

Louis Massignon: Vatican II and Beyond

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Introduction

There is widespread agreement among his commentators that Louis Massignon's work, and undoubtedly his personality, exerted significant influence on the wording of the statements on Muslims and Islam offered at the Second Vatican Council.¹ And yet the concrete historical connections between Massignon and the conciliar pronouncements have required further explanation. In other words, *that* his work influenced those pronouncements is the consensus position among people who work on Massignon, but *how* his influence was exerted is less certain. And the *how* matters, for it strengthens and perhaps even cements the case, which, if correct, favors further study of Massignon, to which, drawing on the work of Robert Caspar, Maurice Borrmans, Michael Fitzgerald, Christian Troll, Anthony O'Mahony, and Andrew Unsworth, I have my-

¹ All of the following have explicitly referred to Massignon's influence on Vatican II: Neal Robinson, "Massignon, Vatican II and Islam as an Abrahamic religion," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 2 (1991): 183; Sidney Griffith, "Sharing the Faith of Abraham: the 'Credo' of Louis Massignon," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 8 (1997): 193; Andrew Unsworth, "Louis Massignon, the Holy See and the Ecclesial Transition from 'Immortale Dei' to 'Nostra aetate': a Brief History of the Development of Catholic Church Teaching on Muslims and the Religion of Islam from 1883 to 1965," *ARAM* 20 (2008): 299; Anthony O'Mahony, "Catholic Theological Perspectives on Islam at the Second Vatican Council," *New Blackfriars* 88 (2007): 387; Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2000), 155.

self made recent contribution to the conversation.² After briefly summarizing that contribution, in what follows I make the case for Massignon's work as a resource for Christian-Muslim understanding going forward, with some attention to the importance of his eventual membership and ordination in the Arabic-praying Melkite Church.

Massignon's Influence on Vatican II

Clearly whatever influence Massignon exerted on Vatican II was indirect. The council opened on 11 October 1962, and Massignon died on 31 October 1962. He was neither invited to the council as an expert, nor was he consulted during the preparatory phase. Given the date of Massignon's death, and given the fact that a discussion of Islam emerged relatively late in the council, scholars typically cite two lines of evidence in support of Massignon's influence. First, the language of the statements in *Lumen gentium* and *Nostra aetate* that refers to Islam closely echoes, intentionally or not, Massignon's own position, and because his position was unique in the history of Catholic approaches toward Islam, scholars conclude that the council adopted implicitly certain of Massignon's ideas. In other words, the similarity is too strong to be merely coincidental. Second, the people at the council who were mainly responsible for introducing and then drafting the statements on Islam were by and large friends and students of Massignon. Scholars therefore trace a genealogy from the documents themselves through his friends and students to Massignon himself, assuming that his friends and disciples would be convinced of and would communicate his vision of Islam.

The relevant texts are as follows. *Lumen gentium* 2:16 (1964) states: "But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place among these there are the Moslems, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God who on the last day will judge mankind." *Nostra Aetate* 3 (1965) states:

²"Louis Massignon's Influence on the Teaching of Vatican II on Muslims and Islam," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23 (2012): 329–345.

Upon the Moslems, too, the Church looks with esteem. They adore [the] one God, living and enduring, merciful and all-powerful, Maker of heaven and earth and Speaker to men. They strive to submit wholeheartedly even to His inscrutable decrees, just as did Abraham, with whom the Islamic faith is pleased to associate itself. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin mother; at times they call on her, too, with devotion. In addition they await the day of judgment when God will give each man his due after raising him up. Consequently, they prize the moral life, and give worship to God especially through prayer, almsgiving, and fasting.

Consider a few correspondences to Massignon's positions. The affirmation of common worship between Christians and Muslims of the one, and most importantly, the *same* God, while not wholly original with Vatican II, nonetheless had never been proclaimed in so authoritative a manner and context. So too the Church's esteem for Muslims, including their practice of virtue and prayer, devotion to Jesus and Mary, and ties to Abraham represented a dramatic shift from public Christian attitudes toward Islam in preceding centuries. Massignon, however, had argued for decades that the God of the Qur'an was in fact the God of Abraham, and he never ceased extolling the high moral character and witness of practicing Muslims.³ One is hard pressed to produce another name associated with the positive attitude adopted by the Church.⁴ Thus Massignon influenced various understandings of Islam held by people who were then largely responsible for shaping the Church's teachings on Muslims at the council. How exactly that happened is less clear. To say so would require close scrutiny of the unpublished journals and letters of Massignon's many interlocutors.

³ Ibid., 331–334.

⁴ Massignon's friend colleague, Miguel Asín Palacios (1871–1944), is certainly one such name, but the existing literature does not link his work to the relevant statements at Vatican II.