John Gilchrist has also written two relevant books: *Partager l'Évangile avec les musulmans* and *Face au défi de l'Islam*. The first book is a practical manual for the evangelisation of Muslims. In this book, Gilchrist (2007, 8) introduces Christians to the commonalities between Christianity and Islam that can serve as bridges to proclaim the Gospel to Muslims. The author derives this principle from the examples of the Apostle Paul, who, when he entered the synagogues in Greece and Asia Minor, explained from the Scriptures that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. Also, in Acts 17:22-23, when Paul arrived in Athens, he went through the city to familiarise himself with the beliefs of the people he wanted to evangelise, and he looked for commonalities with the beliefs and teachings of the Scriptures. The second book is a manual of apologetics of the Christian faith before Muslims. The author discusses in detail the key points on which Muslims stand to confront the Christian faith. The author (2007a, 12) traces the history of this challenge from the founder of Islam through the first centuries of Islam to modern times. He (2007a, 19-23) advises Christians not to engage Muslims with a triumphalist spirit, not to demonise and distort Islam and not to have negative attitudes towards Muslims. These ideas can help Christians in the Central African Republic to play their biblical mandate as salt and light of the world.

### ***A Brief History of Religions in the Central African Republic***

#### ***Christianity***

In the CAR, the coming of Roman Catholics preceded the Protestants. The Fathers of the Holy Spirit were the first Catholic missionaries to enter the country in 1894 (Baur 2001, 233). The Apostolic Vicar Monseigneur Augouard established the first station in Bangui. These pioneer missionaries integrated the socio-economic aspects into their evangelisation work as a strategy by using schools, health centres, agricultural farms and small industries (Morouba (2011, 4). Blandenier (2003, 448) adds that the missionary efforts undertaken by the Fathers of the Holy Spirit were limited to Bangui until 1925 before spreading throughout the territory with the assistance of the Capuchins and Jesuits.

The Protestant missionaries' interest in the CAR was awakened during the World Missionary Conference in 1910 when it was reported that the Oubangui-Chari and Chad had



been neglected (Baur (2001, 390). However, it is worth noting that the penetration and establishment of Protestant missions in the CAR faced challenges. The Roman Catholic missionary action at that time enjoyed, on the one hand, the protection and financial support of the colonial government based in Brazzaville and, on the other hand, obstructed Protestant missions (Blandenier (2003, 449).

Strong (1984, 28-43) states that the arrival of Protestant missions in the Central African territory goes back to 1920. William Clarence Haas of Africa Inland Mission landed for the first time in 1912, but he had to leave because of health reasons, making him unable to establish a base. He returned eight years after resigning from AIM and founding the Mid-Africa Baptist Mission (name later changed to Baptist Mid-Missions). With five colleagues, they established evangelism posts in Bangui and several other places. Jobson (2007, 27-28) records that a second mission, supported by the Brethren Church of California - the Evangelic Mission of Oubangui-Chari - arrived in Brazzaville in 1918 intending to spread the gospel in Oubangui-Chari. However, only three years later, in 1921, four missionaries were allowed to enter the territory.

Blandenier (2003, 449) specifies that the United Mission of Sudan, already active in various countries of French Equatorial Africa, began work in Oubangui-Chari in 1923. In 1924, the Swedes of the Mission of Örebro, already present in French Congo, extended their mission work to the southwest of CAR. That same year, John Buyse of the Africa Inland Mission (AIM) crossed the Oubangui River from Belgian Congo to evangelise the Zande tribe in the southeast. A French couple (among others) joined him after a while, and various stations were founded. In 1927, the Mission Elim (work of the Swiss Pentecostals) also entered the mission field.

### *Islam*

According to Filakota's research, Islam's origin and establishment in the CAR occurred in the half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, precisely in 1870, through "isolated Muslim traders from neighbouring countries in the North and West (Chadians, Cameroonians, Nigerians, and Sudanese)" (Filakota (2003, 28). Access to the country was made possible by creating roadways sponsored by French colonisers. In addition to these group penetrations, some Muslim traders came individually or in small groups from Mali, Senegal, Yemen and Lebanon. Trade was not the only vector for establishing Islam in the CAR; livestock and social pressure also pushed groups of Sudanese breeders to covet the country's grazing fields. The percentage of Muslims in the CAR, estimated at 7% in 1988 (Filakota 2003, 30), increased to 10.1% in 2003 (Department of Economy 2005, 11). The Muslims in 2003 were



the descendants of the 2<sup>nd</sup> or even 3<sup>rd</sup> generation having a Central African nationality, although they continue to be called "Chadians." Some Central Africans who were Christians initially but converted to Islam represent only a minority (2 to 3%) of this population.

Islam in the CAR has long been influenced by mainstream brotherhoods in Chad, such as the Tidjaniyya (the most powerful Central African brotherhood), the Qadiriyya and the Mouridiyya. Under the influence of new doctors of Muslim law trained in Sudan, Egypt or Saudi Arabia, Central African Islam has experienced a strong Islamic revival movement from the 1980s through NGOs and associations, the training of urban youth women activists and the recruitment of state and public service executives (Observatoire Pharos 2014, 26).

The *Mbororo* (Fulani) populations form another Central African Islam group with their own diversified practice depending on whether they are from the first generation of *Mbororo* breeders (from the west at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) or "Chadian *Mbororo*" who arrived more recently and considered as foreigners (Observatoire Pharos 2014, 27). Among the 10%, 7% are Muslim immigrants: Cameroonians, Guineans, Lebanese, Senegalese, Sudanese, Syrians, and Chadians. The 1% comprises Central Africans converted by the bond of marriage. In comparison, 2% of Muslims can be said to be from the Central African source. These are the Hausa, Foulbe, Fulani, and Sahara (Africa Service n.d, 8).

### ***Christian-Muslim Before 2012***

Until the 2012 crises, the Central African Muslims were in all sectors and spaces of decision-making — in the transport sector, civil service, the security and defence forces, the government, the Parliament, diplomatic representations, and international organisations. In trade and the commercial sectors, they were the most active. The Muslim community occupied a significant place in the wholesale and small livestock trade, the trade in precious stones, essential products, import and export, and cattle. The massive exodus of Muslims following the military-political crises of 2013 and 2014 resulted in a temporary shortage in the country of essential products. At one point, beef, for example, was either non-existent or unaffordable because the supply chain was disorganised entirely (African Security 2017, 4-5). Access to the popular Muslim quarter in Bangui, "KM5,"<sup>1</sup> was impossible for the non-Muslim populations.

The Mbororo Muslims controlled cattle farming in the CAR. While the other (ethnic) groups get their food through gathering and farming, the *Mbororo* practice breeding poultry, cattle and oxen. This breeding is concentrated in the north of the country, especially the

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<sup>1</sup> KM5 which literally means five kilometers.



northwest, because trypanosomiasis threatens the life of cattle in the south. However, Mbororo herders regularly lead their animals south, especially to Bangui, where they sell them to butcher shops. In north-western regions, the *Mbororo* represent approximately half of the population in some villages. They often live in separate communities since they practice the Moslem religion amid animist or Christian people (Saulnier 1997, 40-41).

### ***Deterioration of Christian-Muslim relationship after 2012***

This section presents grounds that worsened the Christian-Muslim relations after 2012.

#### ***Acts against Christians***

Africa Services (n.d., 1), a Christian organisation working in countries where the churches are victims of persecution, has presented a comprehensive picture that can help people understand the actions that have destroyed the harmonious relationship between Christians and Muslims in the CAR. According to this organisation, the crisis began on December 10, 2012, at Ndele town with the entry of Seleka soldiers. The Seleka alliance, made up mainly of Muslim men from Chad, Sudan and other Muslim countries, was a veritable tsunami that swept across the country with their progress in power gradually extending to the East, the Center, the South and the West. In addition to seeking financial and territorial power, their presence launched a great wind of persecution against Christians, which continues to grieve many families. The death toll amounts to thousands across the entire Central African territory.

According to Africa Services, the persecution affected the entire country but particularly impacted the cities. In the town of Ndele, a prohibition was issued to Christians not to trade or engage in income-generating activities and to practice crafts in areas dominated by the Seleka. Muslim herders destroyed farms owned by Christians and came with their herds into fields of crops owned by Christians; anyone who protested was severely punished or killed. Christian broadcasts on community radio at Ndele were prohibited, and only Islamic broadcasts were allowed. Churches of all denominations were burnt down at Ndele and in its surroundings. The town administration was subjected to Islamic laws and taxes, and arbitrary arrests were directed against Christian subjects. The Seleka practised forced Islamization in areas under their control. Some professing Christians, under threat or suffering, converted to Islam. Reportedly, Muslims also tried to convert Pastors to Islam (Africa Services n.d., 43-46). In Bria, there was massive displacement of people into refugee camps. Massacre of Christians, including Pastors, churches destroyed, women raped, or made to enter into forced marriage-destroying several families, and houses of Christians looted and ransacked (Africa Services (n.d., 47).



Considering that the main objective of the Seleka coalition was political power, this armed group invaded Bangui and effectively took over on March 24, 2013. Their reign was characterised by cycles of violence against Christians. The administration building of the International Biblical Society was ransacked, and the Bible was desecrated. Thousands of Christian homes were destroyed, and pastors were murdered at KM 5 and other Muslim locations between the years 2013-2014. Christians whose lives were threatened and whose homes were destroyed had to move to refugee camps. On Sunday, April 24, 2013, during the Sunday service, Seleka elements launched a shell onto the FEEF church at Cité Jean 23, causing enormous human and material losses (Africa Services n.d., 48-53).

There is hardly a single city or town in the CAR that the presence of Seleka did not negatively impact. While some of the depredations were due to seeking money and material possessions, there was undoubtedly a significant element of persecution. According to the Seleka Muslims, all people who were not Muslims were regarded as Christians. For example, four large villages were burnt down in the town of Mbres, in the sub-prefecture of Nana Gribizi. In Kaga Bandoro, more than ten churches and Bible colleges were closed and prevented from worshipping (Africa Services n.d., 60).

#### *Acts against Muslims*

The acts against the Muslims were largely perpetrated by the Anti-Balaka group, which was initially formed to defend communities against the Seleka. Although sometimes described as a Christian militia, the reality is that they were primarily traditionalists rather than Christians. Both international and national human rights organisations have decried their abusive acts. At times, the political authorities did not pay much attention to them. According to the FIDH (2014, 60-61) report, the Anti-Balaka arose from the tradition of hunters being initiated into secret rites. This report compared them to the Mai-Mai in the Democratic Republic of Congo or the *Dozos* in West Africa. They are fetishists claiming to have received supernatural powers such as invisibility, invulnerability, transformation into a ferocious beast, etc. In the early 90s, the Anti-Balaka (literally, anti-machetes in Sango) appeared as popular self-defence militias which fought against the highway bandits who were particularly active in the northwest of the country in the Bossangoa and Bocaranga regions. Thus, in areas where the state had less influence or presence and the parts that were difficult to access, the government tolerated or even supported these militias because they provided minimum security (FIDH 2014, 60-61).



The name Anti-Balaka gained notoriety when several Anti-Balaka groups joined forces to fight the "foreigners," namely the Seleka. However, they also blamed the Muslim civilian population believed to have supported the Seleka in the Bangui coup-d'état of March 2013. Little by little, the Anti-Balaka were joined by more and more young people, extending their area of action and influence from the northwest to Bossembélé and finally directly to Bangui; they expanded to the west and south after December 5, 2013.

According to an Amnesty International (n.d., 16-17) report, most Anti-Balaka fighters were recruited from the Christian and animist communities of the CAR, and some of their leaders have claimed that their movement was to defend Christians. The religious authorities, however, denied these assertions. Central African religious leaders have often insisted that the conflict is not religious but was the result of many years of inaction, economic marginalisation and political exploitation. Amnesty International (n.d., 15-16) has collected reports of serious human rights violations committed by Anti-Balaka in Bangui and the west of the country, in particular during attacks at Bossemptélé, Boyali, Bossembélé, Bouali and Baoro. The violence often took the form of killings, kidnappings, mutilation, looting, and burning of houses and mosques. In a report published on February 12, 2014, Amnesty International denounced the massacres of civilians, the destruction of houses, shops and mosques, and the methods used by the Anti-Balaka to carry out "ethnic cleansing" to empty the CAR of its Muslim population. Such actions were seen by some as war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Another document, the Observatoire Pharos (2014, 27-28) report, mentioned that the crisis of 2013-2014 had a heavy impact on the demographics of the CAR. By December 2013, when the "Battle of Bangui" broke out, 230,000 people had already fled the violence. Anarchy prevailed for a year following the seizure of power by the Seleka rebellion and was also marked by violent anti-Muslim attacks by Anti-Balaka militias. There were massive displacements towards the countries bordering the CAR. In one case, the Chadian government organised airlifts and road convoys that displaced entire communities, totalling around 120,000 people. An estimated 50,000 people, both Muslim and non-Muslim, were crossing the borders nearest to their places of residence. By the time the Seleka rebellion conquered Bangui and gained political power on March 24, 2013, the Central African Muslim population could be estimated to be approximately 460,000 people- less than half of the original population. In Bangui, only about 20,000 are estimated to have remained out of a population of more than 150,000 people who used to live in the two Muslim communities of KM5 and PK12.



The American Commission on Religious Freedom in the World (USCIRF) (2018, 5) remarked that,

Muslims continue to face strict limitations on their right to move freely inside and outside their communities. Imams from Bangui and Boda said that some Muslims in these cities may move outside the enclaves but that it can be dangerous for a Muslim to travel to other regions, especially in traditional Muslim attire. Representatives of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and civil society actors have reported to USCIRF that throughout the west of the country, especially in rural areas, predominantly Christian communities are restricting traffic of Muslims and forbidding them to return home or return to work in the mines. UNHCR and human rights groups have also reported that in some western villages, returning Muslims cannot freely practice their religion.

Such an observation of the situation shows how the condition of the everyday life of Christians with Muslims has deteriorated. These cycles of violence can be summarised as a bilateral loss. First, it affects human lives; thousands of people have lost their lives, while others suffered the loss of certain body parts or organs. Second, it affects material goods, houses, and properties, losing much or all they contain. Third, it impacts resources; people lose income-generating activities and jobs. Finally, it has a trauma effect in the sense that children have lost fathers or mothers or have been orphaned, and women have become widows.

The challenge to overcome all this dark past and to return to some measure of harmony with each other seems impossible because emotional wounds are often fraught with consequences. However, what the Bible and the Qur'an teach may be the beginning point of dialogue to avoid the consequences related to religious conflicts.

### **Qur'an and Bible Considered**

A good attitude towards Islam and Allah is a starting point for a healthy Muslim-Christian relationship. This idea is also supported by many Christian writers (Accad 2012, 31), including Azumah (2008, 137-144; 2016, 41)—the starting point matters. Gilchrist (2007a, 22) believes that if one classifies Allah in Islam as a false god or an idol, it becomes relatively easy to attack Muslim beliefs. Such blunders should be avoided in a discussion with Muslims. Allah is the universal Arabic name to designate the Supreme Being of the whole universe. Arab-speaking Christians, Jews, and Muslims.

The following section considers some Bible and the Qur'an passages, with input from scholars who suggest ideas for living together peacefully.

#### ***The Qur'an and its relationship with other religions***

At the birth of Islam, the prevalent religions were Judaism and Christianity. Both the Qur'an, the sacred book of Muslims, and the Sunna, a book of Muslim traditions, describe how Muslims should deal with the followers of other religions. Muhammad's actions are also



instructive to his followers, states Azumah (2008, 87). These sources give lessons which are both positive and negative. Since this work aims to encourage Christians and Muslims in the CAR to live together, the paper focuses on the positive lessons but lays aside those that do not contribute to the goal of this paper.

### *Qur'an Teachings*

The sacred book Qur'an contains the teachings of the beginning of Islam. Boullata (1995, 43) states, "The Qur'an, the foundation on which the religion of Islam is based, expresses in several ways a fundamental tolerance of early religious whose faith, like that of Islam, centres on the one and only God." Arguably, religious pluralism is one of the doctrinal principles articulated in the Qur'an. Thus, CAR Muslims should not oppose CAR Christians because of their faith in God. The Christians of the CAR are monotheists; they worship the One and Only Creator God of the universe (S. 3: 64).

Ayoub (2009, 4) downplays the Christian role in the origin of Islam. For him, Islam arose in a context where Jewish, Christian and Zoroastrianism religions were accepted at the start. He writes that:

Beginning with the Qur'an, Islam dealt with these religions and their followers in the context of this universalistic worldview. It, therefore, based its relations with these faith communities on the assumption that they were peoples of revealed religions. A careful look at the Qur'an would, therefore, reveal that its worldview is one of religious pluralism, which acknowledges the right of other religious communities to coexist peacefully with the Muslims. Furthermore, the Qur'an regards racial, cultural and religious pluralism to be the result of divine wisdom and God's signs, second in importance to 'the creation of the heavens and the earth (S. 30:22).

### *Muhammad's Attitude toward Christians*

Azumah (2008, 89) thinks that in addition to the Qur'an (and tradition), how Muhammad treated people of other religions can serve as a basis and benchmark today for how Muslims should interact with other people. Therefore, it is essential to look back at how Muhammad interacted with other people, especially Christians and Jews. Azumah (2008, 90-91) shows that the relationship between Muhammad with the Jews and the Christians was initially healthy. Muhammad viewed the latter as allies and as part of the Muslim community. One report is about Muhammad's meeting with a group of Christians to whom Muhammad ceded his mosque for prayer.

Schirmacher (2016, 535) believes that the Qur'an offers a multifaceted picture of Christians, the Christian faith and their revelation. At the beginning of his preaching, Muhammad hoped to be recognised by the "holders of the Scriptures," namely, Jews and



Christians. During this early period, Muhammad focused more on things he had in common with the Jews and the Christians than on differences. First, he adopted the Jewish way of teaching youth and the Jewish habit of turning to Jerusalem to pray, which he abolished or corrected in subsequent revelations. In Muhammad's first steps in the public arena, he recognised Christians as "holders of the Scriptures" or "the book" (*ahl al-kitab*), praised their piety (5:82), praised their faith in one God, Creator and judge of all men (3:110) and accepted their written revelation, the gospel (3:199).

It is probably around the same time that the Qur'an mentions that Christians have a certain knowledge of God and believe in God and the last judgment; that is to say, they share certain beliefs. According to early Islamic preaching, Christians have no reason to worry about the final judgment (2: 62). In the early years, from 610 AD, Muhammad praised the piety of Christians, their love, their humility and their faith because they were the ones who were the closest to the Muslim community (5: 82).

#### *Shari'ah Teachings*

Azumah (2008, 92) shows that at the beginning of its history, Shari'ah taught Muslims to have a good attitude towards Jews and Christians. The Jews and the Christians are the peoples of the alliance who are protected peoples. The presence of the people of the alliance is tolerated, and they can behave according to the laws of their religions and are allowed to hold their worship meetings with their leaders freely. Based on these teachings of the Koran, of the life of Muhammad and Muslim Tradition, Central African Muslims must seek to live in harmony with Central African Christians because a true Muslim submits.

#### ***The Bible and its Relationship with Other Religions***

The Bible is the only guide for the Christian in matters of belief and conduct. A comprehensive view of the Bible guides how a Christian relates to everyone else.

#### *Revenge Belongs to God*

From the beginning, God opposed violence (Gen 4: 1-15). He did not accept the sacrifice of Cain, who was jealous of his brother Abel. Consequently, when Cain killed his brother Abel, God intervened to prevent the cycle of revenge. Although Cain's curse is dramatic and symbolic of death, Everson notes it is not the final punishment. In this world, the wrath of God never excludes love. God does not reduce the sentence imposed on Cain just because of his protest, but he pledges to protect him from premature death. Anyone in the family who seeks revenge by killing him will be punished, too: "Cain will be avenged seven times." The number seven symbolises the whole. Anyone who takes revenge will bear the brunt of divine



wrath. This measure is a way for God to curb the spread of sin and limit the bloodshed (Everson 2007, 104). Glasser et al. (2003, 44) affirm that God showed concern for both the innocent victim and the unrepentant sinner. He is the God of justice as well as the God of mercy. Henceforth, Cain, the fugitive, would wear a protective mark (Gen. 4: 12-15). One implication of these biblical verses and the reaction of God is that Christians in the CAR should not take revenge on Muslims because of the things done to them. God cares about both the victims and the guilty.

In the New Testament, what Jesus taught his disciples on non-violence can be quite instructive for CAR Christians (Luke 22: 47-51). Luke's account shows that when the enemies of Jesus seized him, his disciples attempted to defend him. One of the disciples, Peter, took out his sword and cut off the ear of one of the servants of the High Priest. Jesus rebuked him and healed the severed ear without leaving a trace of injury (John 18: 10). In this, we see the sovereignty of God, who watches over his will (Mat 26: 53). The disciples wanted to protect Jesus from danger, but did not realise that this opposed the fulfilment of God's plan - the death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection for the salvation of humankind. Christians, too, should trust the sovereignty of God before simply reacting to harmful circumstances. He is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and eternal. God is in control of everything, and nothing escapes him. The apostle Paul told the Romans (8:28) that everything fits together for the good of those who love God. Jesus is the model for every Christian to follow to obey the Father (2 Tim 1: 13). Like Jesus, we can expect to go through difficult moments of trial, but we can also hope that God will ultimately restore us as He did for Jesus (Phil 2: 5-11).

#### *Christian Missions in a Pluralistic Context*

The apostle Matthew presents the coming of the Messiah, the Son of David and Abraham. After his baptism, which marked his entry into his earthly ministry, he was tempted by the devil (4: 1-11). In chapters 5-7, Matthew describes the beginning of Jesus' ministry. As many people came after Him, he took time to explain the principles of his kingdom to them. For Mears (1982, 36), "Every kingdom must have laws and regulations to control what their subjects do. The kingdom of heaven is no exception." These principles of the kingdom of heaven are opposed to those of the world. According to Jesus, these principles are not limited to disciples who followed him then but to all who have accepted the gospel message (John 17:20).



Matthew 5: 13–16 contains two short parables on the disciples' role: to be the earth's salt and the world's light. With this sermon, it is as if Jesus presented the life plan for those who want to follow. Jesus does not promise to spare his disciples from difficulties. He warns everyone that whoever wants to be his disciple will have important choices which will necessarily lead him to dissociate from ways of being and doing that surround him. According to Bonnard (1982, 59), when Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth," he means that the disciples give all humanity flavour. Koursou (1994, 42) comments that without the disciples, humanity will not be pleasing before God, and by their presence, the world can be kept from corruption. Like salt, Christians bless those who sit in the darkness of death. Regarding the metaphor of light, for Koursou (1994, 42), the disciples bring clarity merely by their presence. Through them, darkness will be revealed, and people will be unmasked. When people see the light from Christians' deeds, they are led to recognise that they are in darkness and must themselves turn to the light. Jesus expects his disciples at any place to avoid living according to the principles of the world. Their presence must give meaning to human existence by preserving it from corruption in all its forms. They must show the love of God to Muslims so that their very life will lead some to be converted.

Several New Testament examples can also encourage Christians to know that efforts to seek reconciliation in Christ will not be in vain (2 Cor 5:20). One example is the meeting of Jesus with the Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21). Another example is the meeting of Peter with Cornelius (Acts 10). Christians must not reject people but embody an attitude of acceptance and love. Similarly, Joseph's forgiving attitude towards his brothers, who sold him into slavery, is instructive (Gen 37). After the death of their father, Jacob, his worried brothers asked him if he had any intentions of revenge because of the bad things they had done against him. But Joseph confessed he had forgiven them and had no bad feelings or thoughts against them; he said, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." He recognised that the bad they did to him was part of God's plan to help him and his family (Gen 50: 15-21). Central African Christians should consider forgiveness for all the acts the Muslims have committed against them, trusting in God's good plan.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Christians and Muslims in CAR have coexisted in relative peace since independence. It was in 2012 that the situation deteriorated with the advent of the Seleka coalition that took over political power on March 24, 2013. This Muslim-majority coalition has done a lot of harm to people, especially to Christians. The Anti-Balaka militia organised



as a counter-movement to Seleka aggression further complicated the peace process. Some leaders of this heterogeneous group, not necessarily Christians, have confirmed that their original intent was to protect the Christian populations against the abuse of the Seleka, but are also guilty of abuses. This paper proposes passages from the Qur'an and the Bible to encourage the two groups to live together again and end the cycle of violence and revenge. Living together in society means Christians and Muslims are interested in peace. Peace is the only way to develop the well-being of each group. The cycles of violence that had shaken the country have highlighted one thing- no one wins in a violence and revenge mission; thus, forgiveness and reconciliation should be embraced. For Christians, seeking peace with others is in their interest because this is what the word of God instructs them as they make disciples of all nations (Matt 28: 16-20).

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