

Serge Laugier de Beurecueil (1917–2005)

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I. Introduction

Serge Laugier de Beurecueil, OP was a Dominican friar (French Province) in the Roman Catholic Church. Beurecueil was for the Dominican Order of Preachers what Bede Griffiths, OSB (1906–93) was for the Benedictine Order. Both Serge and Bede were admirable examples of inter-faith dialogue. In his case, Serge learned through a different faith tradition (Islam) how to better live his own tradition (Roman Catholic), without syncretism or compromise. In his last book, *Je crois en l'étoile du matin* (2005), Serge states:

I met Someone, the living God, who “seduced” me, to speak like Jeremiah. I do not believe at all in ideologies, but I believe in Jesus of Nazareth. I do not believe at all in morals, but I believe in the Holy Spirit, guiding my steps from within. I do not believe that I “possess” the Truth and that I could, from the heights of my superior stand, hand it down. I wish, only, with others, often by and through them, step by step, day by day, to move toward the Truth, in order that she possesses me. At times, no matter how dark is our night, I believe with all my being, for them (others) and for me, in the radiant morning star.

Serge’s spiritual path exemplified an encounter between two religious traditions: Islam and Christianity; two cultures and civilizations: Persian–Arabic and Western European, without clash or the negation of the other. After years of intense struggle and hard

work, Beurecueil became a world-renowned scholar on Abdullah Ansari of Herat (1006–95). One could say that Ansari seduced the French Dominican priest to settle in Afghanistan for 20 years. Like Louis Massignon’s (1883–1962) love relationship with the works of the great Sufi martyr Husayn B. Mansur al-Hallaj (d.922), Beurecueil’s mystical path blossomed when he entered into conversation with the mystical writings of Abudullah Ansari of Herat (Afghanistan). Serge’s encounter with Ansari’s work transcended history and theology.

Khwanja Abudullah Ansari was an erudite hanbalite Sufi who lived in the eleventh-century Abbasid dynasty. Born in Herat in 1006, Ansari is one of the most celebrated Persian poets and Sufis. His poems are an intimate dialogue of the soul with God in the form of a monologue. His treatises and poems are among the best of Persian Sufi poetry.

Therefore, in the footsteps of Massignon, George C. Anawai, OP (d.1994), Charles de Foucauld (1858–1916), and many others, Serge walked the path of an authentic Christian mystic in the land of Islam. Serge was one of those

who live in a way least thought of by others, the way chosen by [Jesus of Nazareth], to make headway against all the power and wisdom of the world. It is a difficult and rare virtue, to mean what we say, to love without deceit, to think no evil, to bear no grudge, to be free from selfishness, to be innocent and straightforward ...

simple-hearted. They take everything in good part which happens to them, and make the best of everyone. (John Henry Cardinal Newman in his homily on the Feast of St Bartholomew)

The Arab and Islamic world of Beaucueil was as complex and difficult then as it is today. On theological and anthropological grounds, he had to grapple with Amin Maalouf's questions in his book *Les Identités Meurtrières*: What is the meaning of our collective need of belonging, be it cultural, religious or national? Why does this genuine and legitimate desire often lead to the fear and negation of the other? (Maalouf, 2001).

An honest historical consciousness would suggest that false essentialisms, the dangerous rhetoric of either/or and simplistic answers to complex historical and religious situations are the common sources of the fear and negation of the other. But, as Richard Bernstein puts it, "the basic condition for all understanding requires one to test and risk one's convictions and prejudgments in and through an encounter with what is radically 'other' and alien" (Bernstein, 1992). Thus, Beaucueil's meeting with Ansari was a genuine encounter with "what is radically other and alien" on the most difficult ground, namely, religious beliefs and faith traditions.

II. Life, Study, and Work

Brother Serge Laugier de Beaucueil was born on August 20, 1917 and died in Paris on March 2, 2005. He was the son of a cavalry officer, and the second child of three. After early schooling and secondary education at l'Ecole de Gerson and at Lycée de Janson de Sailly in Paris, he passed his baccalaureate in philosophy with Arabic as a third language. In 1935, Serge joined the Dominican province of France. His choice to become a friar preacher opened the doors to years of scholarship in Islamic studies. First he learned Arabic and then Persian.

He was sent to Le Saulchoir, the Dominican studium of the time, for theology and philosophy. There, he met Marie Dominique Chenu, who was the students' master of Le Saulchoir. At the studium, Chenu's intelligent intuition prompted him to ask a number of Dominican brothers to engage in a serious

study of Islam and Muslim societies. Chenu wanted the brethren to study Islam as a way of salvation and not as some oddity.

Four years later, in 1939, World War II started and Serge interrupted his studies at Le Saulchoir. He was called to accomplish his military service in the city of Jounieh in Lebanon (at that time, Lebanon was a French protectorate). He stayed in the service until the end of the war. In June 1940, he was discharged from military service and re-entered Le Saulchoir in order to complete his studies.

Toward the end of his theological studies, Serge enrolled at l'Ecole nationale des langues orientales in Paris to continue his studies of Arabic. There he met the great French orientalist Louis Massignon, who would have a decisive influence on him. According to Merigoux, OP, Serge completed his doctorate in theology at Le Saulchoir and obtained a diploma at the Ecole nationale de langues orientales in Paris and a licentiate in Islamic studies and Arabic at the time of his priesthood ordination (Merigoux, 2005).

In 1943, Serge was ordained Roman Catholic priest in the Order of Preachers by Cardinal Suhard. Around Serge's ordination year, George Anawati, OP (d.1994) and Jacques Jomier, OP (1917–) moved to Cairo (Egypt) in order to establish a Dominican center for Islamic studies and Muslim societies. The idea of establishing a Dominican center for the study of Islam was put forward in 1938 by the Dominican Order in conversation with the Holy See. Thus, Beaucueil, Anawati, and Jomier were the founding members of the IDEO, the Dominican Institute of Oriental Studies in Cairo.

Serge arrived in Cairo in 1946 to join Anawati and Jomier and started his studies on Islam and Muslim societies. He stayed in Cairo for 17 years. At the IDEO, he oriented his research toward Sufism, the mystical tradition of Islam. First, he worked for the IFAO, the French Institute of Oriental Archeology in Cairo, and then became a full member of the IDEO.

Serge kept in mind the advice of Chenu, "do not study doctrines, but the people who conceived them in their context and time. Otherwise, one runs the risk of not understanding doctrines at all" (Merigoux, 2005). Therefore, in 1953–4, Serge published in the IFAO a commentary on Ansari's *The Book of Stages*. Later in 1963, he published a critical edition of the

same book. He pursued his study of Ansari and wrote many articles. In 1963, on the ninth-century lunar anniversary of Ansari's death, the Afghanistan government invited Serge, in gratitude for his work and interest in Ansari, to come to Kabul for a big celebration. On his return, he published *Manuscrits d'Afghanistan* (IFAO, 1964).

In 1971, he obtained his PhD from the prestigious University of the Sorbonne for his work on Ansari (see MIDEO, 1972, 11: 291–300). After his doctorate, he moved to Kabul and stayed there until the Russian invasion in 1981. First, he was invited to come to Kabul and teach at the university; he was awarded the chair of professor in Islamic mysticism. However, the plight and misery of children on the street would change his career.

He abandoned his professorship to open a house for street children. He dedicated his life to their care. He became their teacher, advisor, and mentor. The number of children, who belonged to many tribes, soon reached 25. At the same time, he got a job as a French teacher and academic advisor at the Lycée Français Estéqlal of Kabul.

In the midst of a Muslim community, Serge lived his life as a Dominican friar and priest. He was the only Catholic priest in the country. He shared this unique experience of a Dominican friar among Muslims in two books: *Nous avons partagé le pain et le sel* (Cerf, 1965) and *Prêtre des non-Chrétiens* (Cerf, 1968).

In *Nous avons partagé le pain et le sel*, Serge recounts the act of thanksgiving (Eucharist) in the midst of a dire social milieu. The book describes an intimate and familiar gesture, breaking bread and sharing salt, with poor Afghan children. He draws us into the infinite horizon of Afghan people's hospitality. He notes,

When I broke bread and shared salt the first time with Ghaffar, it was in a little room next to the chapel where I consecrated the Eucharist. I celebrated Eucharist in Eastern rites. The same bread was shared to seal our friendship and we became the body of Christ. Ghaffar did not understand I knew it ... But, the mystery was there, independent of whether or not we understood. (Beaurecueil, 1965, 38)

Unfortunately, Serge left Afghanistan in a dramatic manner in 1983. First, he went to Brussels where he

was a prior of the Dominican priory for three years. Then, he moved to the Annunciation's Priory in Paris. It was in Paris that Serge compiled a memoir of his experiences with Afghan street children. He published *Un Chrétien en Afghanistan* in 1985 and *Mes enfants de Kaboul* in 1992. However, Ansari's work and thought never left him. In 1985, he published *Ansari: Chemin de Dieu. trois traites spirituels* and in 1988, *Cris de coeur*.

Beaurecueil's departure from Afghanistan was very painful. He grew to love not only the work of his beloved master Ansari but the complexity of the land and its people. Afghanistan was for Serge what Florence was for Dante. The desert landscape of Herat, the shrine of Ansari and the crowd of visitors, were part of him. Several times, he went for retreat and conversation with the Khwanja at the shrine in Herat. Naturally, Brussels and Paris did not fill the emptiness he felt and the agony he endured.

Finally, he found in Paris, at the hospital Saint-Fargeau, a way of pursuing his ministry to help children. His experience of the house of care for street children in Kabul served him well and kept the memory of Afghan children and Lycée Estéqlal close to his heart.

Fortunately, in Kabul one of the boys who had lived with Serge opened a house of hospitality for street children in the footsteps of Serge. One can only imagine how Serge felt and how he cherished his pupil's accomplishment. He had the great joy of visiting Kabul in 2003, in the company of the French television program *Envoyé Spécial* featuring Serge and entitled "A Priest in Kabul." It was an emotional and awe-filled experience.

Serge returned to the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies in Cairo to give lectures and seminars on Ansari. He died in 2005. He gave his ultimate lecture, "L'Amour de Dieu chez Ansari," in 2004. His intimate knowledge of Islam through Sufism and Muslim societies, via his care for the street children of Kabul, gave Serge unparalleled insight and awareness of Islamic societies. His experience in Bayreuth, Cairo, and above all in Kabul as a Dominican friar among Muslims is a bold testimony of inter-faith dialogue.

Beaurecueil's life is a finger pointing to Christian-Muslim dialogue. Ultimately, his mystical path embodied the possibilities and vulnerabilities of what it means to take inter-faith dialogue seriously.

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