

REFLECTIONS IN TUNISIAN CEMETERIES

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IN PAST CENTURIES NEOPHYTES of Tantric Buddhism sought an understanding of human transience by meditating overnight in cemeteries. Seated among decomposing corpses, they pondered life and death. Although I feel no urge to follow this particular religious practice, cemeteries have always interested me as sacred spaces in which we may be able to come to a greater understanding both of ourselves and of the mystery of God. Recently, while writing a book about Tunisian cemeteries of the Second World War, I spent many hours in such places.

The particular atmosphere of a cemetery depends on the circumstances of those buried there, as well as on the attitudes of their families and of society in general. If we know something of the history of the cemetery and are willing to sit quietly, we may begin to understand what it has to tell us. Normally we are preoccupied by a frantic rush to fill our time and our lives with activities and possessions. But because in a cemetery we are set apart from such things, it may be easier there to listen to our hearts. People who work in or visit cemeteries, too, often have informative stories to tell. And the activities that happen in cemeteries reflect other, unspoken stories.

Military cemeteries are particularly moving because they remind us of the urgent and continuing need for peace and reconciliation between nations, communities and religions. They contain a high percentage of young people, who seem to us to have died before they had achieved anything in their lives other than self-sacrifice. 'They gave their today for our tomorrow', but what did they receive in return?

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Lessons in a Tunisian Cemetery

On a cold, wet and windy March morning I drove to Sidi Amor Cemetery in Le Kram, outside Tunis, with a friend, Beya, who insisted that I ought not visit 'these foreign graves' without seeing what she believes is the real thing. Moreover, she wanted to tell me about a holy man who might expand my understanding. This was an appealing invitation, and Beya was right: I needed a Tunisian yardstick with which to measure my experiences.

Sidi Amor Cemetery is named after a *marabout*, a holy man who died more than a hundred years ago and around whose grave the cemetery eventually grew up—despite his evident lifelong desire for solitude. Here it seems, is the first lesson: once a someone becomes 'holy', people will never again leave them in peace. Some 7,000 other people are now buried in close proximity to Sidi Amor, and at least two more were expected on the day of my visit. Workmen were shovelling earth busily while the male relatives of the deceased stood by, pretending to be in charge and obviously happy to be out of the house where the women were washing the body of their elderly aunt.

Sidi Amor is a burial place for people of uncertain financial means. But it displays the same accoutrements of love and hope that are found at gravesides all over the world: flowers, messages, and, as space permits, a few plants and struggling trees. Friends and relatives come to visit those they have lost, and family members are buried close together. Beya and I prayed over her husband and then her mother, before going on to the



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Tomb of Sidi Amor



Sufi dancers

grave of Sidi Amor where we lit a candle and said another prayer.

Beya is a Muslim and, not quite certain of what Christian prayer entails, she reminded me that it is God to whom we pray, 'Not Sidi Amor, who is only God's helper'. Evidently Sidi Amor, a counter-cultural figure in life, is now revered in death. And so we lifted our hands: I asked God to make me a more loving Christian, hoping that Sidi Amor, with all his *baraka* or holy energy, might help see to it. After all, he is now beyond the divisions and harsh disagreements which exist in

this life among those who profess to believe in one God. This is the second lesson. With Beya at Sidi Amor, I recalled a Sudanese friend who, years earlier, accompanied me on a visit to another cemetery outside Omdurman, where ritual Sufi dancing is regularly performed. Although he had never seen anything like it before, the Christian Sudanese understood instantly what the dancing, whirling Muslim Sudanese were about. This is 'prayer fellowship', he told me: 'They are joining together in praise of God'. He was right, of course. It is sad that there are orthodoxies in every religion more interested in control than in love, which find it easy to fear and scorn lovers of God, and thus risk being scornful of God as well. This is the third lesson.

A Lesson about War and Love

A fourth lesson to be learned in cemeteries is that war may create victory or defeat, ceasefire or stalemate, but it can never create peace.

Only Love can do that—and both divine and human suffering. When we reject this Love, as most of us regularly seem to do, God suffers rejection and surely mourns over us. But though we turn away, neither culture nor doctrine nor war can mute the divine call to transcendence for very long. The listening heart quickens when faced with what Donald Cozzens calls 'God's scandalous, unconditional love'.¹ Because millions of Muslims as well as Christians believe this, I have often asked myself why Christians and Muslims are ordinarily so timid about praying together. Sometimes it takes desperation to overcome this hesitation and here, too, death can play a role.

In the mid-1990s I was living in the British Residence in Khartoum, and a group of Muslim and Christian women used to gather there to discuss their longing for peace in a safe and neutral venue. But one day, during a particularly bloody phase of Sudan's civil war, we could find no way to begin. The reports of burning villages, murdered children, and endless slaughter were so horrifying that we were left speechless. Southern Sudan seemed to have become one vast cemetery. We felt lost, useless, disempowered by death. And there seemed only One to whom we could turn. 'Let us pray', I heard myself say. We all stood then, lifting our hands to God in silent supplication. It was my first experience of prayer with Muslims, and it was a response to the unjustifiable death of innocents. The lesson here is twofold: we must become weak in order to become strong, and by supporting one another in our suffering we are strengthened.²

It was in search of further insights into what suffering has to teach us that I set out to explore Second World War cemeteries in Tunisia. There are fourteen, including eight British Commonwealth burial grounds, each commemorating deep sorrow and pain, each an invitation to open our hearts to God.

Forgiveness in the American War Cemetery

Standing in the American military cemetery in Carthage, a monument to soldiers who died during the 1942–3 North Africa Campaign, I looked out over the precise rows of crosses, interspersed with a few

¹ Donald Cozzens, *The Changing Face of the Priesthood: Reflections on the Priest's Crisis of Soul* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 3.

² Cozzens, *Changing Face of the Priesthood*, 3.



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Stars of David, and reflected on how few of the American war dead are buried in this cemetery in Tunisia. Over 18,000 American soldiers were listed as killed or missing in action during the Allied campaign to drive the Axis powers out of North Africa. But most of the dead were repatriated to the United States: there are only 2,841 buried at Carthage, including 240 unknowns.

There is a wall in this cemetery, referred to as 'The Tablets of the Missing', which bears the names of 3,724 people, most of whom died when their troop carriers were sunk *en route* to North Africa. The cemetery superintendent told me about a recent visitor who had been on one of the torpedoed ships and had, after years of suffering, come to make peace with himself. The old soldier walked along the memorial wall, looking for names he remembered. At last, he found the one name which haunted him. When the ship went down, there had been a man who, not being a strong swimmer, had clung to him in the water until, at last, as his own strength failed, he had chosen to live and so pushed the other man away. More than sixty years later he repented with tears. Cemeteries help put life into perspective, and in doing so they are not infrequently places of repentance.

Pride and Politics at the French Military Cemetery

The most complicated cemetery in Tunisia is surely the French military cemetery in Gammarth. Located on thirty hectares of prime real-estate, with sea views on three sides, this cemetery is a memorial park which contains the remains of nearly 5,000 men. It is also a statement of French pride, of lost empire. It is not simply a war cemetery, but a repository for some of the monuments of French imperialism which, after independence in 1956, the Tunisian government asked the French to remove from elsewhere in the country.

Nonetheless, the Gammarth cemetery is comforting because of its way of bringing together that which is usually divided. Not only do we find Muslims and Christians in the same place, but the fallen of both world wars of the last century lie buried side by side. Neither of these facts reflects the usual practice. Here the bones of people with different religions and different ethnic origins remind us that death equalises us all.

But although Muslims are buried in the Gammarth cemetery, most of them are not Tunisians. The columbarium, built in 1971, contains the bones of over 1,000 French and other soldiers who died for France or in the service of France, and were originally buried in various territories formerly held by France. This is a place where history collides with nationalism—a place which cries out not only for meditation, but also for further research. There are three other, much smaller, French military cemeteries in Tunisia: one is primarily Christian and the other two only contain Muslim dead. It is sad that, despite the relative inclusiveness of the Gammarth cemetery, the men in these three other cemeteries are there mainly because of the political divisions between the Free French and Vichy forces.

The truth that political affiliation, along with rank and position, no longer matter when you are dead has generally been more readily accepted by Muslims than by Christians. The monuments, marching bands and firearms which seem to be used by most traditions and cultures to honour the military dead are, after all, for the benefit of the living. The dead are beyond caring about honour, glory and position; they have found a broader world. There is no glory in death, only the loving Presence of God.

Grief and Repentance in the Commonwealth Cemeteries

Between 8 November 1942 and the fall of Tunis on 7 May 1943, 25,742 members of the British army in North Africa were killed in combat or related endeavours. There are eight British Commonwealth cemeteries in Tunisia, spreading from Sfax and up the Medjerda Valley to Tabarka. The men buried in these cemeteries include Indians, New Zealanders, Australians, Canadians and South Africans as well as thousands of British and a sprinkling of other Europeans. Some of the Commonwealth cemeteries in Tunisia are small, containing only a hundred or so burials. Others, such as the cemetery at Enfidaville, the site of the annual 11 November Remembrance Day observation, and Massicault, one of four Commonwealth cemeteries in the Medjerda Valley, are much larger.

Despite the years, visitors still come to the Commonwealth cemeteries; there are many families whose lives were changed permanently by the loss of a father, son, brother or husband. The simple family messages on most of the headstones make these cemeteries particularly moving: 'If love could have held you back, you would not have died', proclaims a headstone at the cemetery near Tabarka. At Sfax a son, visiting for the first time after sixty years, wrote, 'I came,



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The British Commonwealth cemetery at Massicault

Dad'. As much as he may want to do so, it is sometimes by grace alone that such a son can forgive the father whom he never met for having died. These war cemeteries are places of forgiveness and repentance, as well as of commemoration. I have seen the German and Japanese ambassadors lay wreaths at the Commonwealth cemetery on Remembrance Day—a moving expression of hope for a more peaceful world.

Reconciliation in the German Military Cemetery

On a hill above Borj Cedria, with a clear view across the Mediterranean toward the French war cemetery at Gammarth and the American war cemetery at Carthage, the German cemetery is not far from where Axis forces finally surrendered in May 1943. Although there were originally six German Second World War cemeteries in Tunisia, after independence the German government was asked to consolidate its military graves. Over 8,500 bodies were relocated to Borj Cedria in 1977. Efforts to identify the remains continue and recently it was established that some of those buried at Borj Cedria are actually Italian soldiers. The Italians repatriated all their known war dead after Tunisian independence, but former Italian soldiers still visit Borj Cedria cemetery, which is a focus for the sorrow of both nations over the Second World War. The German cemetery is a stark place of large grey vaults, each of which contains the remains of between 50 and 55 men—or mention of them if their remains disappeared in transit. Because the Germans were an army in retreat, many of the bodies remain unidentified. Even where there is identification, only rank, date of birth and date of death (if known) are given. Borj Cedria is perhaps the saddest of Tunisia's military burial sites. Many of the fallen were farm boys, teenagers, young people with little choice but to serve a wicked totalitarian regime. Their fate is a strong reminder of the continuing international need for forgiveness and reconciliation.

What Really Happened Here?

The war cemeteries of Tunisia are a fascinating part of Tunisian and of world history, still visited by friends and relatives of the fallen, though in declining numbers as the years pass. It is natural, of course, that most Tunisians consider the North African campaign of 1942–3 to be a war carried out on Tunisian soil in the interests of foreign powers. But the

story of the Tunisian farmers of that era remains a moving tribute to loyalty, hope and family love.

The Allied invasion of North Africa from the west began in Morocco and Algeria in November 1942, and moved east into Tunisia until halted by winter rains. It was mid-February 1943 when, in response to German action, the sodden, half-frozen Allied troops started fighting again after many miserable weeks of living in the mud. For the Tunisians around them, who had also lived through a dangerous and difficult winter, there was no choice about the next task. As the foreigners returned to war, the Tunisians, regardless of shelling, buried mines, tank battles and advancing troops, harnessed their oxen and mules and went to work on the fields. It was spring and, in order for families to survive, the land must be prepared for the seed. As battles were fought around them, and sometimes even among the furrows which they cut, the Tunisian farmers maintained their positions behind the plough. Ploughing is an expression of hope for the future. Surrounded by death, the dedication of the Tunisian farmers cried loudly for life.

Is not God the Ploughman who, preparing the future, offers us hope and suffers along with us? The Galician poet Manuel Rivas wrote, 'The world is divided into those who plant the corn and those who tread upon it'.³ Therefore, we are called to work towards the day when 'they shall beat their swords into ploughshares' (Isaiah 2:4).

Personal Reflections

As I researched and wrote about the 1942–3 North African campaign, I thought about God's interest in individuals. Sometimes theology, like war, is made by people who wish to control others. But death is the door to eternity, where life will be revealed and where there will be no further need for theology or for war.

I believe that cemeteries are places of life more than of death, for they are where we lay the bodies of those who have by grace entered into the life of God. In cemeteries we can sometimes—as the Tantric Buddhists tried to explain—come to grips with mortality. It is our own eventual death—which we spend a lifetime learning to accept—which

³ I am grateful to Fr Diego Sarrio MAfr. for drawing my attention to this quotation from Manuel Rivas' *El pueblo de la noche*.



Allied patrol at Kasserine, Tunisia, 1943

impedes us. When we consider our own death what we actually hope for is Life. As Augustine, a North African saint, said, 'Thou hast created us for thyself, and our heart cannot be quieted till it may find repose in thee'.⁴

As many who have sat at the bedside of dying people know, the door of death opens for a moment to allow those who still live to catch, albeit imperfectly and momentarily, a glimpse of eternal life. Shortly before her death my aunt looked in the mirror and exclaimed what most of us say to ourselves sooner or later: 'But I look too good to be dying!' Then she burst into joyful laughter. The journey through death can be filled with life if we have begun to accept that Love awaits us.

Life is filled with extreme suffering, and God, too, surely suffers over our cruelty, selfishness and indifference, our fear of accepting greater responsibility. In a manner which we only partly understand, God has engaged humanity by giving us creative power for change. But where responsibility has been turned over to us, it appears that God does not normally intervene, or interfere. Our prayers rarely result in rescue, but they do give us the strength to endure. Does not God thus show a loving and steadfast forbearance which allows us to mature as we find our way back home?

The French grandfather of Leila, a Tunisian friend, was visiting Tunis when it was discovered that he was mortally ill. The old man, a

⁴ *Confessions*, 1.1 (1), translated by William Watts (London: Loeb, 1912).

Christian of deep faith in both God and humanity, arranged for a Christian funeral, to which he invited his Muslim family and friends. As he had asked, he was buried in the Christian cemetery at Borgel, on the outskirts of Tunis—but he was buried in the Muslim way, with no coffin, only a simple shroud. After a few final words at the cemetery, we were invited by the priest to pass by the open grave so as to leave our last thoughts and to say farewell. I was surprised then to see that the shroud had been pulled back to allow us to see Grandfather's face. And contrary to both Christian and Muslim practice, his brilliant blue eyes were still open. How did this happen and what did it mean?

'Open your eyes', the wise old man was saying to us. 'See the reality of Love in which we are one.'

Two weeks after Grandfather's death, the flowers on his grave were said not to have wilted and the gardeners were spending their free time sitting next to him hoping to participate in his *baraka*. Thus, through death, are saints born the world over.

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