

The Life and Thought of Louis Massignon (1883–1962): Comparative Political and Theological Perspectives

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“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.” So stated Albert Hourani, former professor of Middle Eastern history at the University of Oxford, who had himself converted to Catholicism under the influence of Massignon.¹ Louis Massignon (1883–1962) was a key figure in modern French Catholicism, a convert, a scholar of Islam, an academic chair-holder at the Collège de France, veteran of the First World War, a diplomat, a Catholic priest in the Melkite Church, and later in his life a public intellectual with a strong sense of the *politique et mystique*.²

Massignon's life, according to Abbé Harpigny, might be divided into three episodes: “*le cycle hallagien*,” which ended

¹ Albert H. Hourani: *Islam in European Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 43–49. A. Hourani, “Obituary: Prof. Louis Massignon,” *The Times* (21 Nov 1962). What influence Massignon had on Hourani (d.1993) is difficult to say. See Derek Hopwood, “Albert Hourani: Islam, Christianity and Orientalism,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 30 (2003): 127–36.

² A. O'Mahony, “Louis Massignon: a Catholic Encounter with Islam and the Middle East,” in *God's Mirror: Renewal and Engagement in French Catholic Intellectual Culture in the Mid-Twentieth Century*, ed. Katherine Davies & Toby Garfitt (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 230–251.

with the submission of his doctoral thesis, *La Passion d'al-Hosayn-ibn Mansour al-Hallâj, martyre mystique de l'Islam* in 1922; “*le cycle abrahamique*,” which lasted until his ordination as a priest in the Greek Catholic Melkite church in Cairo in 1950; and “*un cycle gandhien*,” a period of political activism which ended with his death in 1962.³ Massignon had a formative influence upon many leading Catholic theologians and intellectuals, including: Jules Monchanin, Jacques Maritain, Louis Gardet, Henri de Lubac, and Jean Danielou. He also introduced into this milieu Muslim converts to Catholicism: Ali Mehmet Mulla Zade-Fr. Paul Mulla & Jean-Muhammad Abdel-Jalil,⁴ who along with Jean-Pierre de Menasse, created a distinctive element of French Catholic intellectual life c. 1930–1950. The highpoint of Massignon’s influence, and that of French Catholic thought was at Vatican II,⁵ especially upon Pope Paul VI (1963–1978) as it related the Catholic Church’s renewed ecclesial self-understanding to wider humanity which included believers of other religions.⁶

³ Guy Harpigny, *Islam et Christianisme selon Louis Massignon* (Louvain: Université Catholique de Louvain, 1981).

⁴ Mulla-Zadé et Abd-el-Jalil. *Deux frères en conversion. Du Coran à Jésus. Correspondance 1927–1957*, éd. Maurice Borrmans (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2009); Frédéric Gugelot, “Les convertis issus de l’Islam” in *La conversion des intellectuels au catholicisme en France (1885–1935)* (Paris: CNRS Éditions), 211–224. See also Vincenzo Poggi, “Paul Ali Mehmet Mulla Zade Islamologo di tre papi,” *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 292 (2012): 10–248; and Hugues Didier, “Louis Massignon and Charles de Foucauld,” *Aram* 20 (2008): 337–353.

⁵ N. Robinson: “Massignon, Vatican II and Islam as an Abrahamic Religion,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 2 (1991): 181–203; A. O’Mahony, “Catholic Theological Perspectives on Islam at the Second Vatican Council,” *New Blackfriars* 88 (2007): 385–398; A. 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 1833 to 1965,” *Aram* 20 (2008): 299–316; and Christian Krokus, elsewhere in this volume of *Logos*.

⁶ Andrew Unsworth, “The Vatican, Islam and Muslim-Christian Relations” in A. O’Mahony and Emma Loosley, ed., *Christian Responses to Islam: Muslim-Christian Relations in the Modern World* (Manchester University Press, 2008), 54–65; Christian Troll, “Catholicism and Islam,” in Gavin D’Costa, ed., *The Catholic Church and World Religions* (London: T&T Clark, 2011) 71–105. See also Martin Ganeri, O.P., “Catholic Magisterium

Massignon's mystical Catholicism belonged to the core and essence of his being, and it informed his entire understanding of Islam. It was "commitment" to the other outside his own Christian faith which made Massignon such a powerful witness. The Dominican scholar Jean-Pierre de Menasce argued that

if the attitude of Christians towards Muslims and Islam (and consequentially towards 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 to a great extent owed to Louis Massignon.⁷

Massignon understood that his views were controversial to many in the Church. Nevertheless, loyal to the Catholic faith, he always sought clarification from theologians and church authorities. This standpoint makes his contribution to Christian thought on Islam so integral and profound. He held it was only by remaining close to the authority of the church and the truth of Christianity that such an encounter with Islam could be sustained.⁸

On the 28 January 1950, Kemal Medawar, auxiliary of the Greek Catholic Patriarch Maximos IV, ordained Louis Massignon Priest in Cairo. This was the summit of his spiritual journey his "courbe de vie" to which he often referred.⁹ Massi-

and World Religions," in: *Catholics and Shi'a Dialogue: Ethics in Today's Society* (London: Melisende, 2008) 26–43.

⁷ J-P. de Menasce, "Reconnaissance à Louis Massignon," *Mémorial Louis Massignon* (Cairo: Dar-es-Salam, 1963), 81.

⁸ Cf. Massignon, *Opera Minora*, ed. Abbé Y. Moubarac (Beirut: Dar al-Maaref, 1963), III:789.

⁹ Massignon, who was very interested in biography, liked to plot on the graph of what he called *Courbe de vie* or "the curve of life" of the life stories which attracted his attention. Cf. S.H. Griffith, "Thomas Merton, Louis Massignon and the Challenge of Islam," *The Merton Annual: Studies in Thomas Merton, Religion, Culture, Literature and Social Concerns* 3 (1990):151–72; Agnes Wilkins OSB: "Louis Massignon, Thomas Merton and Mary Kahil," *Aram* 20 (2008): 355–373.