

## Responding to Islam as Priests, Mystics, and Trail Blazers: Louis Massignon, Kenneth Cragg, and Rowan Williams

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In this paper, I intend to bring Louis Massignon's legacy into conversation with that of the Anglican Islamicist, Bishop Kenneth Cragg and in turn suggest some confluences with the response to Islam of Archbishop Rowan Williams. Biographically, Massignon (1883–1962), Cragg (1913–2012), and Williams (1950–) would seem to have very little in common. Massignon's upbringing within a family and amongst friends at the heart of Parisian artistic and literary life contrasts with Cragg's Blackpool Grammar education and Anglican evangelical roots.<sup>1</sup> Williams provides a much more contemporary contribution and grows out of the liberal catholic tradition of the disestablished Church in Wales and theological academia in Cambridge and Oxford.

The ecclesial positioning of Massignon, Cragg, and Williams, on the surface, points to few similarities. Massignon's return to the Catholic faith in 1908 was, for him, a direct result of his encounter with Islam and led to what has

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<sup>1</sup> For biographical or autobiographical studies of Massignon, Cragg, and Williams, see, respectively, Mary Louise Gude, *Louis Massignon – The Crucible of Compassion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996); Kenneth Cragg, *Faith and Life Negotiate: A Christian Story-Study* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 1994); Rupert Shortt, *Rowan's Rule: The Biography of the Archbishop* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2008).

been termed “a fervent and eccentric Catholicism.”<sup>2</sup> There is, however, a parallel here with Cragg’s missionary scholarship on Islam. This scholarship has been a decisive element in developing a spirituality which he describes as having been “schooled in the east.”<sup>3</sup> Moving beyond the narrow confines of his early evangelicalism, Cragg resists any categorisation. He admits to being indebted to the notable endeavours of the *Lux Mundi* school<sup>4</sup> of nineteenth century Anglican apologists. This school argued for a serious historical-critical engagement of scripture with the world under the guiding theological principle of incarnation.<sup>5</sup>

For this comparative study of Massignon, Cragg, and Williams, I will suggest two themes that mark their respective responses to Islam: priesthood and mysticism. I will then conclude by suggesting how they each act as trail blazers, in the language of David Burrell,<sup>6</sup> for the Christian-Muslim encounter that we see emerging today.

Despite the biographical gulf between Cragg and Massignon, there is a clear sense that they both wrestle from within their respective Christian traditions in idiosyncratic ways that defy easy labels. Cragg’s seminal work *The Call of the*

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<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Clark, “Translator’s Introduction” to Louis Massignon. *Essays on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), xxi–xxxii.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Cragg. *The Order of the Wounded Hands: Schooled in the East* (London: Melisende, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Charles Gore, ed. *Lux Mundi: A Series of Studies in the Religion of the Incarnation*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: John Murray, 1909).

<sup>5</sup> See Nicholas J. Wood. *Faiths and Faithfulness: Pluralism, Dialogue and Mission in the Work of Kenneth Cragg and Lesslie Newbigin* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009) and Bård Maeland. *Rewarding Encounters: Islam and the Comparative Theologies of Kenneth Cragg and Wilfred Cantwell Smith* (London: Melisende, 2003) for two comparative studies of Kenneth Cragg’s theology of interfaith relations. Christopher Lamb’s *The Call to Retrieval: Kenneth Cragg’s Christian Vocation to Islam* (London: Grey Seal, 1997) remains the most significant theological assessment of Cragg’s theological development. Pages 12–14 highlight how Cragg drew from the *Lux Mundi* tradition of high Anglicanism’s *kenosis* theology.

<sup>6</sup> David Burrell. “Mind and Heart at the Service of Muslim-Christian Understanding: Louis Massignon as Trail Blazer,” *The Muslim World* 88 (1998): 268–278.

*Minaret*<sup>7</sup> was first published in 1956 and thus draws him into natural comparison with Massignon's influence on the defining documents of Vatican II for Christian-Muslim relations into the 1960's.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, Cragg has been called "the Louis Massignon of Anglicanism"<sup>9</sup> and "the Massignon of the Anglo-Saxon world."<sup>10</sup>

Williams' contribution to Christian-Muslim relations, especially as archbishop of Canterbury from 2002–2012, is less obvious. There is a certain irony that the sharia law speech of 2008 may well be the most remembered speech of Williams in the popular imagination for all the controversy it engendered.<sup>11</sup> The subject of Islam, however, is far from being an isolated excursion in his theological-intellectual offerings while archbishop of Canterbury. As Benjamin Myers notes, "if all his recent lectures and essays on Islam were collected, they would form a sizable book."<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Williams' tenure as chair of the annual bi-lateral Christian-Muslim scholars dialogue programme "Building Bridges" has generated a significant corpus of published, theological exchanges between Christians and Muslims.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956). See Hugh Goddard, "The Significance of *The Call of the Minaret* for Christian Thinking about Islam" in *A Faithful Presence: Essays for Kenneth Cragg*, ed. David Thomas (London: Melisende, 2003), 78–94.

<sup>8</sup> See Christian S. Krokus, "Louis Massignon's Influence on the Teaching of Vatican II on Muslims and Islam," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23 (2012): 329–345.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Brown, "Kenneth Cragg on Shi'a Islam and Iran: An Anglican Theological Response to Political Islam," *ARAM* 20 (2008): 375–391; at 378.

<sup>10</sup> E. Pisani, "Bulletin d'islamologie (IV)," *Revue Thomiste* 117 (2009): 467–496; at 492.

<sup>11</sup> Rowan Williams, "Civil and Religious Law in England: A Religious Perspective," *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* 10 (2008): 262–282. Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: T & T Clark, 2012): "His remarks on Islamic sharia law were greeted with cries of alarm and incredulity: tabloid papers ran hysterical headlines about 'a victory for terrorists' or 'a victory for al Qaeda'": 63.

<sup>12</sup> Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 64. See also Rowan Williams, *Addresses on Christianity to Islamic Audiences* (London: Church House, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> To date, there are eight published collections of essays from Christian and Muslim scholars on various themes such as revelation, scripture, and prophe-