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His Words

The word has been sacred for millennia in this country, where only sages had the right to speak and where oral tradition was endowed with the same rigor as the most sacred writings. Because black Africa was without a practical system of writing, it has nurtured veneration for the spoken word, of the "life-giving word."

Aissata had said to her son: "Learn to cover the physical nakedness of men before covering their moral nakedness with your teachings." Traditional weavers are initiated into the symbolism of their craft, in which each element has a specific meaning and of which the whole symbolizes the "primordial creation." They all know that as they give birth with their fingers to a length of cloth, which progresses like time itself, they are doing nothing other than reenacting the mystery of the creative Word.[1]

The importance of the word, and concern for its value, for whether it is good or bad—a new "language of Aesop"—assumed an essential importance for Tierno Bokar.[2]

> Speech is a fruit whose skin is called "chatter," the pulp "eloquence," and the kernel "common sense." From the moment a being is endowed with speech, whatever the degree of his development, he is in the class of the most privileged, because speech is the most marvelous gift that God has given to His creation.
>
> Speech is a divine attribute, as eternal as God Himself. It is through the power of the Word that everything was created. By bestowing upon man speech, God delegated to him a part of His creative power. It is through the power of the

[1] See our *Aspects de la civilisation africaine* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1972) and "Africanisme" in *Enciclopedia del Novecento* (Rome: Instuto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1976).

[2] Editor's note: The ancient moralist and storyteller Aesop was once asked to identify the best of things and the worst of things. To both he replied, "Language," because of all the good and all the bad that it can bring about.

> word that man, too, creates. He not only creates to secure the indispensable necessities of his material existence, but also to secure the viaticum [i.e., a purifying sacrament—Ed.] that opens for him the doors of beatitude.[3] A thing becomes that which the Word tells it to be. God says: "Be!" and the created being responds: "I am."

In the first part of this book we reported some of Tierno's words. It would have been awkward indeed to focus on his life and to try to outline it without citing something of what he said in relation to those events that were milestones in his life. The master's words are the essential element of his story. How better to elucidate the "message" that he has left us than to allow the one who unfolded it to speak?

We can never say often enough that the essential characteristic of Tierno's words was that they were spoken in one of the most humble places in the world, the master seated on an infertile soil that was by turns scorched by the sun and eroded by the rain. Tierno usually spoke in Fulfulde (Fulani). Although he was a good Arabist, which permitted him to study texts in depth, he always taught in the local languages. Besides Arabic, he knew four African languages, as well as the traditional knowledge of the main ethnic groups of the savanna.

He had an aversion to those who expressed themselves in anything other than ordinary language. One of the characteristics of "sorcerers"[4] was to use impenetrable language, and Tierno often used this same appellation to ridicule those who through intellectual snobbery made a show of expressing themselves only in Arabic, even when addressing people who did not know this language, in the belief that they were dazzling them.

His message was meant to be understood. Had the Prophet not said: "Speak to people according to the level of their understanding"?

I personally collected the accounts and reflections that follow from the mouth of Tierno Bokar. I was always close to him from my earliest childhood. I was born, as they say in Africa, "in his hands." How many times when I was little did he carry me on his back in my parents' courtyard! And what wonderful stories he told me that I could not yet

[3] An allusion to the spiritual virtue of reciting sacred texts and divine Names.

[4] Editor's note: That is, a person who claims or is believed to have magic powers.

understand! My mother had often said that as a rather sullen baby, my face only lit up when he came to take me in his arms.

When I was seven years old, I was entirely entrusted to him so that he could take charge of my religious education as well as the formation of my character and my social comportment. I only left him on the day when, like all sons of chiefs, I was "requisitioned" by the authorities to be sent far from Bandiagara to the French school which was then officially known as the "School for Hostages." But I came back to be near him during my holidays.

This continued until, as a young man, I became a civil servant and was posted to Upper Volta. No longer able to teach me directly, Tierno transmitted to me, by correspondence, answers to questions that I asked him. He dictated his letters to a friend, Mamadou Sissoko, who knew how to write in French.

It was particularly in 1933 that I received his teaching more intensively and in more depth than ever before. Until then he had, in effect, always taken into account my age and my level of comprehension. That year Upper Volta had been eliminated as an administrative territory. Having been put on extended leave awaiting a new assignment, I took advantage of the time to immediately rejoin Tierno and had the good fortune of being able to spend the better part of this providential year of leave with him in Bandiagara.

It was mainly during this stay in 1933 that I made notes of the teachings and of the anecdotes that are to follow. Moreover, Tierno entrusted me with the mission of making known the schematic teaching that he had invented under the name of *Mā 'd-Dīn* and which appears at the end of this book. It goes without saying that I could only present the exoteric, outward aspect of this teaching, only that which could be written down and presented in the form of diagrams. Esoteric knowledge cannot be presented according to a logical plan. In Islam, as in many other religious traditions, esoteric knowledge is taught by word of mouth and is more akin to a lived experience than an intellectual type of teaching.

We are very aware that any attempt at classifying and labeling this message in its entirety can only be incomplete, even artificial, and would have made the master smile. A book cannot reproduce the full force of these words as they were heard in Bandiagara, where they resonated with such life and love. However, it is incumbent upon us, we who have inherited an oral tradition, to try to transmit what we

can of it before time and forgetfulness erase it from the memory of men.

A particular difficulty exists in going from Fulani to French because of differences in structure that characterize these two languages. Fulani, like Arabic, is a synthetic language in which each word can carry many different (although related) meanings according to its position in the sentence and to the level of meaning at which a person can comprehend it. By contrast, in French, which is not a synthetic but an analytical language *par excellence*, each word possesses a unique and precise meaning; hence the difficulty in transporting an idea from one language to another without affecting the conciseness of the expression, or the style, or the pungency of images. The reader is asked to pardon these inevitable shortcomings.[5]

For Tierno Bokar, the power of the divine creative Word, as with all uttered words, was linked to vibrations.

"In the universe," he taught us, "and at every level, everything is vibration. Only the differences in the speed of these vibrations prevents us from perceiving the realities we call invisible." And he gave us the example of the propeller of an airplane that becomes invisible after attaining a certain speed of rotation.

But when the creative Word is written, its mystery can be approached through the traditional science of letters and numbers. The perspectives opened through explanations in this domain allow us to sense, or sometimes to glimpse what seems to be an immense edifice of astounding consistency, where primordial principles underlie the whole of the living world and are found even in the very heart of apparently mundane realities.

Immersed in mysticism—and by this we do not mean a life cut off from the world, but a life in which the inner relationship with God accompanies and enlightens every moment lived in this world—Tierno Bokar was the very incarnation of love and of goodness. Firstly,

[5] Editor's note: The author is certainly not using the terms "synthetic" and "analytical," as applied to language, in the same way as modern linguists do. We can probably get an accurate sense of what he intends by looking at the definitions for these terms given in the *Dictionary of the Académie française* (8th edition), according to which synthetic language is language that "expresses complex relationships with a single word." From the same source, analytical language "expresses an idea by breaking it down" (or: "parsing it").

his love for God was absolute and without reservation; then came his love for all living creatures, from human beings to the most humble creatures of nature, whether animal or vegetable.

Tierno Bokar loved all men, without consideration of race, religion, or social status. The distinction that seemed to him the most senseless was when men band together under different religious insignias and declare themselves the enemies of others. Do not all men, and most particularly those who are animated by sincere faith, carry within themselves a "particle of the Spirit of God"? Tolerance was thus to become the permanent concern of his students, as it had been the basis of the teaching of Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijani as well as one of the main fundamentals of Islam.

Tierno Bokar focused his attention on the society in which he lived during his earthly journey, a society whose equilibrium was so often compromised. But for him, Love and Charity provided the key to all hearts and the solution to all problems.

A monumental program! He who dedicates himself to following it must return often to a refreshing, vivifying source in order to find the strength to progress further along the spiritual path. For Tierno Bokar, there was only one source capable of constantly reinvigorating those who become weak. It was the mystical Spring[6] around which one meets religious men of all religions and of all times.

"Tierno," I asked him one day, "what are the respective roles of the *Sharī'a* (the revealed Law) and Mysticism?"[7] He answered:

> The *Sharī'a* and Mysticism (initiatic teaching) are two different aspects of Religion but which complement one another and are not able to exist one without the other.
>
> The essential objective of the *Sharī'a* is, by its very severity, to preserve man from the decadence of irreligion. It

[6] Translator's note: In French, *une source* can mean "spring" as a source of water as well as the origin of something.

[7] Editor's note: Since the specific form of mysticism practiced by Tierno Bokar and his students was Sufism, we can safely assume that this is what is being indicated by the French term "la Mystique" used here. The Arabic word *Tarīqa*, meaning "the Path" (i.e. the mystical path), is frequently paired with *Sharī'a* to show the interdependence of the Sufi mystical path and the practices of the general body of believers within Islam.

is comparable to a carpenter's plane that smoothes a wooden plank. The *Sharī'a* compels the believer to improve his or her conduct and prevents a person from falling into the depths of a disorderly life where no spiritual growth can come to flower.

Without a strong *Sharī'a*, moral defects will soon express themselves and encourage moral corruption. The fundamental pillars[8] of the *Sharī'a* are like canals through which the imperfections that soak into hearts are allowed to drain away.

If we liken the *Sharī'a* to a network of canals, mysticism will be likened to irrigation. The role of this irrigation is to open the human spirit to the Knowledge of God (*ma'rifa*), which is like a kind of subtle water, in the absence of which the spirit becomes like dry, burning earth.

Mysticism comes from two sources: First, from a Revelation made by God to an elect of His choosing; that is, to a Prophet who teaches and propagates this Revelation. Second, from the [lived] experience of the believer or, for one who is destined for the divine Light, from a direct intuition which is the fruit of his long meditative and religious practice.

In its first aspect, Mysticism comes directly from the Source, contained and preserved in the sacred Books. In each form of *The Religion*,[9] these Books are like vessels in which one collects rainwater. Just as with physical water, these vessels must be preserved from all pollution, in the interest of the very life of the community.

In its second aspect, Mysticism is comparable to water that human ingenuity is able to divert through the use of dams and canals. Any theologian can draw portions of a spiritual teaching from the Holy Books—those carefully guarded vessels. But he can also dig another canal, one that is adapted to the contours of the land; that is, one that corresponds to the

[8] The fundamental pillars of the *Sharī'a* are, firstly, the canonical obligations of Islam (faith in the Unity of God, prayer, alms-giving, fasting, pilgrimage), then the various moral and material prohibitions that a believer should respect, and finally all of the recommendations taken from the example of the Prophet and his Companions.

[9] The eternal Religion: the various known historical religions are but manifestations in time and space of the eternal Religion.

mentality and to the level of development of the people of his own time.

In order to make us understand the limitations of an attitude of simple, blind, and narrow imitation (*taqlīd*), he provided us with the following parable:

The Well

The well that receives its waters only from outside itself receives at the same time a thousand things that have been caught up by the current. Such a well is exposed to all this litter and to something even more dangerous: to find itself dry as soon as its water has been drawn out. On the other hand, the well whose "eye"[10] is situated within itself has no need of rain to fill it. Its water, filtered through the cracks of the earth, remains abundant, pure, and fresh, even during times of greatest heat. It is the same with those whose faith in God depends on outward relations and with those who take their faith from their own meditation and intimate conviction. The first are subject to variation and their faith is not exempt from doubt. The second group remains steadfast. They are in the full Light, the full moon of their faith, which never knows darkness.

Tierno called the well which only receives its water from the exterior "the well of *taqlīd*." It belongs to those who only blindly follow outward examples: "Someone said this," "Someone did that," instead of finding in themselves a certitude born of their own experience, or even from personal reflection when confronted with an unexpected circumstance.

Tierno reminded us in this respect of the following *hadīth*:[11]

[10] In Fulani, as in Arabic, "eye" and "spring" (*source* in French) are expressed by the same word.

[11] *Hadīth*: An account relating the words of the Prophet or an anecdote about his life.

One day the Prophet wanted to send one of his companions to Yemen. He called Mu'adh ibn Jabal to teach Islam there. He asked him, "How will you apply the law? How will you dispense justice?"

"I shall dispense justice according to the Koran," answered Mu'adh.

"And if you are confronted by a case that has not been anticipated by the Koran?" asked the Prophet.

"I will apply the *Sunna*,"[12] Prophet of God."

"And if the *Sunna* has not made provision for the case?"

"I will refer to *Ijmā'*."[13]

"And if *Ijmā'* had never handled such a case?" asked the Prophet.

Mu'adh was somewhat taken aback, because in Islam, the Koran, the *Sunna*, and Consensus are the sole three sources of law and of jurisprudence. But since he was a man who prayed and meditated, he had found in himself the way of divine inspiration (*ilhām*).

After a moment of reflection he answered, "Then I will perform *ijtihād*" (effort at personal reflection).

The Prophet looked at him and then said, "Go and perform *ijtihād* whenever it is necessary. As long as Islam includes men of your like, it will not become like a slender tree with few branches." (That is, which provides neither shade nor protection.)

Reliance on *taqlīd* is normally a feature of those marabouts and believers who are purely exoteric in their outlook. It is not a question here of rejecting conscious and voluntary imitation of the prophets and saints, which is, on the contrary, very beneficial to the spiritual life, but to denounce blind, narrow-minded imitation, in the name of which all those who do not conform to the established norm are condemned.

[12] *Sunna*, "Custom": All of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet that should be imitated. *Sunna* is a source of jurisprudence.

[13] *Ijmā'*, "Consensus": All of the opinions or customs of the Companions of the Prophet, also a source of jurisprudence.

One day, wishing confirmation upon this point, Tierno Bokar went to Segou to visit Niaro Karamogo, the greatest marabout of his time, one of the "most learned students" of al-Hajj Umar. He intended to ask him for his thoughts on *taqlīd*.

When Tierno arrived in front of the compound of Niaro Karamogo, at least three hundred students were assembled to listen to him. Tierno went through the first door, with his question in mind. Just as he came up to the second door, he saw at the far end of the courtyard the marabout with his head tilted forward as he began to pound on the cushions on which he was leaning, saying forcefully, "*Taqlīd*! *Taqlīd*! Say, all of you, without any doubt or dispute, that he who applies only *taqlīd* in his Muslim devotions will go to hell! The only question is to know whether he will be able to get out of it or not."

Tierno told us this anecdote with a smile, specifying that this, of course, was only an image by which one might adequately portray the seriousness of *taqlīd*.

It is certain that *taqlīd* is a tendency that is found everywhere, not only in Islam. It has prevailed, as it undoubtedly still does, in many environments that are not necessarily religious. Both the ancient and contemporary history of mankind shows us countless examples. This is a weakness inherent in man, and this is why Tierno Bokar insisted so often to us on the dangers of *taqlīd*. He always encouraged us to become fully informed before taking a position, to never stop at the surface of things, and to remember the gift given to us by God: Intelligence, Higher Reasoning, which is a subject that he expounded upon in his lesson *Mā 'd-Dīn*.[14]

The Three Lights

The eye (*'ayn*) that lies in the depths of each person needs light in order to see the world in its true reality and, above all, to perceive divine Reality. But not all paths are accessible to everyone.

One day, while he was teaching about the concept of Light (*Nūr* in Arabic), I asked him, "Tierno, how many mystical lights are there?" He replied:

[14] See p. 181.

Oh my friend, I am not the one who has seen all the lights. I shall nevertheless talk to you about three symbolic lights:

The first is that which we get from matter by rubbing it, thus causing combustion. This light can only heat or light up a limited space. It corresponds symbolically to the faith of the mass of individuals who have only advanced a little along the mystical ladder. At this stage, adepts cannot go beyond imitation (*taqlīd*) and the letter. The darkness of superstition surrounds them, the cold of incomprehension makes them tremble. They remain huddled up in a small corner of (their) tradition and they make as little noise there as possible. This is the light that gives life to believers when they find themselves at the degree of faith called *sulb* (solid).[15]

The second light is that of the sun. It is superior to the first in that it is more widespread and more powerful. It lights up all that exists on earth and warms it. This light symbolizes the middle degree of faith on the mystical path. Like the sun, it dissipates the shadows as soon as it comes into contact with them. It is a life-giving source for all creatures. It symbolizes the lights that hold adepts at the mystical degree of faith called *sā'il* (liquid). Just as the physical sun gives light and warmth to all beings, who from this perspective are all brothers, the adepts who have reached the middle degree of light see and treat everything that lives under the sun and receives its light as brothers. Because of its indispensable preparatory role, they do not scorn the first light, but they are no longer like insects that dance around a flame and sometimes get burned. The first light, just as that which it symbolizes, can be extinguished or relit depending on the circumstances; it can be transported from one place to another; in other words, it can change in form and strength. However, the second light remains fixed and unmovable in its perennial existence, like the sun. It will always come from the same source and will never falter throughout the ages.

The third light is that of the center of all existence; it is the light of God. Who would dare to describe it? Its darkness

[15] See pp. 119-120.

is more brilliant than all lights combined.[16] It is the light of Truth. Those who have the good fortune of reaching it lose their identity, and become like a drop of water when it falls into the Niger River, or rather into a sea infinitely more vast in breadth and depth. In attaining this degree, Jesus became the Spirit of God, Moses became His Interlocutor, Abraham became His Friend, and finally, Muhammad became the Seal of His Emissaries.[17]

The Three Degrees of Faith

Having thought about what he had just said, I asked him, "Tierno, how many types of faith are there?" He replied:

O my brother, I don't know exactly. Faith is neither countable like the population of a farmyard, nor measurable like the distance from Bandiagara to Mopti. It cannot be weighed like the millet of Bankassi or the fruits of the Dourou market. For me, faith is the amount of trust that we have in God and the degree of our conviction; it is also fidelity to our Creator. Faith becomes warmer or cooler, it varies according to people and places.

I am willing to outline faith in this way to make it easier to understand: The first is *sulb* faith which I shall call solid faith; the second, *sā'il* faith, which I shall call liquid faith; and finally *ghāzi* faith, the most subtle, which is like a gaseous vapor.

1. The first degree of faith is suitable for the common man, for the masses, for marabouts attached to the letter. This faith is upheld and channeled by the prescriptions imposed by a Law which itself is taken from revealed texts, be they

[16] Editor's note: This is intentionally paradoxical and enigmatic. The author has said that there are no words that can adequately describe the light of God. In referring to the "darkness" of the light of God, he is making the point that its full glory confounds our understanding and language, yet it is still immeasurably greater than all other lights combined.

[17] All of these qualities applied to the prophets are taken from the Koran.

Judaic, Christian, or Muslim. At this stage, faith has a precise form; it is inflexible, hard like a rock, whence the name I attribute to it. Faith at the degree of *sulb* is heavy and immobile like a mountain. If necessary, it prescribes armed warfare to assure its place and make it respected.

2. *Sā'il* (liquid) faith is the faith of men who have worked and successfully confronted the trials of *sulb*, the rigid law that permits no compromise. These men have triumphed over their faults and have embarked on the way that leads to the truth. The elements of *sā'il* faith flow from knowledge and are related to the truths from which they come, without one ever having to think about their origin or their existence from time immemorial. These truths gather and come together to form a living body that is in perpetual movement, constantly moving forward like the flow of drops of water, emerging from mountain hollows, coursing through varied terrains, accumulating at obstacles, then swelling from streams into rivers to finally rush into the ocean of Divine Truth. This faith, like its liquid symbol, washes away the faults of the soul, wears away at boulders of intolerance, and spreads everywhere, always taking the form of its receptacle. It penetrates human beings according to the contingencies of their moral make-up. *Sā'il* faith disciplines the adept. It makes him a man of God, capable of hearing and appreciating the voice of all who speak of the Creator. It is vivifying. It can solidify and take on the nature of hail when it has to deal with souls who have remained at the first degree. And it can sublimate and rise up in a vapor, like *ghāzi* faith, into the heavens of Truth. It establishes the regime of the city of peace, where man and beast live side by side, where the three kingdoms live as brothers.[18] Those who possess this faith rise up against war.

3. *Ghāzi* faith is the third and last term. It is the privilege of an elite within the elite. Its constitutive elements are so pure that, released from all material weight that would hold them down on the earth, they rise like smoke into the heaven

[18] Editor's note: The "three kingdoms" are the animal, vegetable, and mineral domains of existence.

> of pure souls, permeating them. Those who attain this faith worship God in truth and in a light beyond color. The Divine Truth flowers in the fields of Love and of Charity.

For Tierno, loving and serving God amounts to no more than a very small part of returning to Him what is His due, because compared to the infinite nature of the gift that has been given to us, all that we can offer necessarily remains miniscule.

The Miserly Merchant

"Is it reasonable," he would ask us, "to refuse a small portion to Him Who has given you everything?" [Then he would tell this story:]

> A merchant who, through greed, tightens the cord of his purse and refuses to give a penny to someone who had financed him when he was starting out, can be considered as an example of moral ugliness. But how much greater is the ugliness of a man who refuses to worship God, from Whom he has received the very spirit of life, which is both the source and the result of Love? To God belongs all that is in the heavens and earth—can one refuse to give a part to Him who has created and given everything? Certainly not, and yet this is what is done by those who are lost and distracted in the labyrinths of earthly life.

Thinking Beings

Many people came to Tierno with the hope of obtaining material benefits or miraculous powers, thanks to his blessings or his prayers. "Give me the secret of such and such a Name of God or of such and such a prayer," they asked him. He replied:

> O adept, you who come to the threshold of our *zāwiya*, do not think that we have miraculous means of curing souls. We refer our brothers to holy verses. Reflect upon the following:
>
> "May the illusory life of this world not lead us astray and may temptation not turn us away from God" (Koran 31:33).[19]

[19] Editor's note: A more literal translation of this portion of the verse would be: "Let

> Be in God's hands like a child in the hands of his mother. Seek for nothing other than the desire to please Him. You who come to us, and whom we consider not as a pupil, but as a thoughtful brother, before entering the *zāwiya* where one seeks Love and knowledge, meditate well on this verse and allow it to illuminate you:
>
> "One of His wonders is to have created you and spread you over the earth as thinking beings" (Koran 30:20).[20]
>
> Ask Him to do with you what pleases Him.

Tierno rebelled against the idea that any being could be excluded from God's love. He scorned the distinctions made by those "attached to the letter" and chose to ignore those who make this love the privilege of only orthodox believers.

For my own part, I could not understand how only Muslims could be the beneficiaries of the mercy of God. I reflected on the smallness of their number in relation to the whole of humanity, both in time and in space, and I said to myself: "How could God, in front of a mound of seeds, take only one handful of these seeds and reject all the others, saying: 'Only these are my favorites'?"

I had often heard around me, especially from certain marabouts, that non-Muslims were *kuffār* (infidels) and that they would go to hell. This angered me, as if I myself had been one of those unhappy infidels. So one day I took advantage of a class to ask him about this subject that was troubling me:

Does God Love Infidels?

"Tierno, you always speak of God's love which embraces everything. But does God also love infidels?" He answered:

not the life of the world beguile you, nor let the deceiver beguile you, in regard to God." The source of translations of the Koran used by the author is not known.

[20] Editor's note: Translated more literally, this verse reads, "Among His Signs is this, that He created you from dust; and then, behold, ye are men scattered (far and wide)!" The author's translation is emphasizing the aspect of intelligence implicit in the Arabic word *bashar*, "human being."

God is Love and Power. The creation of beings comes from His love and not from some constraint. To detest that which is the result of the Divine Will acting through love, is to take a position against the Divine Will and dispute His wisdom. To imagine the exclusion of a being from primordial Love is proof of fundamental ignorance. Life and perfection are contained in Divine Love, which manifests Itself in a radiating Force, in the creative Word that brings the living Void to life.[21] From this living Void, He makes forms appear that He divides into kingdoms.

May our love not be centered upon ourselves! May this love not incite us to love only those who are like us or to espouse ideas that are similar to our own! To only love that which resembles us is to love oneself; this is not how to love.

Being a man, the infidel cannot be excluded from the Divine love. Why should he be excluded from ours? He occupies the rank which God has assigned to him. The act of a man debasing himself can bring about a punishment for him, but without thereby provoking an exclusion from the Source from which he came.

It is necessary to reflect upon the legend of Korah and Moses.[22] Korah was the most perverse of beings. He had received his share of the finest riches that a man can enjoy on earth. From these, he had made a paradise for himself, access to which, he said, was forbidden to Moses and to his God. Moses asked God to chasten Korah.

God replied, "I have entrusted the earth to you. Act as you see fit."

The Prophet Moses then addressed Korah, "O infidel! Mend your ways and return to your Lord, otherwise you shall receive a punishment that will be cited as an example."

[21] Tierno compared this living Void, pure potentiality, to the mathematical notion of zero, the starting point containing the seed of all numbers that emerge from it. He does not mean here "nothingness," but rather "non-manifested."

[22] Editor's note: This story of Korah (called Qarun in the Koran) is constructed of elements from the Koran, which mentions him very briefly, the Old Testament, and other legends whose source we do not know.

"Call upon me all the misfortunes you want, I fear nothing," replied Korah.

So Moses ordered that the earth swallow up Korah and all of his possessions. Korah, ensnared by his feet and unable to loosen the hold, understood that he was lost. He repented and asked Moses to forgive him.

"You believed yourself to be stronger than God," Moses replied to him. "You have rejected the Eternal, and me, His Messenger. Now you are defeated and your riches are no more. The earth will swallow you up slowly; you shall be subjected to this punishment until the end of time."

It was thus that Moses excluded the infidel from God's love. He caused him to perish after having pronounced his judgment, and he expected the approval of the Almighty. But the ways of God are impenetrable and the Lord reproached him severely, saying, "O Moses! Korah called upon you seventy times in repentance and you remained deaf to his plea. If he had called upon Me but one time, I would have saved him."

Moses was confused. God added, "Do you know why you did not have compassion for Korah? It is because to you he is neither your son, nor a being that you have created."[23]

This intentional juxtaposition of "son" with "created being" clearly shows us that God, Who has not engendered and Who was not engendered,[24] has for those He created the same love that a father has for his children. He was generous to the children of Adam, without differentiating amongst their states.

In this regard, Tierno told us about a major event in the life of Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijani when he was living in Morocco, where he benefited from the protection of the Sultan. During a public talk, a troublemaker who wanted to embarrass him asked him a trick question. He asked, "Does God love infidels?"

[23] Editor's note: Whereas, for God, even one as wicked as Korah is still considered as a "son" and one of His created beings.

[24] An allusion to a phrase in the Koran 112:3.

Basing his response on commentaries of the Koran, the Shaykh dared to answer, "Yes, God loves infidels." This was an unexpected answer at that time. There was a great outcry. Indignant, the audience left the room. Only eleven faithful disciples remained around the Shaykh, those very ones who later would see the birth of the Tijani order.

Marcel Cardaire, himself a fervent Catholic, had been touched by the attitude of openness and love that radiated from the teachings of Tierno Bokar. Let us allow him to speak:

> The first lesson that the "brothers in God" learnt was a lesson of religious tolerance.
>
> In the small rooms of Tierno's disciples, the teaching that was described to us took on new dimensions according to the rhythm of the seasons. It became true nourishment. In this country of simple technologies, we heard simple sentences fall from simple lips. The words penetrated better than if they had been pronounced in one of those temples or mosques that give homage more to the prowess or refinement of man than to the majesty of the Creator. And moreover, these words that we have collected in no way resemble what one hears in other places of worship. These were words in their pure state, words spoken not to exalt man, neither speaker nor listener, but rather truly animating words, spoken with such sincere feeling for the other as to cause God to live in the heart of the unbeliever, to vivify his faith, and to give a meaning to the lives of everyone.
>
> In these small rooms we heard maxims that we would have liked to see engraved in golden letters on the portals of all the places of worship in the world. What religious university, what al-Azhar, could match the Sage of Bandiagara?[25]

Among those who came to listen to Tierno, not all were from the Tijani order. One day several Qadiri, members of the Qadiriyya brotherhood, one of the most ancient orders in Islam, came to listen to his classes. When the time came to carry out the great *dhikr* (the common

[25] *Tierno Bokar, le Sage de Bandiagara*, p. 80.

chanting of the Name of God) one student asked Tierno, "Are those who are not Tijani going to take part in the *dhikr*?"

"Make the *dhikr* without worrying about them," he replied. "If some of them want to participate, you have no right to forbid them. And if they prefer to leave, you have no right to restrain them."

The *dhikr* took place, in the presence of numerous Qadiri. When it had finished, Tierno spoke:

The Rainbow

> The rainbow owes its beauty to the variety of its shades and colors. In the same way, we consider the voices of various believers that rise up from all parts of the earth as a symphony of praises addressing God, Who alone can be Unique. We bitterly deplore the scorn that certain religious people heap on the form of divine things, a scorn that often leads them to reject their neighbor's hymn because it contrasts with theirs. To fight against this tendency, brother in God, whatever be the religion or the congregation to which you are affiliated, meditate at length on this verse:
>
> "The creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your languages and of your colors are many wonders[26] for those who reflect" (Koran 30:22).
>
> There is something here for everyone to meditate upon.

During a certain period, American Protestant missionaries had come to the Soudan. They liked to preach in the areas where the Catholic Church had not been able to establish itself. Because Bandiagara was one of these places, the head of this Protestant mission arrived one day in the town, set himself up on the market square, and began to speak of God in the Bambara language.

Astonished, or at least amused to hear a foreign pastor express himself thus in their language, large numbers of curious people sur-

[26] The Arabic word *aya* signifies at once "marvel," "miracle," "sign," and "verse." If the revealed verses are "signs" of God, in an inverse manner one can also say that all the "marvels" that exist in creation are also "signs," therefore another mode of divine Revelation. According to this perspective, everything is Revelation. It is we who do not know how to read.

rounded him. When he started to speak of God with warmth and strength, and above all when he translated the psalms of David into Bambara, people were moved. Muslims are always moved by Biblical language, especially when it is translated into their tongue. But there were a few bigots in the audience who took offense to the scene and who tried to turn the crowd away crying, "It's a Christian! It's a Christian!"

One of Tierno's students had been present at the scene. When he arrived in class, he reported these facts to us, exulting in a malicious way what had happened to the pastor. "Today," he said, "a pastor wanted to talk to us about God. But we made so much fun of him that he was obliged to leave."

Tierno was revolted by this behavior. Wanting to put his students on guard against disrespectful behavior towards men who spoke in the name of God, he launched an out-and-out call for tolerance on that day:

Children of the Same Father

> Are children of the same father, although physically different from one another, any less brothers and legitimate sons of he who fathered them? In accordance with this law-truth, we pity those who deny believers from different confessions a spiritual identity and brotherhood under one single God, the unique and immutable Creator.
>
> Although it may not please those attached to the letter,[27] for us one thing alone counts above all others: to profess the existence of God and His unity. So, brother in God who comes to the threshold of our *zāwiya*, which is a center of love and charity, do not harass the follower of Moses. God Himself witnesses that He has said to His people, "Implore God for assistance, and be patient. The earth belongs to God

[27] Editor's note: That is, to outward forms, as in "the letter of the law." The exoteric form of a religion will necessarily exclude other possible forms, but here Tierno is suggesting that the central tenet of Islam, God's unity, implies for those with the virtues of love and charity that they must expand these virtues to encompass other children of God, through that very principle of God's unity, which encompasses all.

and He bequeaths it to whom He will among His servants. A blissful end will be for those who fear Him" (Koran 7:128).

Neither should you harass the follower of Jesus. God, in speaking of the miraculous child of Mary, the Virgin Mother, said, "We granted to Jesus, son of Mary, the gift of miracles and We comforted him through the Holy Spirit" (Koran 2:253).[28]

And the other human beings? Let them enter, and even greet them in a brotherly way in honor of that which they have inherited from Adam, of whom God has said, addressing the angels, "When I have perfected him and breathed into him of My Spirit, then fall down before him prostrate as a sign of your veneration" (Koran 38:72).

This verse implies that every descendant of Adam is the repository of a particle of the Spirit of God. How would we therefore dare to scorn a receptacle that contains a particle of God's Spirit?

Moreover, Tierno often said:

You who come to us and whom we esteem, not as a student, but as a brother, reflect! Meditate on this verse from the Book of Guidance:

"There is no compulsion in religion. The Truth distinguishes itself from error. He who rejects false deities in order to believe in God has grasped a handhold that is firm, unbreakable. And God is All-hearing, All-knowing" (Koran 2:256).

Relations with Other Religions

"Tierno," I asked him one day, "is it good to converse with people of another faith to exchange ideas and better understand their god?" He answered:

[28] Editor's note: This Koranic passage is usually translated as: "We gave Jesus, the son of Mary, clear signs [or 'proofs'], and strengthened [or 'confirmed,' or 'supported'] him with the Holy Spirit."

Why not? I will tell you: one must speak with foreigners if you can remain polite and courteous. You will gain enormously by knowing about the various forms of religion. Believe me, each one of these forms, however strange it may seem to you, contains that which can strengthen your own faith. Certainly, faith, like fire, must be maintained by means of an appropriate fuel in order for it to blaze up. Otherwise, it will dim and decrease in intensity and volume and turn into embers and then from embers to coals and from coals to ashes.

To believe that one's race or one's religion is the only possessor of the truth is an error. This could not be. Indeed, in its nature, faith is like air. Like air, it is indispensable for human life and one could not find one man who does not believe truly and sincerely in something. Human nature is such that it is incapable of not believing in something, whether that is God or Satan, power or wealth, or good or bad luck.

So, when a man believes in God, he is our brother. Treat him as such and do not be like those who have gone astray. Unless one has the certitude of possessing all knowledge in its entirety, it is necessary to guard oneself against opposing the truth. Certain truths only seem to be beyond our acceptance because, quite simply, our knowledge has not had access to them."

He added:

Avoid confrontations. When something in some religion or belief shocks you, instead seek to understand it. Perhaps God will come to your aid and will enlighten you about what seems strange to you. . .

Not only would Tierno Bokar not prohibit his students from interacting with believers of other faiths, but he also considered this practice an actual therapy for the soul. He asked people to make the necessary mental effort and to struggle against what is holding them back so as to better understand.

Along these same lines, one day he told us about a vision he had had:

In my mind, I saw a gigantic man lying on his back. People of various religions and faiths were bustling about him. Some were speaking into his ear, others were opening his mouth, others were making him breathe in various perfumes, others were applying an eyewash, etc.

"What is this that I am seeing, who is this man?" I cried out to myself.

A voice answered me, "This is the blessed man who reminds himself of the Unity of God and of the brotherhood that should unite His worshipers, wherever they may come from. He is receiving, as you see, all the teachings. The result is better for him. He is porous, like sand. God gave him the power to conserve and to assimilate."

He added:

The religious teaching given by a Prophet or by an authentic spiritual master is like pure water. One can absorb it without danger to one's spiritual or moral health. Such a teaching will be intelligible and of a superior order. Like clear water, it will contain nothing that can change it by modifying its flavor, its odor, or its color. It will mature the mind and purify the heart because it does not contain any external pollutant that could have the effect of obfuscating the soul or hardening the heart. We cannot overemphasize the benefits of studying the teachings of revealed religions. They are, for everyone, like potable water. We advise, however, that they be assimilated slowly, and to avoid murky theology that is likely to contain a spiritual Guinea worm.[29] The saying goes, "When you are sweating, do not take in cold water." We recommend that "When your soul is in mystical fervor, do not read anything."

[29] Guinea worm, also called in French "filaire de Medine" (*dracunculus medinensis*). The larvae live in stagnant water. They implant themselves into humans, live in subcutaneous cellular tissues, and develop particularly in the legs, where they appear as enormous abscesses which in fact are made up of the implantation of the female and the accumulation of microfilaria. Upon the slightest contact with water, the sore opens and the female releases the mass of microscopic worms which renew the cycle.

He constantly tried to inculcate into us the spirit of tolerance and make us understand that it was only the intrinsic spiritual quality of a man that mattered:

> Our planet is neither the largest nor the smallest of all those that our Lord has created. Those who inhabit it can therefore not escape this law: we should not believe ourselves to be superior, nor inferior, to other beings in the universe, whatever they be.
>
> The best of created beings amongst us will be those who live in Love and Charity and in respect for their neighbor. Upright and radiant, they will be like a sun that rises and that goes straight up towards the sky.

"His Words"

Features in

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