

Muslim and Christian Relations in The Gambia: Worldwide Lessons in Respect and Tolerance

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Why I went to The Gambia is a rather difficult question to answer. One would think that as many times as I have been asked, I would have at least composed a good story by now. But the truth is, I did not know precisely why I went.

What I did know is that when an opportunity like this comes by, you do not let it slip through your fingers. I had a premonition that I would grow as a person in a way that I could not here in the United States, but exactly how, I was unsure. I knew that I would gain a new perspective on life, new eyes with which to see and understand the world, but again, how exactly that would happen was still a mystery. What I did know was that at least part of my history stems from African soil -- a land untouched by my African turned African-American family since they departed generations ago. I knew that I would be the first to return, and I could be that starting point that allowed and encouraged generation after generation henceforth to make that journey -- the White family's *hajj* to our own Mecca. I knew that since my collegiate years began I have been on a constant quest to learn about and understand myself. We are products of our history, and because my life had been shaped even before my very conception, journeying to Africa had become crucial. It is not as if I had or would learn this history in a classroom since, in my fifteen years of schooling, I have spent probably no more than the equivalent of two class periods learning about the history of Africa and African Americans and their contributions to the modern world. Therefore, it was a wisdom I had to gain experientially.

After arriving in The Gambia came the question of what I wanted to focus my independent project on. This question actually became a process as I ended up doing neither my first nor second proposed topics. I began with an idea that commenced formulating within the first hour of being in the country. On the bus from the airport to the hostel in which we stayed I noticed a rather large Western style building that read, "Center for the Development of Democracy." As I am an aspiring politician, this building grabbed my attention. Soon thereafter I began learning more and more about Gambian government and their democracy, which was only recently recognized as "free and fair" by the United States government. From there I decided on a topic concerning The Gambia's government and their process of sustaining and building a democracy. Excited about this idea I discussed it with Professor Bill Roberts, the field study leader and professor of anthropology at St. Mary's College of Maryland. However, to my dismay he advised against it, although now I understand why. I was left searching for a new topic, thankful that because of the format of the study tour I would not have to begin any major work until the final two weeks of the trip.

It was not until our time up-country that we began thoroughly discussing new topics for my project. After much discussion and reflection about new ideas and interests, I decided to study Christianity in The Gambia. He suggested then that I study what he called a recent phenomenon in The Gambia, the

rapid emergence of what are classified in The Gambia as “charismatic churches.” These are non-traditional sects of Christianity that have been spreading through the nation, particularly in the Greater Banjul Area. Unlike Roman Catholic, Methodist, and Episcopal congregations that have long existed in The Gambia, these churches are known for their excessively noisy congregators, who almost seem violent, as outsiders attest, with their manner of shouting, dancing, trances, and speaking in tongues. They are very similar to what Dele Jegede (1995) refers to as “syncretism” in his article, “Popular Culture in Urban Africa,” that is, a synthesis of African culture with facets of Christian beliefs. However, it is important to note that not all non-traditional sects of Christianity in The Gambia fit into this classification.

While conducting research for this project I was led to my final topic, “Christian/ Muslim relations in The Gambia.” Although I had no intention of changing my previous focus, while researching I began to notice that I was learning more about this topic than about charismatic churches alone, and it roused my curiosity. Since this topic interested me anyhow, and that seems to be the capricious nature of ethnographic research, I allowed it to lead me. Thus, I had found my topic — or I should say, it had found me.

Methodology

As this project is primarily ethnographic, the two components of the data collection were personal observations and interviews. I did my utmost to use the best possible cross-section of interviewees for the sake of diversity. I interviewed Gambian men and women who were either from Muslim or Christian backgrounds. My goal was to collect the most diverse array of responses possible from which to obtain an overall view or feeling in The Gambia. I cannot say whether I began with the interviews or with observations because I began noticing various situations and customs related to Christian/ Muslim relations almost as soon as I arrived. But because I had no intention of turning this topic into my project, they seemed inconsequential at the time and I paid them little attention. However, as my project began to change, I began to notice more and recall those things I had previously deemed trivial. Nonetheless, that did not occur until my interviewing process was underway.

The idea I originally began researching came to me while on the bus, in the midst of our 10-day tour up-country. The term “up-country” is used to differentiate between the city and the rustic villages. Gambian villages are more similar to what most Americans are medially trained to envision when they think of Africa, *i.e.*, huts and mud-brick homes. Professor Roberts and I were discussing other interests of mine that I might be curious enough about to pursue as a topic for my project. The problem was that my mind was so fixed on politics I found it difficult to be optimistic about other ideas. When he and I began brainstorming about other interests I could pursue there, the only idea left that was greater than politics was religion, so we went with it. Once we came to that conclusion, he suggested that I study the spread of these charismatic churches and explained to me what he knew of them. I admit I was hesitant. I felt that the topic might fuel the preexisting stereotypes about black and African cultures that dominate our society, and I worried that I might end up highlighting churches and customs that were said to promote the type of behaviors that are used to stereotype black cultures. This was the primary

thing I did not want to do. Nevertheless, after discussing the idea for a time, I decided to pursue it.

We returned to the city on a Saturday evening from our trip up-country. The next morning I went to a "loosely charismatic" church, "The Abiding Word Ministries" at the recommendation of Professor Roberts. It was a particularly hot Sunday morning, and I was still drained and exhausted from all our traveling. Sunday was to be my Sabbath -- my day of long-awaited rest after being agonizingly sick through our cumbersome 12-hour ride from Senegal, where we had spent the final two days of the trip up-country. Due to my poor health, the entire ride felt as if we were riding on loose cobblestones in 100° weather, sitting on seats made of rows of metal bars, while nauseous with diarrhea. However, with little time remaining in The Gambia to conduct research for my paper, I had no choice but to get up the next morning for a 9:30 service. I went with Lisa Matiaco, a Peace Corps volunteer, accompanied by my friend Shawn, an alumnus of St. Mary's College and Will, a fellow student.

When we got in the vicinity of the church, my spirit was immediately lifted and I became excited by the sound of a familiar up-beat song I had sung a hundred times with my choir at home: "I love You. I love You. I love You, Lord, today, Because You cared for me, in such a special way..." At that moment I knew that this would not be merely another research chore for my project, but a splendid and wonderful experience. That Sunday was amazing! I felt a spirit running through the church different from any I have ever felt. Everyone danced, clapped, and sang freely, though it was not a show at all, which is what I had come to expect. Rather, it was uplifting, quenching a spiritual thirst that had overcome me since I had been away from my own church family for so long.

The service lasted about three and a half hours, and I spent the entire time drenched in sweat. It was hotter inside than it was outside. The heat was so intense that when I stood up to leave after the service I felt as if I might faint from dehydration. Even so, the heat did not stifle the congregation. During the songs, everyone stood singing, while some danced between the many rows of white, plastic chairs. But the dancing was not the wild jumping and screaming helter-skelter that stereotype black churches in America, but more similar to the way one would dance alone in their rooms if moved to do so by a song they loved. I could bring myself to do no differently. I even found myself dancing and singing to the songs I did not know. My spirit was moved in such a way that I claimed "The Abiding Word Ministries" my home church in The Gambia. Two days later I returned to interview one of the elders of the church. That was when my intended topic began to take shape.

Interviews

Elder Alhagie Tijan

As his title states, Alhagie Tijan is an elder. As in most any church, there is a hierarchy at "The Abiding Word Ministries." At the top is the pastor, Francis Forbes, with whom I later spoke. Under him are the elders, who are similar in capacity to priests, and finally, the deacons, who head different ministries and programs in the church.

My meeting with Elder Tijan proved interesting as he came from a strongly Muslim family. It was then that I first learned of the significance of the family's role in people's choice of religion. As a convert to Christianity, he told me of the pangs that had come with changing his religion – because his entire family, past and present, and his circle of friends were all Muslims. "Immediately I lost all my friends," he said, "I became a [stranger]." Years passed before either group would embrace him again. "It wasn't easy," he stated. Numerous times Tijan was called to family meetings where he was pleaded with and even scolded. He was called a traitor and told that he was a disgrace to his family. Anyone who knows West African culture, and in particular Gambian culture, can attest to the importance and influence of family. What an outsider must understand is the importance of family in Gambian society -- it is regarded with something bordering on reverence. It was my observation that family is the very backbone of the society, and respect for one's elders is held in much higher esteem than in the United States. Therefore, when one is told to do or not to do something, to disobey is almost equivalent to blasphemy. This being so, the sting that inevitably accompanied critical remarks from his family was incomparable to anything Tijan had ever experienced.

Tijan explained to me that it is hard for a Muslim to convert because of family, friends and society, a statement that was reinforced to me time and again through other interviews and observations. Even if one is convinced that a different religious path seems right, the thought of betraying one's family dissuades them. Relationships with friends are no different. Islam is so deeply rooted in Gambian society that iconoclasm is nearly impossible, at least emotionally.

Because I was interested in the overall relationship between Christians and Muslims beyond the family, I asked Elder Tijan how the surrounding community reacted toward him and fellow Christians. He responded that, overall, the community neither verbally nor physically mistreats him because of his religious holdings. He assured me that there was a mutual respect between Christians and Muslims in The Gambia. In fact, he told me that they celebrate with each other on their respective feast days and holidays, a fact I found astounding.

Although at that point I still had not altered my topic, I could not help but ponder the polarity between the ways Elder Tijan had been treated by his family versus the way he was treated by the overall Gambian community. On one side there was a strong resentment toward the idea of conversion to Christianity, and it seemed to strike at the very heart of the family. Yet, on the other side, there appeared no antipathy whatsoever. I gathered that if his situation was in some way reflective of the general feeling of Gambians, it

would suggest that most Gambia Muslims held no strong feelings of animosity toward Christians on the whole, unless it was one of their friends or family members who was converting. But was this an isolated circumstance or a consistent sentiment in The Gambia?

The Reverend Pastor Francis Forbes

Far preceding Pastor Forbes was his distinguished reputation as a preacher and a visionary. However, I rarely rely on others people's judgments, so I was eager to meet him in order to formulate my own opinion. Scheduling a meeting with Pastor Forbes proved a difficult task, due to his busy schedule. Because he had not preached the previous Sunday (my first time at that church), I had no idea what to expect when I met him. However, I was pleased to find that he presented himself as a gentleman and a distinguished man of God.

Although his family was Gambian, his parents were part of the Christian minority in The Gambia, so his story was much different than Tijan's. His father was a Methodist minister, but when Pastor Forbes changed denominations, it was much different than changing religions altogether. Standing only about five foot eight inches, his poise and influence made him a giant both in my eyes and those of his congregation. Also adding to his stature was the power and timbre of his baritone voice, one that carried much authority.

We began talking about how he came to the point where he is today — pastor and founder of a strong Christian church. He told me that he was saved in 1979. "Saved" is a term used by many denominations of Christianity; it refers to a declaration, both internal and external, that one has given their lives completely to God and or Christ, depending on one's particular religious understanding. After this time he underwent a period of prayer and fasting, another rite of sorts used by many Christians worldwide, particularly when in search of an answer or sign from God or during the coursed of religious discovery. When he felt called to preach, he spent years studying theology in Nigeria, which accounts for his more than slight Nigerian accent. In 1989, Francis Forbes was ordained and started his ministry in the local Gambian YMCA with only seven members. Today, his church is approximately 450 members strong and attracts many locals, volunteers (primarily Peace Corps and Mercy Ship volunteers), and tourists of all religious, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. However, it is important to note that not all of the local members are Gambian by ethnicity. Because many West African countries have been plagued by turmoil, The Gambia has become a safe haven for refugees, many of whom come from strong Christian countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone.

I asked Pastor Forbes why he thought his ministry was so strong. He responded that there was much need for "revival." There is widespread civil unrest throughout the sub-region. For years, the dalasi, the local currency, has been steadily losing value against such major foreign currencies such as the U.S. dollar and the British pound sterling, and today it remains unstable. Consequently there is a declining relevance in traditional religions, particularly for young Gambians, because such orthodox denominations do not seem to deal with the common everyday problems that people are facing. With so much adversity, people need a God and a religion they can relate to. They

need a church where they can celebrate in a manner that feels comfortable to them -- no old hymns or services spoken in Latin or Arabic, but a place where they can dance and celebrate, combining their culture and religion. Both Pastor Forbes and Elder Tijan spoke of how Forbes' ministry focused on "developing the total man," often preaching about real-life issues such as education, marriage, and even hygiene.

Because at this point in time my topic still had not changed, Pastor Forbes and I did not discuss in depth the topic of Christian/ Muslim relations. When I asked he did tell me that as far as he could tell, Christians and Muslims in The Gambia had a very positive relationship, which is fairly rare (or rarely heard about) in many countries today.

Reflecting on this interview, I noticed a consistency with the assertion of my previous interviewee (Elder Tijan) that Gambian Christians and Muslims enjoyed positive relations with one another. In fact, it did not seem to me that these two men had given the matter much thought prior to their interviews with me. To me that was a clear indication of how well the two religions coexist in this single society. If the relationship between the two communities were dire or merely par, surely these two men would have given the matter more attention long before I met them. However, because both these men provided me with only the Christian perspective on the issue, I could not receive confirmation until I had spoken with a Muslim. That was when I was introduced to my next interviewee, Gibril Sumbunu (pronounced Soom-Boon-uu).

Gibril Sumbunu

I met Gibril Sumbunu at his compound, directly outside his house because the weather that evening was so pleasant. Around us were four women engaged in various activities. All looked young enough to be his daughters, but old enough to be his wives, of which he has two. It was about 6:45 when we met, and our meeting lasted until almost 8:00 when we were interrupted by the evening call for prayer. Because I was beginning to see my project heading in its own direction, I decided to go into more depth with Mr. Sumbunu about Christian/ Muslim relations and the co-existence between the two religious groups. His Muslim standpoint would be valuable to the validity and reliability of my study. Without a Muslim perspective there would be neither balance nor precision to legitimize this work. He proved a great resource not only for this topic, but for the many random curiosities I had about the Islamic faith as well. As we talked, I revealed to him my very obvious ignorance of his religion.

First I asked, "Living directly across the street from one of these 'charismatic' churches, how do you feel about them springing up all around The Gambia?" Mr. Sumbunu admitted that although he had no problem with Christianity, he was used to more traditional denominations that worshiped on Sundays. The charismatic church held services three to four times a week in the middle of his neighborhood. He explained that they do not worship as Roman Catholic and Methodist churches do. Rather, they scream and shout during services -- hence their local classification, "charismatic." "From afar," he said, "you'd think they're fighting or all hell has broken loose." Mr. Sumbunu explained that he respects people's right to choose their religion and even their style of worship, but he would prefer it if their churches were in designated areas as

opposed to being directly in the middle of a neighborhood or cluster of compounds. He speculated, "If their prayers go on at the same time as Muslim prayers, there will be clashes."

I wanted to learn more about his thoughts of an individual's right to religion, on the one hand, and the clashes that arise between these two religions, on the other. I asked him what he thought about Christians and Christianity. He explained that although he was a devout Muslim, he had no qualm with Christians or Christianity. In fact, he said that he held much respect for them. He explained to me that Muslims believe in many of the same figures Christians do, *i.e.*, Jesus and Moses and many other prophets, but they held them in a different regard. For instance, what I as a Christian call the *Old Testament* of the *Bible*, they call *The Book of Moses*, and what Christians call the *New Testament*, Muslims refer to as *The Book of Jesus*. Given this, he had little reason to dislike Christians.

Because prejudice and dislike are not always reciprocated, I asked Mr. Sumbunu how he thought Christians felt about Muslims. He told me that he had never gotten the notion that any Christians disliked him or any other Muslim for religious reasons. So I followed up with a more intriguing question: "If The Gambia is supposed to be a secular state, how are Muslims allowed to project public calls for prayer from loudspeakers, roaring across the country when I know that Christians could never pull off such a thing?" With a grin he responded, "Muslims can get away with it. They are the majority -- about 92 to 95 percent. But..." he continued, "most Muslims are aware that the religion does not support continuous blaring of loud speakers calling people to prayer. After the announcement for prayer is made, the loudspeakers should be turned off. People make their own decisions about when and where to pray."

Nonetheless, I knew that his feelings toward Christianity would change when I asked how he would feel if one of his daughters decided to convert or to marry a Christian, and I was correct. I wanted to confirm my sense that although most people seemed highly tolerant of Christians and Christianity, when it comes to one of their own close friends or family members converting or marrying into Christianity, sympathy makes an about-face. As I expected, Mr. Sumbunu was adamantly against the idea of such a conversion. He said that it was his job as a father to "show them the way." And if they didn't follow this religious path, he would shun them. Although he made it clear that he could not sit idle while one of his daughters left the faith of Islam, it was clear through his words and mannerisms that the idea of having to turn away from one of his daughters would be painful. I could see that Mr. Sumbunu loved his daughters, and it was out of his love for them and for his God and religion that forced him to stand his ground so unyieldingly. However, he did confess that because a household customarily follows the husband's religion, if his son married a Christian woman, he would not oppose it lest she refuse to convert to Islam. Though even if she did refuse, Islam would accept the marriage on two premises: first, she might decide to convert later, and second, the children would be reared as Muslims.

We spoke a while longer, and I discussed with him the practices and beliefs of Muslims. It was during this conversation that we were interrupted by the call for prayer. By then I was already running late for an appointment, so it came at a fitting time. However, I was also happy that it came when it did as it

gave me an opportunity to see the preparation rituals for prayer and inquire about them.

As the call for prayer echoed all around us, Mr. Sumbunu's son, a young boy of about eight or nine years of age, came to where we were sitting; he was bearing a plastic kettle filled with water. It was done in such a routine manner as to suggest that he does this every day. Mr. Sumbunu then excused himself from where we were seated, explaining to me that he had to cleanse himself for prayer. This is called ablution. He walked a short distance away and proceeded to wash out his mouth with water from the kettle, including his teeth, which he scrubbed with his index finger as is customary there. I had seen many men do the same during my stay in The Gambia. He also washed his hands, arms, face and his feet. When he had finished, his wife came to where he was standing to give him her sandals in the same routine manner as his son. When he was done and about to pray I excused myself to leave. He said in a kind voice, "Please, don't feel rushed." However, I explained that I was behind schedule. So we bid each other good night and I left.

Walking back to the hostel I contemplated what I had learned and confirmed. Since I had not thoroughly interviewed any Muslims before Mr. Sumbunu, I had been uncertain about how he would respond to questions regarding his relationship with Christians. But after he responded that he had great respect for Christians, consistent with my previous interviewees, it was not difficult to forecast his responses to the questions that followed. For example, there was not a single doubt that he would respond the way he did to my question about how he would feel if one of his children converted to Christianity or married a Christian. I had predicted his response even down to the very word he used, "shun," that is, except for the exemption made for his son. I noticed that I was receiving one confirmation after another of the exceptional relationship between Christians and Muslims in The Gambia. It was during this interview that I realized the topic of my project had changed. However, to complete my cross-section I still needed to converse with a Gambian woman as I still only had male perspectives, and that challenged the idea of diversity in my study. Thus came Yvette Phillott, a great addition to my project.

Yvette Phillott

My meeting with Ms. Phillott added yet another viewpoint to my collage of perspectives. As the vice-principal of Gambia College, she is a college-educated woman, something of a rarity in The Gambia. She and her family are also long-time Roman Catholics, which allowed me to contrast her perspective to other, non-traditional denominations of Christianity as well as to the Muslim worldview.

Ms. Phillott and I met at her residence in the evening, just a couple of days before I was to return to the States. When I arrived, the difference between the house of a middle-class, well-educated family and that of many others seemed apparent. It was not that her house was excessively extravagant, but it was more similar to a house in the U.S. than most others I had seen in The Gambia. She and I decided to sit on her front porch because the evening was cool. We spoke at length about non-traditional sects of Christianity, my original topic. However, as with the other interviews, the information on that subject was too sparse and forced to be of any use to others or myself. So, as

with the former interviews, I fashioned my way to questions about Christian/Muslim relations.

I began this segment of the interview with a broad question about her take on Christian/Muslim relations. She responded that there was a mutual respect, which corroborated what I had learned from the other interviewees. She said, as others had previously told me, that when there is a feast, the two religions feast together, and when there is a holiday, they celebrate together. For example, Christmas is a widely celebrated holiday in The Gambia, at which time, I am told, both Christians and Muslims enjoy dinner and celebrations together.

I asked if she had been discriminated against at work or otherwise because of her religion. She told me that she had not, nor had she or anyone she knew been ostracized or experienced any animosity because of their religious convictions. I asked Ms. Phillott how she felt about the public calls for prayer, especially since it is not likely that Christians would ever, in the current state of the country, be allowed to do such a thing. She replied, "We've learned to cope," in a very understanding and non-resentful manner.

As I had with Mr. Sumbunu, I asked Ms. Phillott how she would feel if one of her children decided to convert to Islam. She said that she was not sure what she would do. She realized that, ultimately, it is their life and they have to live it. Shunning them will not likely change their mind, but of course she hopes that would never happen. She added that she thinks education plays a role in one's flexibility. "The less well-educated will probably be less flexible." She based this on her own level of understanding, adding that it is her education that allows her to recognize and understand different points of view. "But," she added, "at the end of the day, we are all judged the Almighty."

My interview with Ms. Phillott allowed me to see that there was no apparent variance of opinion based on sex, as was the case with religion. She seemed to share similar views and experiences as the men with whom I had spoken. Before our meeting I had almost hoped that Ms. Phillott's experiences would vary from those of her male cohorts in order to give a different perspective to my project from which to draw a conclusion. However, as the interview went on, I realized that an accurate conclusion could not be forced – it could only be found from the data.

Observations

As previously mentioned, my observations on the subject of Christian/Muslim relations began long before I knew it would be the topic of this project. From the time I entered The Gambia, I could not help but notice how overwhelmingly Muslim it was, taking note of various things out of pure curiosity. However, after the topic for my paper took a turn to its present form, I began to pay closer attention to detail. When I did so and combined my observations with my interviews, I found that I had originally misled myself.

One of my first revelations was that The Gambia is very much a Muslim country despite the fact that its constitution declares it a secular state. I saw proof of this throughout the society. As an outsider looking in, particularly from a Christian standpoint, it was easy for me to see the inescapable Muslim influence that predominated almost every facet of Gambian society. Not a

single day passed when I was not reminded of The Gambia's dominant religion, Islam. However, as dominant as Islam was, The Gambia did not seem to force it upon its citizens any more than a commercial advertisement forces its viewers to buy their product. Family influence, of course, operates more stringently than does the national government.

It is no secret that roughly 90 percent of Gambians are Muslim. In fact, walking through the streets one would think Islam even more dominant than that. For instance, walking down any given road at one of the prayer times, one is likely to see a group of males in rows of about five or six, lined up almost like a battalion, ranging from pre-puberty boys to more senior gray-haired older men. They kneel face down on their prayer mats, bowing and rising in the Muslim custom. And even when it is not a prayer time, thousands of men, if not more, are praying with their prayer beads, sliding the rosary-like beads through their thumb and index finger one by one, reciting inaudible prayers. They are required by Islam to pray in this manner every day.

Five times during the course of the day Muslims (men in particular) are required to pray in the more elaborate manner previously mentioned. *Subaa* is the first prayer time, which is at dawn. *Salifanaa* is the second, around 2:00 p.m. *Alan Suroo* is the third, around 5:00 p.m., and *Fitiroo* is the fourth, between 7:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m.

Saafu is the final required prayer, which is shortly after 8:00. I have mentioned the calls for prayer, which are announced shortly before each prayer time. Audible though they were, I find myself unable to describe them because I do not understand Arabic, the holy language used by muzzeeins across the country. However, I am not alone as I was informed that most non-Arabic Muslims do not understand Arabic either. The call to prayer is not spoken, but sung vociferously and in an alto key as foreign to me as the country, from loudspeakers placed outside the mosques found in nearly every community and neighborhood in The Gambia.

It was not until our trip up-country that my question arose of how non-Muslims felt about this public call for prayer. We were staying in a village, and at about 5:00 each morning I was startled out of my sleep by the all-too-familiar sound of the call for prayer. Only, without the noise and structure of the city where we stayed during most of the trip, there was little to dilute this seemingly endless early morning cry. It was much louder and more difficult to bear than it had previously been. And without much to do at this time of morning and unable to sleep through it, I pondered how the non-Muslim faction of this society tolerated this everyday. Does it aggravate them? Have they simply grown accustomed to it? Was this sound that was so germane to Muslims merely flagrant bellowing to local Christians? Surely, it was probably as euphonious as music to the Muslim population, but one person's music can always be another's racket. Moreover, does this display of Muslim dominance fit in accordance with a constitution that expressly defines The Gambia as a secular state?

This was far from the only daily reminder of the prevalence of Islam. Many a time I would be relaxing after a long language and culture class, trying to salvage some energy during the break before our daily excursion by lying down in my room at the hostel. Drained from class, I would turn on the television and occasionally find movies or sitcom re-runs that were actually in

English (although The Gambia's official language is English, televisions with a satellite dish or cable connection receive channels broadcast from Arabic- or French-speaking countries). But just as my interest would peak, the show would be interrupted for afternoon prayer. Then, passages from the Koran would be read in both English and Arabic. Thereafter, the show would resume, but only for the same thing to happen about three minutes later. For a reason unknown to me, each of the five prayers was repeated once on television.

The fact that these prayers were publicly broadcast was somewhat shocking to me. What that symbolized to me was an intertwining of media, government, and religion -- three of the most powerful entities in this world. And since I can be generally sure that it is not Islam controlling the media, one would have to conclude that it is the government. In terms of democracy and government there are many implications that extend beyond the scope of this paper. However, in terms of religion, it seemed to signify that there is a strong connection between Islam and the government. Risking justifiable accusations of ethnocentrism, I would have argued that state-sponsored religion could be dangerous when compared with current events worldwide. I could not help but recall the infamous Taliban, which ruled Afghanistan with pious authority. That is not to categorize the two collectively, but simply to point out the jeopardy created by the circumstances.

My experience has been that every religion promotes conversion. However, the support of both Gambian media and the national government for Islam would hinder the possibilities of conversion toward Christianity or any other religion. True, I do view the world through the cultural lenses of an American, but in my mind this situation seemed to raise a question of tension and resentment. Do Muslims feel bound to Islam by the government? Do non-Muslims begrudge the government for hindering their cause? Or, was I merely viewing The Gambia from an ethnocentric viewpoint and therefore misconstruing my observations? My answer came when I began to put all the pieces together.

Putting It All Together

In reflecting on and assessing my observations and interviews, my essential finding was that the answers for which I was searching were much simpler than I had imagined. I had, in fact, deceived myself through my initial observations. However, after my interviews the picture became much clearer. All the questions I had asked myself (about the calls for prayer irritating the Christians, or possible resentment toward the government) were simply a non-issue. Gambian Christians and Muslims had both come to accept each other's beliefs and practices, allowing understanding to outweigh their differences. That is why there was no Christian outcry about the calls for prayer or broadcasted prayer.

There was, however, an exception to this rule. Because Islam is so deeply rooted in The Gambia, and friends and family play such a dominant role in each other's lives, conversion to Christianity is not easy, nor will it ever be. However, this is not a sign of contempt for Christianity. It would be just as difficult for one to convert to any religion. That also does not counter the fact that the Muslim community as a whole respects and accepts Christians.

One thing I realized in The Gambia is that although I had never traveled outside the United States before this trip, I did have a base of knowledge that could help me understand my questions. I realized that Islam in The Gambia is rooted just as deeply as Christianity in America. So, just as they are very much a Muslim country despite their constitution which declares them a secular state, the U.S. is much the same thing, but with regard to Christianity. Many of our laws are inherently based on Christian ideals, such as our aversion for polygamy, a widely practiced custom in The Gambia. Although there are calls for prayers multiple times every day, in many ways it is church bells here in the United States.

More important than these findings was the question they raise. Why is it that this tiny country on the far coast of West Africa can maintain such a tight bond of respect and tolerance between Christians and Muslims when in most of the world outside, the two are at odds or at war? Is it because, as some Gambians claim, there has been a high degree of intermarriage between members of different ethnic groups and subsequently, numerous conversions of Christian to Muslim and Muslim to Christian? This small “underdeveloped” country by most of the Western World’s standards can do something that has not been done with any amount of the wealth or technology that we have made our primary goal— the same wealth and technology that we ironically use to fight this very problem, religious division.

Why is this so? That is a question I cannot answer. However, I have found that sometimes a thoughtful question is just as valuable as an answer, just as a single brick is valuable to a house. It is a foundation on which to build until the answer is found. My hope is that one day the answer will be found. If the world could find the answers that lie in The Gambia, then Muslims and Christians, and the U.S., the U.N., and the Arab states would not be on the brink of a world war as they are today. The Gambia is proof that there is a way for peace and unity to prevail over the hate, fear, and distrust that plague our world and put our religions at war with each other. Look to The Gambia.

Acknowledgements

I want to extend my deepest and most sincere thanks to those who volunteered their time and wisdom to help me in this project. You may not see the difference your input has made right away, but my hope is that in the near future those who spend the world’s time and money fighting futile wars will look to information like this as an alternate route, thereby mending the wounds of centuries past. The first step is to know that the kinship between Christians and Muslims, and other religions for that matter, is a possibility. Thanks to you, the basic groundwork is laid. Now all we need is to use it. And if ever you think it impossible, I remind you of the biblical story of David and Goliath, which teaches us that good can prosper over evil no matter how great it may be. Our Goliath is hate, intolerance, disrespect, and all the other woes that afflict the modern world. With prayer, nothing is impossible.

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