10 Louis Massignon: A Catholic Encounter with Islam and the Middle East

Anthony O'Mahony

Louis Massignon (1883–1962) was a singular figure in the French Catholic intellectual world between the First and Second World Wars up until Vatican II.[1] His place in the French Catholic milieu defies easy categorization: soldier-diplomat, leading scholar of Islam and the Muslim World, politically engaged, a religious activist, and latterly ordained a Catholic priest in the Melkite Catholic Church in 1950.[2] Massignon was considered by some of his contemporaries to be a unique mediating voice in France's relations with the Arab world.[3]

Two poles defined his life and work. The first was the world of French Catholicism, with its rich and complex range of religious thought, which had wide influence across Europe and in overseas Catholic missions.[4] In this world Massignon held a special empathy for those converts, like himself, who had discovered or rediscovered the Christian faith.[5] He also guarded the legacy of Charles de Foucauld as a source for the revival of Catholic thought in France, especially within the context of France's encounter with Islam in North Africa and the Levant.[6] Massignon is identified by Étienne Fouilloux as one of those "theologians in lounge suits" (*théologiens en veston*) who, during the interwar years, sought a renewal of ideas in the Catholic Church in its engagement with modernity: "located between, on the one hand, the excesses of the modernist-progressivists, and on the other hand a response of Roman theologians based on a neo-Thomist scholasticism. This *third party* was in fact a nebulous

grouping stretching from Blondel to Chenu, passing through Gilson, Maritain, and Congar."[7]

The second pole was the Arabic world and Islam; Massignon was deeply involved in the politics of the relationship between the Muslim world and France. Albert Hourani observed: "By the originality of his ideas and the force of his personality, Massignon had a deep influence on Islamic studies in France, and indeed on French views of Islam; he was perhaps the only Islamic scholar who was a central figure in the intellectual life of his time."[8]

It is difficult to imagine Massignon outside of the French context. The honor of France was to him something of an absolute, and he felt deeply the drama and contradictions in France's Arab policy.[9] These commitments brought about lasting personal tensions in France and with his Muslim friends.[10] His fidelity to the Catholic Church and Islam made for a distinct religious encounter in the world of politics.[11] In his seeking to overcome these difficult loyalties his position has been described as "religiously heroic."[12] Massignon understood that the French colonial empire was entering its twilight. In 1952 he published an article titled "The West Facing the East: The Primacy of a Cultural Solution,"[13] in which he asserted that in the clash between Europe and the Muslim world the priority should be given to a cultural solution, "a solution of justice possible by means of *exemplary* names and maxims of *wisdom*; which the instincts of the masses understood."[14] Massignon held a view of history that sees the handing on of knowledge of God from one individual to another as the only significant process and therefore most deserving of study.[15]

Massignon's influence in framing the encounter between Christianity and Islam has grown significantly since his death. His ideas are today often deployed in the intellectual defense of the dialogue of civilization "by *challenging* the idea that 'civilization-based thinking' is necessarily a conflict-generating factor and arguing that, contrary to fashionable assumptions, a civilizational dialogue that wants to contribute to a more peaceful world order requires, in a qualified way, 'stronger' civilizational identities."[16]

Massignon held a deeply personal vision of Islam and of the relations between Muslims and Christians. Throughout his life and work he sought to create new thought within Christian theology on Islam. He often commented that he did not consider himself a theologian[17] but rather someone who had experienced a deep mystical encounter with the "other" in such a manner that it reordered his understanding of the Christian presence within Islam: "[I]dentifying himself as a Christian who was converted in a Muslim context, Massignon then dedicated himself as a Christian to Muslims."[18] Massignon understood that his views were controversial to many in the church, but, ever loyal to the fidelity of the Catholic faith, he always sought clarification from theologians and church authorities. In many ways this is what made his contribution to Christian thought on Islam so integral and influential. He held that it was only by remaining close to the authority of the church and authentically within the tradition that truth could be sustained. In 1937 Massignon relayed the "work" of his conversion experience, illuminating a commitment to the deeply personal and a respect for orthodoxy:

> Trying to live, among my Christian brethren, just as I live among the others, my faith, hope and love, pregnant of the full dogma [*sic*]. My only way to love my friends is to love them personally, with all that may seem to them, in their R.C. friend, "queer, obsolete, or borrowed," with all that I recognize as the living structural personality of the Roman Catholic Church: ecclesiastic hierarchy, sacramental realism, vows perpetual, all that warrants my irrevocable love.[19]

Political Spirituality: Massignon and Ali Shariati

Massignon's influence was not limited to fellow Catholics. Several Muslim students studied with him, including Ali Shariati (1933–77), a highly influential Shiite who played a critical role in the revival of religious thought in Iran just prior to the Islamic revolution in 1979. Ali Shariati was referred to as the Péguy of Iran.[20] Whilst working

for a doctorate in Iranian philology between 1959 and 1964 he came into contact with Massignon. Shariati himself translated two works by Massignon into Persian: *Étude sur une courbe personnelle de vie, le cas de Hallâj, martyr mystique de l'Islam* (*A Study on the Personal Contour of Life: The Case of Hallâj, Mystic Martyr of Islam*) and *Salmân Pâk et les prémisses spirituelles de l'Islam iranien* (*Salmân Pâk and the Spiritual Premises of Iranian Islam*).[21] Shariati was profoundly moved by his encounter with Massignon, which he described in his *Kavir* (Desert—subtitled "Those that I venerate" [*Ma'bud-ha-ye-man*]):[22]

> I have never in my life seen anything more sublime than this old Frenchman aged 69; I refer not only to his moral and intellectual superiority but also to his physical charm, making all the faces which I observed in Paris appear insipid. His white hair was cut short, with two slight tufts growing behind his ears, casting reflections of light and giving the whole of his physiognomy a divine and extraordinary purity from which I found it very difficult to detach my gaze.[23]

Turning to Shariati's observations on Massignon, the importance of persons such as Salmân Pâk and, further, Fatima to Shariati's thought was undoubtedly directly due to Massignon's influence. It is also certain that the very "committed" attitude of Massignon regarding Islam and the Muslims provided for Shariati a specially practical concept of Islamology, which he did not conceive as an academic study but rather as an *ideology* transforming mentalities and society. What Shariati adopted from his master, Massignon, was thus not simply his theoretical ideas on Islam but also his ideas or attitudes leading to action: Salmân and Fatima were examples of committed lives that should be followed, and Islamology was to carry a revolutionary message. Michel Cuypers has reflected that Massignon to Shariati was more than a professor or a teacher of ideas; he was a master of life. Shariati was not so much seduced by Massignon's ideas strictly speaking but rather by his intellectual asceticism; his attitude as that of a scientist with total integrity when facing reality, his concern for

the only truth in the presence of facts. Reflecting on his years in Paris, Shariati concludes: "More than anything else, the merit for what I have learnt and above all, *for what has become of me* belongs entirely to Louis Massignon, who united within himself the Orient and the Occident."[24] In a long autobiographical letter to his son in early 1977 (only a few months before his death), Shariati recounts how he renounced his personal preferences, which inclined more toward philosophy, mysticism, and poetry (and which could have made him into a brilliant intellectual academic).[25] Instead, he studied sociology and history, which he considered to be more useful for the Islamic society of his time, a society that needed to abandon its metaphysical idealism and discover concrete social realism. Shariati deliberately wanted to be, and effectively was, a socially committed intellectual. Massignon placed his gifts at the service of the Catholic Church and France. For Shariati, it was a prime moral obligation to put his intellectual work to the service of society. This theme runs through all of his works, but this choice was certainly made at a great cost: "The *highest degree of martyrdom*, the giving of oneself and the generosity, [he writes to his son] does not consist in renouncing just one's goods and one's life, but also one's own growth and own total fulfilling in respect of existence, spirituality and science. It means making yourself available to the others, talking to them, responding to the elementary and ordinary needs of their lives."[26]

We can also see the impact that Massignon's Marian thinking had upon Shariati, who reflected: "It is Mary, who made that dry and haughty Yahweh descend from his throne . . . it was she who made him come to earth, made him tender and tame on Earth."[27]

Massignon was not the only Catholic influence upon Shariati. Ervand Abrahamian, one of the foremost historians of Iran and political scientist of the Islamic revolution and its thinkers, writes as follows:

Through Massignon, Shariati was exposed to a radical Catholic journal named *Esprit*. Founded by Emmanuel Mounier, a socially committed Catho-

lic, *Esprit* in the early 1960s supported a number of left-wing causes, particularly national liberation struggles in the Third World. It carried articles on Cuba, Algeria, Arab nationalism, economics, underdevelopment, and contemporary Communism—especially the different varieties of Marxist thought. Its authors included Massignon, Michel Foucault, Corbin, Fanon, radical Catholics, and Marxists such as Lukács, Jacques Berque and Henri Lefebvre. Moreover, *Esprit* in these years ran frequent articles on Christian-Marxist dialogue, on left Catholicism, on Jaurès's religious socialism, and on Christ's "revolutionary, egalitarian teachings." Despite the influence of Massignon and *Esprit*, Shariati later scrupulously avoided any mention of radical Catholicism. To have done so would have weakened his claim that Shiism was the only world religion that espoused social justice, economic reality and political revolution.[28]

Massignon's Vision of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations

Massignon understood the relationship between Christianity and Islam through the lens of the tragic figure of the mystic al-Hallâj (857–922).[29] Al-Hallâj, who was "martyred" in Baghdad for heresy, represented for Massignon a direct parallel to the suffering of Jesus on the Cross.[30] As Christianity had suffering and compassion as its foundation, so, too, according to Massignon, did Islam. Indeed, he regarded suffering as fundamental to Semitic and Jewish tradition: "This brings us to a fundamental problem of Semitic, and particularly Jewish psychology, in its most 'Kierkegaardian' aspect: there is a hidden but divine good in suffering, and this is the mystery of anguish, the foundation of human nature."[31]

Massignon's mystical Catholicism informed his entire engagement with Islam. It was "commitment" to the "other" outside his own Christian faith that made Massignon such a powerful witness. The Dominican scholar Jean-Pierre de Menasce, OP, states, "If the attitude of Christians toward Muslims and Islam (and consequentially toward all the great religions) has changed in the last forty years, through objective understanding, through gripping the highest and most

central values, through a complete respect for people and institutions, and all this as a result of Christian intensity and not despite it, this is a great extent owed to Louis Massignon."[32] Indeed, the explicit recasting of the Western missionary effort by the French theologian and cardinal of the church, Jean Daniélou, SJ, after the Second World War as one finding Christ even more than preaching him can be traced directly to Daniélou's association with Massignon.[33]

Abbé Harpigny in his study *Islam et Christianisme selon Louis Massignon*, divides Louis Massignon's life into three episodes: *le cycle hallagien*—which ended with the submission of his doctoral dissertation, *La passion d'al-Hosayn-ibn Mansour al-Hallâj, martyr mystique de l'Islam* in 1922; *le cycle abrahamique*—up until his ordination as a priest in the Melkite Greek Catholic Church in Cairo in 1950; and *un cycle gandhien*—a period of political activism that ended with his death in 1962.[34]

In his study *Étude sur une courbe personnelle de vie*, Massignon wrote, "one must choose for each individual their personal axis which is particular to them."[35] Undoubtedly it would conform to his personal spiritual journey to choose an axis, meaning in his case his Christian vocation to witness, his relation to the divine, and even more precisely the Cross, which was the guiding theme in his life. Tracing Massignon's "courbe de vie" (lit. the curve of one's life), we can see how his research, teaching, political and spiritual engagement, his life as seeker, professor, grammarian, linguist, and sociologist, as well as the public man commissioned to the service of the state or the man of action, the religious man and even the priest, constantly offering himself to Muslim souls, all met in one pivotal theme: Islam. As the axial point, Islam also provided the link between his vocation and Arab Christianity as expressed in the religious culture and ecclesiology of the Melkite Catholic Church.

Examination of the thought, or rather the vision, of Louis Massignon concerning Islam demands a particular approach in order to grasp his own way into the subject: concern with the texts (and the Arabic language) certainly, but also a constant awareness of a guid-

ing thread, which was a dialogue of life with Muslims.[36] Massignon willingly differed from those who dissected with a lancet, and he himself was not without contradictions. Where his disciples or his detractors denounced these contradictions, he preferred synthesis. For him the important thing was to approach Islam and its people with the grace he received from it and his personal engagement with it. As one of his disciples, an Arab Christian, Brother E. S. Sabanegh, put it: "The value judgments made by Massignon on al-Hallâj or Islam are the outpouring of a burning faith and a passionate temperament for whom effective and affective engagement is never far from intellectual convictions."[37] Massignon investigated a number of vocations in Islam, of which he judged that of al-Hallâj to be above all others. One scholar has observed that "the very exploratory character of his writings, and indeed of his often enigmatic prose, continues to draw from us something which mere scholarship can never do: a glimpse of the *spirit* which animated these classical works."[38]

Massignon understood his reconversion to Catholic Christianity in Iraq in 1908 as "an interreligious moment of grace."[39] For a strong spirit such as his, the turnaround was a complete one. Henceforth his whole life was to be devoted to God and to mystical, spiritual causes (in fact, his life as a scholar was already committed to the study of Islam, his thesis on al-Hallâj having been conceived as early as 1907).[40] In the course of a public lecture that he gave in Paris in 1959, at seventy-six years of age and at the end of a long life devoted to Islamic studies and Christian Islamic dialogue, Massignon described the point of conversion, or what he referred to as the "visitation of the stranger":[41]

> Baghdad: there, leader of an official archaeological mission, but ascetic life, disguised, under protection (amân) of an Arab family of Muslim nobles; dressed vaguely like a Turkish officer on leave, desert crossing in search of a ruin between Karbala and Najaf (al-Okhaydir); caught in a trap (preparations for Turkish Revolution, 1908), arrested as a spy, struck, threatened

with execution, attempt at suicide through holy horror of myself, sudden self-recollection, eyes shut before an inner fire that judged me and burnt my heart, certainty of a pure, ineffable, creative Presence, suspending my sentence at the prayer of invisible beings, visitors to my prison, whose names struck my thoughts: the first name, my mother (then praying in Lourdes), the fifth, the name of Charles de Foucauld. Saved by my hosts, at their risks: Dakhâla, Ijâla, Diyâfa. Return, amid a thousand obstacles, to France.[42]

The irruption of grace in 1908, which occurred in the Middle Eastern world of Islam, connected with Muslim hospitality and the Muslim respect for the "given word" (*la parole donnée*), was not only to transform his life as a Christian but also to transfigure his vision of Islam. "Converted to Christianity by the Witness of God which the Muslim faith implies," he was to consider Islam, the mediator of his personal grace, as the mediator of universal grace.[43] The providential role of Islam is thus to "gather all the excluded" against all those who are "religiously privileged," the "exclusivists of salvation" who want to keep God for themselves alone.[44] It is

a flaming sword, a holy lance raised against God's privileged people, a reminder and a threat to Christianity, provoking not only the heroism of the Crusades which will unite it, and of the Franciscan proto-martyrs of Morocco, but the institution of liturgical feasts and the foundation of religious orders . . . an evangelical lance stigmatizing Christianity for thirteen centuries . . . the providential guardian of the Holy Places.[45]

Massignon was haunted by the desire to communicate this vision of Islam, through his scholarly work, through the sodality of prayer (*badaliya*), which he established,[46] through his apostolate of the word among Christians, and through his intercessions with the hierarchy. All the circles in which he lived or which he touched were to be influenced by his vision. His Orientalist colleagues would give no currency to his "mystical" views; theologians would frown at this reversal in perspective. But nothing would stop him; he was faithful unto death

to the mission assigned to him. He was to devote himself to his thesis with unremitting effort. With the publication of his two major works in 1922, the *Passion d'al-Hallâj* and the *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane* (*Essays on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism*), the culture of Muslim life in the first three centuries was opened up. Through erudition and technical skill, the potential of the Muslim faith in revealing what is truly spiritual was highlighted. For many, this was a discovery.[47]

As Robert Caspar reminds us, a danger of distortion always exists when the work of an Orientalist who is not necessarily a theologian is taken up and used by a theologian who is not an Orientalist. In the case of Louis Massignon, the difficulty is enhanced by the extremely technical nature of the vocabulary of Muslim mystics and also, it has to be said, by the use of French words in Massignon's translations, which therefore have a Christian resonance and are apt to mislead non-Arabic speakers. Even the best ones are no exception to this.[48] Massignon's work on al-Hallâj and Muslim mysticism is at the heart of his scholarly work. However, it is not confined to these subjects but extends to varied fields, sometimes very unexpected ones, such as his studies of the Shiite tradition. There is, though, one recurrent theme: the study of the issues raised by the relationship between Islam and Christianity—his course of studies at the Collège de France on Muslim and Christian apologetics; his study of the encounter between Muhammad and the delegation of Christians from Najran (*mubahala*); and the series of articles on the Seven Sleepers, a tradition that was common to both religions.[49]

In the latter case, that of the Seven Sleepers, the apostolate of the pen was taken up and prolonged by that of the word and of action. Massignon undertook to revive pilgrimages to the places where these saints are venerated, particularly to the cave (Stiffel) at Vieux-Marché in Brittany, where Christians and Muslims pray side by side even today. But his favorite work in the most profound of domains—that of prayers of intercession—was undoubtedly the sodality of the Badaliya ("substitution" in Arabic).[50] It has united, and still unites, small

groups of believers who offer their supplications, and sometimes their life, in "substitution" for their Muslim brothers before God.[51] Prefigured from January 1913 in Cairo and in 1934 in Damietta, when Massignon and his cofounder, the Melkite Catholic Mary Kahil, prayed together to consecrate the work, it was to develop especially after 1947 in Cairo, Damascus, Paris, Algiers, and Dakar.[52]

Massignon's particular conversion narrative might be considered a novelty in French Catholic thought in the early twentieth century. Indeed, Griffiths observes that those converts to Catholicism under the influence of Islam relinquished, as their Christian faith grew, any strong attachment that they had had to Islam, with the exception of Massignon.[53] Based on his experience of a "visitation of a stranger," Massignon developed a theologoumenon (theological statement that is of individual opinion and not of doctrine) in which he sought a new framework for understanding Islam, placing it at the level of affinity with Jews and Christians, as an Abrahamic religion.[54] In fact, Massignon sought to articulate a Catholic theology of Islam rooted in doctrine and expressed in action.[55] He was always extremely conscious that as a committed and believing Catholic Christian he wished the church to enter into a dialogue with his fundamental intuition, thus finding a space for Muslim belief within Catholic Christianity. Massignon's religious vocation can be traced through his conversion in 1908 to the formation of the Badaliya with Mary Kahil in 1934 and his ordination as a priest in the Melkite Catholic Church.[56] Leading scholars today affirm as a matter of fact that Massignon made a decisive contribution to the Vatican II document *Nostra aetate*, thus confirming the influence of Massignon as a key figure in creating new Christian thinking on Islam.[57] Christian Troll, an influential Jesuit scholar on Islam, evaluates Massignon's influence in these terms: "Whereas, on the one hand, Vatican II's positive description of central aspects of the Muslims' faith and practice and its new outlook on Islam would be unthinkable without Massignon's insights and commitment, on the other hand, the Council, as has been shown,

refrained from adopting key elements of Massignon's idiosyncratic theologico-prophetic vision of Islam and its prophet."[58]

Massignon and France's Policy toward North Africa and the Middle East

Not only was Massignon a seminal voice in French Catholic thought leading up to the Second Vatican Council, but he also had a long-term relationship with the French diplomatic and political establishment from the First World War onward regarding North Africa and the Middle East. In 1917 he was attached to the delegation of Georges Picot in his negotiations with Mark Sykes, the British representative who drafted the secret treaty of 1916, which oversaw the establishment of the French and British mandate system in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire.[59] In 1919 he was part of George Clemenceau's team which negotiated with Faisal on the future of Syria,[60] and in the 1930s he played an important role in the French colonial establishment's centennial celebrations of the capture of Algiers in 1830.[61] In the postwar period, Massignon found himself in a position of opposition against French colonial policy. He was opposed to the Madagascar massacres in 1947; French policy toward the Palestinian question and the establishment of the state of Israel from 1947 to 1948; the dispatch of the Moroccan monarch, Mohammad V, into exile in 1953; repression of the nationalist movements in Morocco and Tunisia; and the high drama over civil conflict in French Algeria.

With the conquest of Algeria, France became the ruler of a significant Muslim population. Henri Laurens has reminded us that French policy toward the region was made largely by administrators, military men, missionaries, and diplomats but that the universities were absent from this debate on engagement with, and rule over, Muslim peoples. In fact, the French university system (understood as including the secondary schools or lycées) had a weak institutional base for most of the nineteenth century, and it was only during the

Third Republic, in the context of war with Germany, that a new model for the university was developed as a constitutive part of the regime, which is sometimes spoken of as a "republic of professors."[62] In the area of Islamic studies the republic restored the École des langues in 1873, and Massignon in due course would become a pupil at this institution. It was during this period that the Third Republic sought greater knowledge of the Muslim world. In fact, this geographical-cultural nomenclature gained wider usage at the turn of the century, against the background of the emergence of pan-Islamism within the Ottoman Empire and across Asia.[63]

Massignon's political and university career under the Third Republic unfolded as France's Muslim policy developed. His work on the sociology of the Muslim world, especially in the period up to 1940, was closely linked to the concerns of France's Muslim policy. Laurens has identified whole passages by him included in published articles and administrative reports.[64] This aspect of Massignon's work bears witness to the way in which the Third Republic was able to integrate a range of academics specializing in the Muslim world into the defining of its policy. The Fourth and Fifth Republics did not follow suit.

Another essential aspect of Massignon's career involved his interventions at a senior level in the determination of long-term policy, which reflected a constant desire to integrate his religious and political ideas, often based on his sociological work. The character of this long-term policy might be seen as an attempt at mitigating the shock of colonialism within the Muslim world through a desire to demonstrate respect for Arab civilization and culture. Massignon often pleaded for a greater role of the Arabic language against what he saw as the dominant administrative presence of French imposed in an often authoritarian manner. Massignon had a distinct appreciation of and vision for Arabic culture, demonstrated by his work in the Academy in Cairo, which sought to accommodate the Arabic language and modernity. Massignon's vision of the relationship between France and the Arab world emerged in juxtaposition to his constantly evolv-

ing understanding of Islam. He seems to have been influenced prior to 1914 by modernist views as articulated by Salafist circles and these encouraged in his own mind a progressive rapprochement between the juridical customs of metropolitan France and its Muslim dependencies.

Massignon's basic desire was to see Muslim emancipation take place within modernity as mediated by the French colonial context, which itself should be based upon tolerance and an open spirit.[65] However, Massignon's voice, although listened to by a wide circle of political administrators within the French elite, was only one among many. In fact, it was Robert Montagne (1893–1954) who, from the second half of the 1930s, would replace him as "prince counselor" and who, it should be said, had more acquaintances among the military than in the diplomatic corps.[66] Massignon's early attachment to a modernist vision of Islam can be understood only if one considers the Islam in question not as an eternal, fixed Islam but as a society-based religion that was constantly evolving. In the 1930s he became more aware of the doctrinal hardening, together with what he considered a certain intellectual closure, then taking place in Salafist circles, hand in hand with its direct entry into politics with the birth of modern Islamism, especially with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.[67] It is interesting that the term "semi-Wahabite" makes an appearance in Massignon's thinking, as he seems to make a distinction between modernists and more Islamist currents. His contribution to Muslim policy in the Third Republic was characterized by efforts toward reconciliation between the French and the Muslim world.

In this context, the official policy of *laïcité* (secular constitutionalism) in France expressed itself in a manner that would find little space for the kind of mystical religiosity that Massignon studied, and for the values of which he would often publicly testify.[68] His orientation might even be considered as a protest against the state of affairs that promoted *laïcité* as a norm: According to him it had significant detrimental consequences for Muslims, whose religion he valued, under French rule.

Massignon's academic and public life were particularly affected by the great changes that were coming into play in France after the liberation in 1944. He witnessed a decline of those values that had been uppermost in his life since his conversion in 1908. The French Empire experienced the shock of decolonization; the influence of the church in French society was on the wane; French political society had been deeply wounded by military defeat; and the self-confidence of French culture, even though not overwhelmed, was diminished. It is within this context that the growing tensions and conflicts in relations between France and its Muslims could often take on an apocalyptic character when viewed from Massignon's perspective. As Jacques Wardenberg well describes, "he resorted to a view and practice of life in which suffering and sacrifice, but also resurrection and sainthood were leading terms."[69] Louis Massignon developed this theme of history in a series of letters to Paul Claudel in 1908 and 1909, in which the meaning of history is to be found not in the impersonality of social evolution but in the divine word in the individual seed.[70]

Massignon and Jerusalem: Theology and Politics in the Holy Land

The character of Louis Massignon and how it was manifested in his life and his influence needs to be considered. Not only was the Badaliya at the heart of his spiritual life and of his sometimes heroic zeal; not only are the texts that he edited for the Badaliya and his verbal communications to the Badaliya in which he poured out his heart most revealing as regards his intimate spiritual life;[71] but this work, which was dearer to him than any other, led him to develop relationships with the highest levels of the Catholic hierarchy. Massignon might have appeared sometimes to be one of the less reassuring sons of the church. He was scathing in his comments about theologians and the ecclesiastical race in general, including certain members of the hierarchy, and he possessed a particular distaste for ultramontanism.[72] But this was only a superficial aspect of his personality, one

that had multiple facets. Deep down he was not only an obedient son of the church, but he also had a heartfelt desire to receive the church's blessing on his work and his apostolate. Many bishops and religious leaders were visited by him and were at times very surprised at his humble attitude.

It was to the pontiffs that he turned to receive a blessing for the work of the Badaliya—to Pius XI, Pius XII, and John XXIII. Massignon seems to have had an open relationship with Pius XII and was often granted a private audience, for example, in 1949, 1953, and 1955. His intermediary, apart from the Melkite patriarch, was Méhémet-Ali Mulla-Zadé (1881–1959), also known as Father Paul Mulla, a Muslim convert to Catholicism.[73] It must be added that Massignon sometimes had to defend this work before the hierarchy as a result of some more or less well-intentioned denunciations. One fact should be noted immediately: One name that reappears in his relations with the Vatican is that of Giovanni Battista Montini, at the time pro-secretary of state (1952–54) before becoming archbishop of Milan. This was not, as one might suppose, a formality; rather, there are very clear signs that the relationship between Louis Massignon and the future pope Paul VI had gone far beyond the stage of formalities.[74]

Massignon's first private meetings took place with Pius XI, who demonstrated some encouragement for the various activities undertaken by him, all directed toward an attitude of openness and desire for knowledge of "our Muslim brother."[75] Massignon's apostolate appears to be totally in accord with Pius XI's intentions, as expressed in the pontiff's statement to a bishop in 1931: "Until now, we have done very little for Islam. The language, religion, practices, and the way of thinking of Islam must be studied in depth: and then, through acts of benevolence, we must address it directly, attempting to gain its esteem, and finally its love."[76] During his first meeting with Pius XI on 18 July 1934, the account of which is preserved in the Massignon family archives, researched by Agathe Mayeres, Massignon asked the pope to bless his creation of the Badaliya. The profound intention of this Badaliya, a term that in Arabic means "to put oneself in the place

of," implies substituting oneself—in and through prayer, fasting, and sacrifice—and, for Muslims, to offer oneself in their place.[77] In addition, during the same audience, Massignon emphasized the importance of Abraham and "sought to extend to the whole Latin Church the special office said for this 'saint' in the Latin patriarchate of Jerusalem."[78]

Massignon based his religious thought on the idea of Abrahamic religions, which articulated in his mind a relationship between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The Second Vatican council responded to this idea of Massignons when it posited in *Lumen gentium* that Muslims "profess to hold the faith of Abraham," although the council fathers did not endorse a genealogical link between Islam and the Jewish-Christian tradition.[79] In making Abraham the first expatriate who assumes the exclusion of the children of Ishmael, who, in his intercession for the condemned of Sodom substituted himself for them, and who, by the accepted sacrifice of Isaac, founded the sacerdotal vocation of his people, Massignon delivered his "spiritual testament." All his prayers and all his actions began from Abraham in order to find their full expression in configuration to the crucified Christ. According to Massignon, then, it is with Abraham—the Abraham who left Ur and reached Palestine—that everything begins. The spiritual power of the remarkable prayers that the patriarch offered to God for Ishmael, the exiled son; for Isaac, the sacrificed son; and for Sodom, the condemned city, fix for all time the destiny of all believers, especially in that Holy Land, which was given to him forever, for himself and his spiritual descendants: "since spiritually one possesses only what one has renounced here below. The problem of the true meaning of the possession of the Holy Land begins with the offering of Isaac. It is given to Abraham only because he offered him up, and because Isaac agreed to his being sacrificed."[80]

For Massignon, Abraham is also the first exemplar of hospitality, of the right of asylum. The problems of the beginning of humanity are also those of its end, especially that of the sacred character of the right of asylum and that of respect for the stranger. This representa-

tion inevitably leads us to the question of Palestine and its Holy Places, the equitable resolution of which is the indispensable prelude to the reconciliation of the Abrahamic religions.[81] During the second private audience granted him by Pius XI in September 1935, Massignon offered the Holy Father the first copy of his work *Les trois prières d'Abraham*, distributed, as Monseigneur Mulla explained to Secretary of State Pacelli, "to educated persons praying for the conversion of Islam in order to clarify their intentions and re-ignite their zeal."[82] This "proselytism" is in accordance with the wish of Pius XI, who, in his encyclical *Rerum ecclesiae* (1926), confirmed mission as a priority of his pontificate.

On the question of Palestine, the Holy Places, Zionism, and the State of Israel, Massignon stood against the prevailing majority of French intellectuals, albeit on different accounts at different times, during the interwar period and after the Second World War: He began with enthusiasm for the Zionist cause, but this underwent a reversal, evolving eventually into acute anti-Zionism. Massignon supported the Zionist movement beginning in 1917, when he met Chaim Weizmann, who was raising awareness for the claim of the "right of return to Israel."[83] After 1936 he spoke out against what he considered to be the colonization of Palestine, the partition of the Holy Land, and the establishment of the State of Israel.[84]

Jerusalem had a special meaning for Massignon as a place of eschatological significance where the political and the religious joined in a reordering of human history to the divine. In 1948 he stated the following:

> One must admit that, if there is one country where the temporal bows before the spiritual to recognize our need for global unity, it is Palestine; the one point of insertion where the spiritual enters the temporal and geography; there is only one place that history predestined to be the Holy Land, Jerusalem, from the time of Abraham; not that it consists as a purely federal district of the UN or, which would be better, an international centre for UNESCO, but as a magnetization of the desire for peace and prayer for

justice toward the high place of Jerusalem. For Christians the Holy Land is not an archeological site but the fatherland [*la patrie*] of their souls even before death; and one day the bishops, even the bishop of bishops, must return to Jerusalem.[85]

Massignon recognized that the history of the Jewish people was characterized by suffering and that this suffering might be of an atoning nature. However, he also perceived that Jewish spirituality, which he admired—the age-old vocation of the Jewish people to exile, accompanied by the immortal hope of returning to Palestine—had been appropriated, demessianized, and secularized in the nineteenth century and had essentially become an economic vocation.[86] Further, in Massignon's eyes the Holocaust did not give the people of Israel any special rights; in any case, he saw no analogy whatsoever between the Passion of Christ and that of the Jewish people. The Holocaust had been apprehended in the continuity of the pogroms before the war and was in fact its result, a result made even more terrible by a godless society and its belief in technology, which were the true culprits. Thus the question of the settlement of Jews in Palestine, Massignon believed, did not have to be considered in a fundamentally new way after the Holocaust. Although such settlement might be partly legitimate, it should certainly not be implemented at the expense of other legitimate claims: those of Christianity, of Islam, and of the Palestinian Arab people. The greatest priority remained the strengthening of relations between Christianity (especially France) and the Arab Muslim world.[87]

Such opinions earned Massignon serious enemies at a time when the argument that anti-Semitism was more or less the same as anti-Zionism was beginning to gain ground in Europe. Massignon's attacks against the colonization and the forced industrialization of Palestine, supported by foreign capital, were clearly very little understood by a public that, on the contrary, saw only the positive aspects of Jewish colonization, its dynamism, and its capacity to exploit arid land. Added to this was Massignon's virulent Anglophobia; at times

Britain and its city bankers seemed to him to be the great culprits behind the conflict. At the same time Jewish activists fought the very same British people, whom they saw as colonialists and as taking a rather pro-Arab stance. By wanting to strongly curb Jewish immigration into Palestine, as it had done in 1939, Britain appeared, in the eyes of the Zionists, to betray yet again the promise made in the Balfour Declaration.[88] In French popular opinion, the Israeli problem was often seen not in terms of the Israeli-Arab conflict but rather in terms of decolonization; de Gaulle, to take an example, was not at all unhappy to see the influence of Great Britain diminish in the region.[89] Massignon combined his anti-Zionist arguments with religious considerations, which no doubt had still less chance of being understood. For example, he inserted the Virgin Mary into his political consideration of the modern State of Israel and the fate of the Palestinians. Highlighting Muslim veneration of the figure of Miriam in Sura 19 of the Quran in comparison to the "negative position" of Judaism on Mary, Massignon reflected on the importance of recognizing the religious history of the Holy Land and tied this to the legitimacy of the State of Israel.[90]

The breakthrough that the work of Louis Massignon achieved in the somewhat restricted field of the Christian vision of Islam was bound to challenge some views: not so much on the value of Muslim mysticism, which most theologians of spirituality were quite happy to admit, but more on the place of Islam in the history of salvation.[91] Now, Islam suddenly seemed to be reemerging, six hundred years after Christ, from a line that traced itself back to Abraham, with its own prophet, revelation, scripture, and mission. Did all of this not question such doctrines as well established and indeed defined, with respect to salvation, as the Christian notion of time, the closing of the apostolic revelation at the death of the last apostle, and the uniqueness of the path of salvation (if not of salvation itself) as traced out by the Bible and by Christ? Louis Massignon had broken through walls and opened new windows in a vision and a style that were his own. It was only natural that these "transtheological" breakthroughs, as

Robert Caspar has called them, should be borrowed to make an attempt at a new formulation of the history of salvation on a theological level, especially as parallel studies concerning the time of salvation, the theology of non-Christian religions, and the notion of prophecy contributed to widen the horizons. As far as the place of Islam in the divine plan of salvation was concerned, several Catholic thinkers took up the views of Massignon.[92]

Conclusion

Massignon, albeit in a distinct manner, belonged to a wide milieu of Catholic thought in the French world, which, by its creative originality, resourced theological tradition, deep ecclesial culture, a Christian dialogical mission to the religions, and an engagement with politics that still grasps the imagination. This extraordinary outpouring was not an act of an individual but of a deep cultural desire to participate in the world. His conversion in Iraq in 1908 with the "visitation of the stranger" worked itself out over the following decades in scholarship, theological thought, and political activism. Massignon is the most influential figure in the Christian encounter with Islam in the modern world. Although much of his thought is disputed today, it nevertheless continues to provoke religious questions with power to disturb. Through his influence he created a new language for the Catholic Church to engage with Muslims and Islam at the Second Vatican Council. He was also someone who provoked other vocations. Jean de Menasce, who converted from Judaism to Christianity and who became himself a leading Catholic thinker on mission, Israel, and religious traditions of Persia, provides a fitting summary of the character of Massignon's thought and work:

> His influence has extended far beyond the world of Islam, and one can say that his work has been decisive in the new orientations given to missionary work in the Catholic Church, not only in France. The spirit which he inherited from de Foucauld is characterized by contemplation and a life that is

humble and poor like that of Nazareth; a life in which the missionary puts himself on the same level as the most unsophisticated and abandoned, those whom he wishes to teach, above all, that God loves them. It was this attitude which allowed Massignon to penetrate into every search for God, without syncretism but with an understanding proceeding from within which aimed at the heights. This he did as a scholar and a Christian.[93]

This page intentionally left blank