

# Christian-Muslim Relations A Bibliographical History

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(1700-1800)

Edited by  
David Thomas and John Chesworth

with Jaco Beyers, Karoline Cook, Lejla Demiri,  
Martha Frederiks, David D. Grafton, Alan Guenther,  
Emma Gaze Loghin, Claire Norton, Reza Pourjavady,  
Douglas Pratt, Charles Ramsey, Peter G. Riddell,  
Umar Ryad, Carsten Walbiner



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# Abbé Demanet

Abbé Jean-Baptiste Demanet

DATE OF BIRTH	First half of the 18 <sup>th</sup> century
PLACE OF BIRTH	Unknown; probably France
DATE OF DEATH	12 July 1778
PLACE OF DEATH	West Africa; probably Senegal

## BIOGRAPHY

Jean-Baptiste Demanet was a French secular priest, best known for his two-volume work *Nouvelle histoire de l'Afrique française*, published in 1767. It seems he served for some time as a priest of the diocese of Trèves, but little else is known about him until he was appointed chaplain to the French troops stationed on Gorée Island (off the coast of present-day Dakar). He arrived in Gorée on 14 September 1763 in the company of Governor Pierre Thomas Guillaume Poncet de la Rivière. Poncet de la Rivière was appointed as the first governor of the French possessions in West Africa after the Treaty of Paris in 1763. On arrival, Demanet found most of the island ruined, the Catholic community scattered and the church turned into an arsenal (Demanet, *Nouvelle histoire*, vol. 1, pp. 88-9).

Hierarchically under the command of Poncet de la Rivière, Demanet only had limited margin for manoeuvre. In July 1764, he accompanied de la Rivière on a journey to the French possessions on the Petite Côte (Joal) and Albreda (Gambia), during which he seized the opportunity to visit the Roman Catholics in the area and administer the sacraments. In his *Nouvelle histoire*, Demanet asserts that no priest had visited the area for over 20 years and he claims to have baptised several hundred people, a large number allegedly converts from Islam (Demanet, *Nouvelle histoire*, vol. 1, pp. 122-6). Demanet served as chaplain until 20 March 1765, when he fell out with de la Rivière's successor Mesnager, who accused him of misconduct and sent him back to France (Benoist, *Histoire de l'église catholique*, p. 74).

Few details are known about Demanet's years in France (1765-73), except that his *Nouvelle histoire de l'Afrique française* was published in 1767. He may have returned to the diocese of Trèves. From later developments, it can be inferred that he was in contact with two of his siblings,

who were Recollect priests (Benoist, *Histoire de l'église catholique*, p. 74). In 1772, driven by a combination of chauvinism and evangelistic zeal already apparent in his *Nouvelle histoire* (vol. 2, pp. 187-96), Demanet founded a commercial company (the Compagnie de Guyane), which was co-financed by the Benedictine Abbey of Merz. The company was granted a monopoly on trade between Cap Blanc and Sierra Leone by royal charter. Demanet envisaged the company as strengthening France's position in West African trade, and hoped through its revenues to finance an ambitious plan to evangelise West Africa. To that end he suggested – in vain – that he should be appointed bishop of Gorée (Benoist, *Histoire de l'église catholique*, p. 74).

### MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

#### Primary

J.-B. Demanet, *Nouvelle histoire de l'Afrique française, enrichie de cartes et d'observations astronomiques et géographiques*, Paris, 1767

#### Secondary

J.R. de Benoist, *Histoire de l'église catholique au Sénégal. Du milieu du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle à l'aube du troisième millénaire*, Paris, 2008, pp. 71-5

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P. Lintingre, 'Le curé de Gorée d'après ses archives', *Afrique Document* 102/103 (1969) 75-129

P. Lintingre, 'La mission du Sénégal sous l'Ancien Régime', *Afrique Document* 87/4 (1966) 97-128

C.A. Walckenaer, *Histoire générale des voyages ou Nouvelle collection des relations de voyages par mer ou par terre*, Paris, 1826, vol. 5, pp. 167-87

### WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

#### *Nouvelle histoire de l'Afrique française*, 'New history of French Africa'

DATE 1767

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE French

#### DESCRIPTION

*Nouvelle histoire de l'Afrique française, enrichie de cartes et d'observations astronomiques et géographiques* is a two-volume treatise written by Abbé



Jean-Baptiste Demanet, published in Paris in 1767. Totalling some 710 pages, the book is composed of three parts. Part One gives an introduction to the African continent by region. It includes descriptions of African kingdoms, islands and rivers as well as reflections on African products and their commercial prospects. Part Two consists of a detailed description of the customs, beliefs and practices of peoples on the west coast of Africa, from Arguin Island in the north to the Bissagos Islands in the south, as well as of its animals, trees and plants. In addition, it gives an assessment of the trade opportunities in this area (e.g. the gum and slave trades). Part Three is a treatise on the physical and historical origins of Africans south of the Sahara.

The book was written against the background of Anglo-French rivalry, more specifically the Seven Years War (1756-63). On 30 April 1758, St Louis was captured by the British, followed shortly after by Gorée and other French settlements on the West African coast. The British attack on the French possessions in West Africa was part of a strategy to weaken the French economy. According to the terms of the Treaty of Paris (1763), France ceded to Britain its possessions in the Americas (Canada, Louisiana and several of the Antilles) and in exchange regained control over the Senegalese coast (with the exception of St Louis, which remained British until 1779).

Demanet's book can best be understood as an entreaty to the French government and the public at large to develop trade opportunities in Africa as a means of strengthening France's economy and advancing its position as a maritime power, which subsequently would enhance opportunities for evangelisation. His chauvinistic and anti-British attitude is plain throughout the book, for example, in his praise for the ruler of Niimi, whom he characterises as a person who 'loves the French' and 'hates the English' (Demanet, *Nouvelle histoire*, Paris, 1767, vol. 1, p. 120).

Demanet is equally opinionated in his descriptions of Islam and Muslims, the majority of which can be found in Part Two of the book. His descriptions of Muslim beliefs and practices are intended to highlight the cruelty of Islamic practices (such as female circumcision), its confused and perverted teaching and the ignorance of its proponents. He presents Islam as 'a religion that has no principles except moral corruption and ignorance' (vol. 1, p. 10) and refers to 'les horreurs du Mahométisme'; he writes that even the Arabs had Islam imposed on them through violence, forcing them to leave their old religion (vol. 2, p. 45). He portrays Muḥammad as a 'false prophet' (vol. 2, p. 2) and 'imposter' whom some

West Africans in their ignorance consider to be God (vol. 2, p. 36). Marabouts are equally vilified and compared to Pharisees, who are outwardly strictly religious but inwardly 'cruel, ignorant, corrupt, superstitious' and misguide Africans with their lies and deliberations (vol. 1, p. 61).

According to Demanet, West African Muslims had no mosques, nor did they observe religious festivals, except for 'their Easter of Bairam, which they call Tabesquer' (vol. 2, p. 10), and Ramaḍān. In Demanet's opinion, neither African Muslims nor their leaders have much knowledge about Islam (vol. 2, p. 1) and so every village has its own 'bizarre opinions' of the faith, resulting in frequent arguments and clashes between villages as to the correct interpretation of Islam. To exemplify this, Demanet writes that some Senegalese consider

Mahomet to be a God, and claim to profess his religion without knowing what it is about, and each individual claims to be the true disciple and the true interpreter of this Imposter (...) Those who want Mahomet to be the true god of the universe, those who consider him to be a great prophet and the intimate friend and dispenser of the good gifts of the Creator of Heaven and Earth, they are the ones that insist on adoring him and insist that no one will be granted grace or salvation without his intercession. Others say it is true that he is a normal human being, but that God the Creator has given him all his powers. Again others have no clue whatsoever. Some drink wine, others consider it a major crime. Some say prayers directly to Mahomet, others see him as mediator and intercessor and others again do not pray at all. (vol. 2, pp. 36-7; all quotations from Damanet are translated by the contributor)

Demanet's low opinion both of Islam and of Africans, whom he describes as 'similar to soft wax, with which one can form whatever one wants' (vol. 2, p. 1), and his view that West African Muslims are confused and misguided in matters of faith leads him to believe that it is possible to convert African Muslims to Christianity. He boasts that, during his brief trip to Joal and Albreda in 1764, he converted and baptised several hundred Muslims, who were awed by the splendour of the Roman Catholic rituals and convinced by his preaching, thus creating the impression that the conversion of West African Muslims is easily accomplished (vol. 1, pp. 122-6). Similarly, Demanet claims that the king of Sine confided in him that he was a Christian at heart but was compelled to hide his faith in order to remain king, stating that his subjects would have expelled him from his kingdom if he openly converted. Nevertheless, according to Demanet, the king explicitly invited him to send missionaries to try and convert the people of his kingdom (vol. 2, pp. 28-9).

By highlighting both West African trade opportunities and openings for Christian expansion, Demanet in his *Nouvelle histoire* tries simultaneously to promote the Kingdom of France and the Kingdom of God as two powers that could beneficially reinforce each other.

#### SIGNIFICANCE

Demanet is an early representative of a distinct missionary tradition in West Africa that underestimated the extent to which Islam had taken root in the region. Convinced that West African Islam was superficial, its adherents were optimistic regarding the prospects of converting West African Muslims to Christianity. They (mistakenly) believed that West African Muslims would abandon their 'confused beliefs' and 'superstitions' once exposed to lucid and well-reasoned Christian teachings.

Demanet's book was widely read in France, and in all likelihood its perceptions of Islam and West African Muslims influenced and fashioned the attitudes of French Spiritans, who took on the evangelisation of the Senegambia from 1789 onwards.

#### PUBLICATIONS

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- J.-B. Demanet, *Neue Geschichte des französischen Afrika, mit neuen Charten sowol, als geographischen, astronomischen und andern Beobachtungen über die Gebräuche, Sitten, Religion und den Handel dieser Gegenden*, trans. Christoph Meiners, Leipzig, 1778 (German trans.); 999/Hist.pol.4300(1/2) (digitised version available through MDZ)
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Martha Frederiks