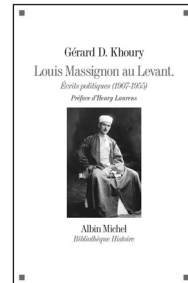


Louis Massignon au Levant: Écrits politiques (1907-1955)

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Islamic scholar Louis Massignon (1883-1962) worked to build cultural, philosophical, and religious connections between western and Arabic cultures. Born to an atheist artist father and a strongly Roman Catholic mother, he came to a renewed Catholic faith through his witnessing the faith of the Muslims of Baghdad, where he lived in 1907. An official in the French colonial administration, a university professor, a well-known writer, and a defender of the Arabic language, Massignon combined a reverence for Islam and Arabic civilization with a sense of French duty towards the colonies.

These previously-unpublished letters and government reports, compiled by Lebanese-French writer Gérard Khoury from French archives, testify to the discrepancy between this love for Arabic culture and the belief in France's guiding hand. Massignon can easily be criticized for his oft-repeated belief that the Arabs needed France. Yet his frequent references to French technological superiority never led him to express French cultural, intellectual, or religious superiority. His writings express his consistent objective of an Arab-French collaboration at the cultural and philosophical levels, in which Arabs would contribute as much to his

country as France would to them. His deep love of the Arabic language and civilization makes accusations of racism or paternalism untenable.

What makes these writings interesting for traditionalists is Massignon's strong dislike of Western materialism, from which he endeavored to shield Arabic civilization. His disdain for the British and the British Council, against whom he felt France was fighting a losing battle for influence in Syria, Egypt, and Iraq, stems from this. He identified a spiritual quality to French culture. Unfortunately, he rarely supports that idea in his missives aside from, for example, a passing reference to Joan of Arc in which he characterizes the French as Arab liberators.

He consistently characterizes the West as a mixed blessing for Arabs, sometimes deeming it the best of a bad lot. In a mission report written in 1951 he notes: "I keep on thinking that the only means of maintaining the eastern Arab countries on our side in the battle with the USSR is to affirm the primacy of culture, which means to renounce all materialism (the more benign it is, the more odious)" (430). Such words show how his spiritual beliefs and experiences informed his political position and work. This fusion overlaps in many ways with Islam. He expresses admiration for the unity of the political and the religious in Islam, referring to Jesus' warning that a house divided against itself cannot stand. He criticizes the practice of compartmentalizing life – literature, worldly affairs, religious issues. As a devout Catholic (ordained in 1950 to the priesthood in the Greek Uniate Church, which allowed married priests), he identified the Blessed Sacrament as the answer to social issues.

Yet in such musings, Massignon's vagueness invites multiple interpretations or even accusations of neither understanding nor respecting the core of Islam. He fails to connect his musings on spirituality and philosophy with Islamic law or basic Islamic practice, such as daily prayer or alms-giving. Despite his avowed reliance on faith, he fails to connect Islamic faith to this daily practice. Expressing such overly abstract, metaphysical, and sweeping thoughts leaves Massignon open to accusations of turning Islam into whatever he wants it to be.

To his credit, in his work as both a colonial official and a professor of Islam, Massignon wanted to "raise the debate," as he wrote in 1947 (331). He aimed "to defend alongside the Arabs the original Semitic spiritual and intellectual values against the soul-destroying technocratic materialism of the European states. Via colonialism, this (materialism) also leads to the

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