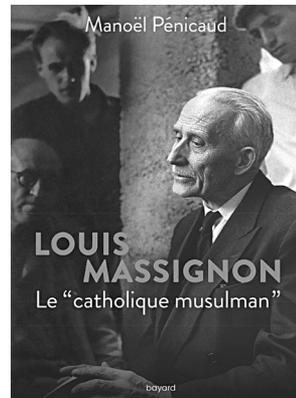


# Louis Massignon: Le “Catholique Musulman”

By Manoël Pénicaud, (2020) Bayard. 431 pages.

Reviewed and citations translated by Brian Welter



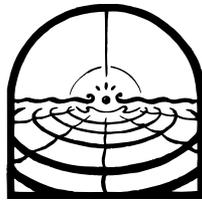
**A**n Islamic scholar and Catholic priest, Louis Massignon (1883-1962) lived during a time of tremendous social and political upheaval in France and its colonies. His scholarly pursuits, chiefly regarding Islamic spirituality, played a vital part in his very personal and religious quest for the truth. This quest took surprising twists and turns. The author, French anthropologist Manoël Pénicaud, specializes in ethnographic research on religious pilgrimage in the Abrahamic religions. He succeeds at showing his subject as a flexible yet authentic thinker who deeply impacted those around him, both Christians and Muslims, through his embrace of Islamic cultures. Despite the fact that historical events, particularly developments in the French empire, directly impacted the Islamic scholar, something immovable remained inside of Massignon after his conversion: The belief in the hospitality offered by all three Abrahamic religions.

*Louis Massignon: Le "Catholique Musulman"* portrays the spiritual and intellectual life of the great scholar. Divided thematically, it first focuses on the man's life and background. Massignon's early atheism reflected the anti-clericalism of the *belle epoch*. Yet this was also a time of the rediscovery of the Catholic Church by many French thinkers. This included the novelist Karl-Joris Huysmans, whose own spiritual and intellectual itineraries had a decided influence on Massignon, and Jacques Maritain, the famous Thomist. What made such thinkers so forceful was that their religious conversions impacted their writing. Massignon was on friendly terms with many such individuals.

Pénicaud's subjective and very personal depiction of Massignon reflects ethnography's concern with the perspective of the subject under study, including the relevant culture. This leads to close coverage of Massignon's spiritual life and how it was influenced. On his first trip to the Arab world, he was impacted by the deep Islamic piety he witnessed. Perhaps this experience as a guest in these countries led to his esteem for hospitality. Pénicaud's strong research provides first-hand accounts. This includes Massignon's reflection years later on his original aims: "From the beginning, we were guided by the need to 'extrapolate' the use of the research methods that we had been shown for Greco-Roman antiquity and for the history of Europe, at the level of the horizon of the universe. We found it absurd that the immense human regions, Asia, Africa, pre-columbian America and Oceania, Chinese, Indian and Islamic civilizations, had been neglected. From this was born our vocation to be Orientalists!" (44). Such thoughts reveal Massignon's tremendous ambitions, which were imbued with idealism and the sense of hospitality for other individuals and cultures. He seemed to carry the weight of the French empire and of interreligious and inter-civilizational relationships on his shoulders. Perhaps Pénicaud could have written more on whether this hospitality and love for Muslims undermines Edward Said's orientalism thesis.

Massignon's love for Islam came from his personal connections, which even extended to the deceased. This is most true regarding Hallaj, a famous Sufi who had been executed as a heretic in 922. Hallaj would be closer to Massignon than almost anyone, living or dead, throughout the scholar's life, as a spiritual teacher and companion. More generally, Massignon found something in the Muslim Arab world that his own

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