

# THE IMPACT OF LOUIS MASSIGNON (1883-1962) ON ISLAMIC STUDIES

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When Monsieur Jacques Keryell, the Editor of the volume *Louis Massignon et ses contemporains*, was collecting contributions about the relationships Massignon had with other people during his lifetime, he did not succeed in finding any university professor to write about Massignon's contacts with his colleagues<sup>1</sup>. Apparently these relationships were not easy. And there is another point to be made. Since his death in 1962 some twenty volumes and innumerable articles have appeared about Louis Massignon and his spirituality, including the significance of his presentation of al-Ḥal-lāğ, Islamic mysticism and Islam in general. And rightly so! Much less, however, has been written evaluating his work according to critical scholarly criteria and pointing out the openings it has given to further research<sup>2</sup>. And in so far as this has occurred, it has been in French Catholic circles, mainly among his pupils<sup>3</sup>.

Since the organizers of this Congress wanted to pay special attention to major changes in Asian and North African Studies during the 20th century, I thought it a good idea to focus on Louis Massignon and the impact of his scholarly work on Islamic studies. This presentation only has a preliminary character. After all, the impact of a scholar's work cannot be measured simply by the ways in which he or she is discussed by others, orally or in writing, or by the counting of quotations. And the other way round, if the impact of a scholar like Massignon who left some excellent work is apparently small outside the circle of his or her admirers, this fact itself, for better or for worse, is intriguing and demands an explanation.

I understand here by "Islamic studies" the broad field of research on Islam as a religion, a civilization and a social system in history and at the present time. It also comprises the study of Islamic features of communities that identify themselves as "Muslim" and of societies that practice Islam, again in history as well as at the present time. Consequently, Islamic studies treat both normative Islam and the ways in which Islam has been practised in different geographical, historical and social contexts. Although the study of religious texts is mandatory, this field is certainly not

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<sup>1</sup> "...aucun universitaire n'accepta de parler des relations de Massignon avec ses collègues du Collège de France ou des universités françaises ou étrangères". (Keryell 1997: 10).

<sup>2</sup> See for instance *Lettres Françaises*, 14-21 Nov. 1962 (special issue on Louis Massignon), in particular the contributions by Claude Cahen and Maxime Rodinson. Compare the defence of Louis Massignon against his critics by Nasr 1987: 50-61. Compare Waardenburg 1968-69: 136-158.

<sup>3</sup> Harpigny 1981. Rocalve 1993. See in particular the Chapter "Le rayonnement du savant" (pp. 123-136). The authors themselves were no pupils of Massignon.

restricted to the study of texts. Both the humanities and the social sciences are involved in it.

In the first part I shall give some bio-bibliographical data on Massignon. In the second part I shall pay special attention to the way in which he studied Islam as a religion. In order to explain the approach which he applied in his work we have to explore its deeper intentions and look for his own particular vision of Islam and its adherents. In the third part I shall deal with the subject proper of the impact of Massignon's work on Islamic studies in the broad sense indicated. After having indicated some striking orientations of this scholar's mind I shall summarise my findings, arriving at a conclusion about what may be called the Massignonian approach in Islamic studies.

### 1. Some bio-bibliographical data<sup>4</sup>

Louis Massignon was born in Nogent-sur-Marne, not far from Paris, in 1883. His father had studied medicine and was an artist actively involved in Parisian cultural life at the time. Already during his schooldays Louis developed a strong interest in what may be called "the Orient", where France was implanting itself at the time, and he made trips to Algiers in 1901 and Morocco in 1904. His studies at the Sorbonne concentrated on history, archaeology and geography; only after his return from Morocco in 1904 did he start Arabic. He had the good fortune to be able to be attached to the French Archaeological Institute in Cairo for a whole year (1906-7). At this age, 23, his passion for experience, his thirst to discover other ways of life and his search to know and understand all that was represented by Islam were further awakened and began to be satisfied. The following year (1907-8) he spent some seven months in Iraq, still under Ottoman rule, concentrating on historical and archaeological researches while becoming a friend of the Ālūsī family. In Iraq he underwent certain experiences which made him — as he used to put it — discover or rediscover God<sup>5</sup>. In the wake of them he returned to the Roman Catholic Church and put himself under a rigorous religious, even ascetic discipline for the rest of his life, considering himself a convert. In 1950 he was ordained priest in the Greek Catholic or Melkite Church in Cairo.

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<sup>4</sup> The most complete bibliography of works by Massignon appeared in Moubarac 1972: 7-89. To this should be added the second, revised edition of Massignon, *Passion* and its English translation, as well as reprints of some books and articles. A succinct bibliography is given in Waardenburg 1970: 351-358. This book also contains a study of the work of Massignon. A short bibliography can be found in Massignon 1987: 285-289. For biographical data, see Destremau & Moncelon 1994. Compare Sani 1985. Rocalve 1993: 149-193 - contains a valuable *Table de concordances*, chronologically arranged, of the main biographical data.

<sup>5</sup> Massignon 1988: 127-199. Compare Destremau & Moncelon 1994: 42-81 - Ch. 3 "Vers un au-delà indestructible".

From 1908 on Massignon concentrated on the study of mystical texts from the first centuries of Islam, with a particular predilection for the Ṣūfī al-Ḥallāğ who, accused of heresy, had been executed in Baghdad in 922. This involved him in a study in depth of al-Ḥallāğ's life and doctrines, the development of Islamic religious thought in general and Ṣūfī thought and practice in particular, and the historical context in which al-Ḥallāğ lived.

In 1913-14 he was invited to present lectures in Cairo in Arabic on the history of Islamic thought. All of this resulted in two substantial dissertations on al-Ḥallāğ (Massignon, *Passion* /1922/) and on early Islamic mystical vocabulary (Massignon, *Essai*) which he defended successfully at the University of Paris in 1922, at the age of 39. Subsequently he published some mystical texts, a few translations, and a great number of articles on numerous subjects, in particular pertaining to medieval Islam and its spirituality. Certain themes fascinated him in particular, such as al-Ḥallāğ, Salmān Pāk, Fāṭima as well as certain significant encounters between Muslims and Christians, such as the Mubāhala, the linkage (also with the Jews) through Abraham, and archaeological findings at Ephesus. But he was interested in nearly all aspects of Islam and had a thorough knowledge of medieval texts. Throughout his life he worked on a second, enlarged edition of his study on al-Ḥallāğ.

At the same time, further to his experiences in Egypt and Iraq, our scholar had a continuous interest in what was happening in the contemporary Arab world and the Muslim world at large. He collaborated in the promising *Revue du Monde Musulman*, founded in 1907, which was supported by the French state. At the end of the first World War he was attached to Picot's delegation negotiating with the British on the future Arab Mandate states.

As to his scholarly career, in 1919 he became Alfred Le Châtelier's *suppléant* at the *Collège de France* in Paris and after his retirement Massignon was elected to succeed him as Professor of Sociology of Islam, in 1925, at the age of 42. A few years later he was also appointed as *Directeur d'études* on Islam at the Section of *Sciences Religieuses* at the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* in Paris. He was the founding director of the new *Revue des Etudes Islamiques* with its *Abstracta Islamica* in 1927 and he was involved in the new *Institut d'Etudes Islamiques* of the University of Paris, set up in 1929. After the war, in 1945, this Institute was reorganized with a new team of scholars, including Régis Blachère, E. Lévi-Provençal, and Robert Brunschvig but without Massignon who became later director of the new *Institut d'Etudes Iraniennes*.

He had started already with the publication of an *Annuaire du Monde Musulman*, a kind of handbook on the Muslim world as a whole which offered extensive information about the contemporary situation of Muslim countries and colonies. Four editions of it appeared, the last in 1954. After World War II Louis Massignon involved himself in French politics as few orientalist before him had done, partly in the service of his government and partly in opposition to it, for humanitarian causes. He was deeply concerned with French colonial and post-colonial policies in particular

in the Arab world, with the Palestine problem and the treatment of Palestinians by the new State of Israel, and with what was happening during the Algerian war. During the fifties, on the one hand, he excelled as a political protest figure in public life. On the other hand he followed his own religious vocation with the *Badaliyya* and his practically secret priesthood after 1950.

Notwithstanding the many tensions he underwent, and the corresponding obligations, he continued his research work on al-Ḥallāğ. At his death in 1962 he left the manuscript for the second edition of al-Ḥallāğ which, thanks to the immense efforts of family, friends and colleagues, was published in four volumes first in French in 1975 (Massignon, *Passion* /1975/) and then in an English translation by Herbert Mason, in 1982. With this legacy the question of the impact of Louis Massignon's work on Islamic studies obtains a new relevance.

## 2. Massignon's researches on Islamic religion

Before Massignon started to work on Islamic mysticism, several scholars had already carried out studies in this field, putting forward different hypotheses about the origin and development of Ṣūfism in Islam. What was new in his case was the technique which he applied in his study of these texts. By starting out from the specific vocabularies used by the authors he obtained lists of the technical terms of these spiritual writings which he had dissected in order to consider their linguistic elements. By analyzing carefully the roots and the derivations of the terms, by identifying them in their specific contexts, and by comparing their use by different authors he put the texts to a linguistic test before inquiring about their broader spiritual meaning. In this way he discovered not only what we would call nowadays the meaning patterns of these terms but also that a number of them went back to Qur'ānic vocabulary. This proved that early mystical thought at least had its source in meditation on the Qur'ān. Only after the precise meaning of the technical terms had been established, could the problem of the meaning of the texts themselves be tackled.

According to Massignon, these religious texts, beyond their literal and possibly metaphorical meaning, had a more hidden spiritual meaning that he called *anagogique*, arising from the inspiration which had produced them. The search for this hidden spiritual ("anagogical") meaning implied that the scholar had to make a kind of mental journey to participate in the "movement" of the text. Just as one can understand literary and especially poetic texts by re-experiencing them and becoming culturally or humanly "enriched" by them, a researcher needs to re-experience mystical texts and become religiously "enriched" by them so as to understand them.

What Massignon had in mind here was a kind of inner application by the researcher himself of the movement of inspiration, the meaning, in short the specific message of the text. His own efforts in this respect were not only encouraged by an intellectual refinement of his linguistic perception and an extraordinary sensitivity to

religious meanings. They were motivated in the last analysis by the conviction that Divine grace was at the origin of these inspired texts. Massignon's research in the end came to mean the search for this grace in various texts of a spiritual nature. It clearly transcended the empirical meaning of religious texts, in other words, the meaning which is ascertainable by scholarly methods. In this way the text laid a claim on the scholar, as it were, and its contents became more than a simple object of research. The text had to be deciphered for the spiritual truth which it conveyed.

Among these mystical texts, certain utterances of al-Hallāğ testifying to passion and self-sacrifice, adoration and even mystical union affected our scholar more deeply than any others. Added to this was the fact that al-Hallāğ had to pay for his mystical utterances with his life, becoming a *martyr mystique* who fascinated our scholar from the time when he "discovered" him in 1907. This led him to carry out a passionate yet scholarly investigation of the historical personality of al-Hallāğ, the events of his life, the context in which he lived, the reasons why he was imprisoned and later condemned to death, and his survival among his followers, adherents and admirers. Any information about al-Hallāğ, any interpretation of him and of relevant events at the time, any legal or theological text that could throw light on his spiritual insights, his trial and condemnation were carefully collected as pieces of a puzzle of supra-human dimensions. In this investigation Massignon proved himself to be a careful and critical, even diffident historian. But beyond the facts, he reached out, again, to find something of the hidden spiritual, "anagogical" meaning of his life and death. In this case it was not only texts but a person the scholar wanted to understand, to re-experience, to see as a medium of Divine grace. If in this Massignonian approach mystical texts were seen as revelation, the mystical martyr al-Hallāğ became a saint laying his own claims on the researcher, who studied him as a spiritual master rather than as a simple object.

These studies of Islamic mysticism and in particular of al-Hallāğ led Massignon to a particular religious vision of Islam, based on his special reading of Islamic texts, his own life experiences, especially in what may be called the crucial years 1906-8 in Egypt and Iraq, and his unique spiritual path afterwards. There is evidence enough to support the view that our scholar was Islamicized to a large extent, not only externally in his desire to live an Arab life but also internally, assimilating values, norms and truths derived from Islam and which he tended to absolutize. But was Massignon not a Christian? He certainly was, according to his own statements, but his nearness especially to Arab Muslims and Islam is testified to both by his highly personal vision of Arabic as a language and Islam as a religion and by his equally personal vocation to Muslims and Islam.

This expressed itself in many ways, for instance in his religious motivation towards "Islamic studies" and his consecration of his life to the cause of Muslims and Islam, in his foundation of the *Badaliyya*, in his passionate pleas to the Roman Catholic Church to recognize Islam, and in his equally passionate defence of any

Muslim and Arab dignity and values, especially in the turbulent times after World War II. Massignon was apparently a victim of the many tensions rife at the time, between the Muslim cause and his Church, between the Arab cause and his nation, between the current religious discourse and the inexorable forces of domination and exploitation. He lived these tensions dramatically in his own life and spoke about them continuously. His ordination to the priesthood may have given him some transcendent peace.

The historian will notice that the latter part of his life coincided with a period when the French empire was in rapid decline and struggling for survival, and when the overall influence of the Roman Catholic Church was on the wane. Any historical interpretation of Massignon's life, work and searches will have to take into account this critical context in which he lived: the waning of an imperial age and of a triumphalist church, which he assimilated intellectually according to a religious mode.

### 3. The impact of Massignon's work on Islamic studies

Massignon's own interests were too special and personally motivated to permit broad academic relationships with his colleagues in the French context. From a strictly positivistic point of view, as it prevailed through the first half of the century, they all had reason to be critical of his approach and his scholarship in general. Moreover, certain character traits of our scholar, among them a somewhat monological way of conveying his thoughts, ideas and convictions and an extraordinary stubbornness, did not help to bridge the differences, to say the least; in fact, they could create obvious misunderstandings. Here too, the Parisian context, with its many rivalries and hierarchies of intellectual and other forms of domination need to be taken into account. Looking back, one can only with difficulty imagine Massignon being appointed, say, at a German university or at an Oxford or Cambridge college, or even at the Sorbonne with its classical traditions, not to speak of an American university. His position at the Collège de France, however, left him the freedom he needed and made him more or less unassailable in his academic and not-so-academic ways of doing research and teaching.

Among his own masters, he specifically mentioned Ignaz Goldziher, whom he met at several occasions and who encouraged him to go on with his al-Ḥallāğ researches; Snouck Hurgronje equally supported this study. He hardly spoke, however, of his own French teachers, for instance of Arabic, though he made an exception for the brilliant Sylvain Lévi with whom he studied Sanskrit for some time.

Some scholarly contacts with foreign colleagues deserve mention. In Germany, for instance, Hans Heinrich Schaeder expressed admiration for his study of al-Ḥallāğ. In the early twenties he launched an inexplicably violent attack on the well-known scholar Asin Palacios on the subject of historical influences and spiritual originality.

In the thirties he worked in Paris together with Paul Kraus, a refugee scholar from Germany, on Ḥallāḡian and other medieval texts, before Kraus moved on to Egypt.

In this period the next generation of Arabists and Islamic scholars in France must have attended his lectures. They kept at a certain distance, however, and not without reason. According to hearsay, they may have been frightened by his soliloquies, his absolute statements and his digressive style of lecturing at the Collège de France. Some French names may be mentioned nonetheless. It was Massignon who gave Henry Corbin the incentive for his studies of Suhrawardī Maqtūl and Šīʿite spirituality, although here too, some misunderstandings seem to have arisen. Another important student of Massignon was Henri Laoust, who wrote his dissertation on Ibn Taymiyya and later became his successor at the Collège de France, where he distinguished himself by impeccable scholarship. Gaston Wiet was Massignon's colleague for Arabic at the Collège de France. Massignon maintained friendly relations with Maxime Rodinson, who started out as a Semiticist, and he strongly encouraged Vincent Monteil's linguistic and further interests and studies. After the war he firmly supported Jacques Berque in his researches in the field of the social history of Arab countries. Until the end of his life he remained a shining star in the French firmament of so many stars, planets and comets of the mind<sup>6</sup>.

Massignon's impact on Islamic studies may be located, however, not only through individuals but also through some specific groups.

First of all, it was among Roman Catholic Orientalists, some of them converts, that Massignon's impact is most clear; a whole generation was indebted to him. Most important perhaps was his bringing Louis Gardet and later Georges Anawati — both converts to Catholicism — to the study of Islamic thought and mysticism and to a concerted effort to bring Christian and Islamic thought and experience together. Both scholars were philosophically and theologically trained along Thomist and neo-Thomist lines and they could put Massignon's experiential studies and explorations in a typical Catholic framework of thought. An important pupil of his in the fifties was the classical scholar and philosopher Roger Arnaldez, who addressed himself to Arabic thought and prepared his dissertation on Ibn Ḥazm. Among Catholic intellectuals, Massignon enjoyed considerable prestige and his influence on certain Catholic students may have been important; in a world believing in secularism (*laïcité*), especially in academic life, Massignon must have appeared to them as a witness of the Faith. On the other hand, there seems to have been a mutual tension between Massignon and the Arabists of Algiers who, like G.-H. Bousquet, viewed Arabs and Islam very much with the eyes of colonials (*pieds noirs*). In general he distrusted those whom he considered to despise Muslims and to denigrate Islam.

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<sup>6</sup> A number of doctoral dissertations must have been defended in Paris with Massignon as a member of the jury; this could be further explored.

To what extent his scholarly influence extended into the Catholic religious Orders is difficult to assess. His relations with them seem to have been rather complex and much depended apparently on personal commitments. There was a certain alignment with the Dominicans and their scholastic learning, which he respected. Jean de Menasce was, and remained, a loyal friend, and as well as Georges Anawati, other scholars who were in contact with him were Serge de Beaucueil and Jacques Jomier. Of the Franciscans Giulio Basetti Sani must be called one of his immediate disciples, open to his learning and spiritual guidance; ‘Abdalḡalīl was very close to him<sup>7</sup>. His relations with the Jesuits seem to have been more aloof intellectually on both sides, although he had pupils there too, like Michel Allard and Paul Nwyia, his successor at the *Ecole Pratique*. His most difficult relations seem to have been with the White Fathers, a missionary order in Africa established by Lavigerie in the shadow of the French empire in 1868. In Massignon’s view they were too eager to obtain conversions which, as he saw it, could only be God’s work. Yet he respected Demeerseman’s work at the *Institut de Belles Lettres Arabes* in Tunis and somewhat later Robert Caspar worked both in his textual studies and in his contacts with Muslim intellectuals along enlightened Massignonian lines. Massignon detested a certain pettiness and lack of purpose in Orders to which the Muslim world had been assigned. Though the hardliners did not like his mysticism, for many of those who had made their vows and lived in Muslim society, Massignon was the undisputed master in Islamic studies and the guide for Christian-Muslim dialogue. Some of them had a considerable influence on the positive appreciation of Islam pronounced by the Second Vatican Council, in particular in the text of *Nostra Aetate*.

A second group on which Massignon’s Islamic studies have had an important impact is that of Muslim intellectuals, whose scholarly work he very much encouraged, in particular when they studied or pursued research in Paris. Through the example and the zeal of our scholar, a number of them discovered unexpected riches in their cultural heritage and a few of them started to do research themselves, like Ib-rāhīm Madkūr on the history of philosophy and science in Islam or ‘Uthmān Yaḥyā on Islamic mysticism, in particular that of Ibn al-‘Arabī. From 1934 on Massignon, together with some other European Orientalists, participated in the yearly sessions of the Egyptian Academy of the Arabic Language. For more than half a century he had numerous contacts in Egypt, where he encouraged scholars like Tāhā Ḥusayn, Maḥmūd al-Ḥudayrī and many others. The relations between Massignon and established Muslim authorities at the Azhar, for instance the successive *Ṣayḥs* of al-Azhar,

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<sup>7</sup> Muḥammad Ben ‘Abdalḡalīl, a member of an old family of Fès, converted to the Roman Catholic Church in 1928 and became a Franciscan. To what extent Massignon’s influence may have been instrumental in this conversion, as in some others is open to question. At the end of his life, which was not without difficulties, ‘Abdalḡalīl is said to have felt a growing nostalgia for the Islam of his youth. Compare Destremau & Moncelon 1994: 231-243.

need to be further explored<sup>8</sup>. How strong his impact could be on sensitive "Oriental" minds can be guessed when one reads the description 'Alī Šarī'atī of Iran gave of his "experience" of Massignon (Cuyppers 1997: 309-327).

A third group on which Massignon's learning had a certain impact was that of Arab Christians, especially Greek Catholics (Melkites) in Egypt who were also open to his efforts of a spiritual *rapprochement* to Islam. Especially after the Second World War Massignon regularly gave lectures at the Dār as-Salām cultural center in Cairo, patronized by the Melkites. They were attended by mixed audiences whose members advocated and in fact carried out a local Christian-Muslim dialogue initiated by Louis Massignon and Mary Kahil.

Paul Nwyia continued Massignon's researches on the vocabulary of mystical texts. In the 1950s two Maronite priests from Lebanon went to work and study in Paris in close contact with Massignon. The first, Michel Hayek, kept a certain distance towards what transcended lines of theological separation between Christianity and Islam. The second, Youakim Moubarac, must be called one of Louis Massignon's major spiritual heirs. The same may also be said of Louis Gardet. However, if Gardet had a disciplined French mind, Moubarac most of all had a soul, and an "Oriental" one. He was the secretary of the *Revue des Etudes Islamiques*, edited the *Opera Minora*, compiled a definitive Bibliography of Massignon's writings, brought together a Massignon *Archiv*, and continued the *Badaliyya*. Deeply affected by Massignon's death in 1962, Moubarac creatively continued his study of the history of Christian theological thought on Islam, and of Christian-Muslim relations on a spiritual level as preconized by Massignon, whose spiritual heritage he consciously defended as he defended the cause of the Christian Arabs and that of the Palestinians. Until the end he was tragically involved in the tensions of the Near East, somehow living out what Massignon had experienced inwardly.

A number of pupils, friends and colleagues contributed to collective publications which appeared after Massignon's death<sup>9</sup>.

#### 4. A scholar's mind

From any ordinary scholarly point of view it is amazing to see how unconditionally our scholar believed in the aspects he studied of another religion and culture and how passionately he took sides in debates and conflicts which were not his own. He did not do this naively; more than most others he was aware of what was at stake and used his sharp intelligence, so that he could always argue that he had reason on

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<sup>8</sup> The same holds true for his contacts with the Salafiyya and other Reformist groups, certain Šūfi orders and – who knows – perhaps members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

<sup>9</sup> Four of these publications deserve to be mentioned here: Keryell 1997, Massignon 1987 & 1996, Six 1970.

his side. He somehow had an orientation which allowed him to make critical distinctions. When he believed something or when he defended a cause, he did so with dedication and passion, often losing the proportions of common sense. In a word, Louis Massignon was a man of passion and for him there was religion everywhere. Consequently, the scholarly world was on its guard. Massignon not only transcended textual, historical and social meanings; he perceived reality in a normative light and made absolutist affirmations about it. In the end, organized *Islamwissenschaft* became subordinated here to the spiritual whims of one researcher's mind.

This must have made Massignon an extraordinary phenomenon for most colleagues. On the one hand, everyone had to recognize his amazing erudition, intelligence and creative force. On the other hand, he did not share the current assumptions about academic style and scholarship. It was almost impossible to stop him when he was speaking, his answers to questions were not always clear and in his lectures he went off into digressions which had hardly anything to do with the subject. His French style of writing was anything but lucid and distinct; it was full of ambiguities, and often even the most benevolent reader could not understand exactly what Massignon meant, if he meant something palpable.

He had respect for texts and facts, but in his hermeneutics he maintained no clear view about their nature or their epistemological status. He respected history but had no rational view of its immanent course. He had respect for social reality, but no vision of the infrastructural factors which determine communal life. He had the greatest respect for human experience but did not see it as a self-contained reality. Massignon saw transcendent incursions, signs of transcendence everywhere; for him religion itself was by definition something continuously moved by transcendence. The search for rational scholarly truth in the chaos of empirical reality was for him only the first step in a broader search for other kinds of connections than the empirically verifiable.

Under these circumstances it is not surprising that his work has been the object of so few scholarly corrections, debates or even attacks in general or in detail. If his detailed researches had a scholarly character, his interpretative framework certainly had not. Consequently, his conclusions — which tended to be expressed in rather absolutist terms — simply lay outside ordinary scholarly discourse, that is to say outside scholarship. Scholarly discussion was no longer possible here. This, it seems to me, was the ultimate reason for his relative isolation in the scholarly world; compared to this, his philo-Arab and philo-Islamic passions or his fervent Catholicism, or even his passionate character, were only secondary factors.

Massignon had very special views of religion both in Muslim and in Christian life and society. Historically, these views dated from before World War I and implanted themselves solidly after his experiences of 1908. He elaborated them in a highly personal way, and on closer consideration they contain the key to his equally highly

personal view of the relationship between the Christian and Muslim faiths, whatever the Church's doctrine on this matter. Psychologically, his world was mainly a man's world, though women could play an important role on a religious level. And he was extremely open to the sufferings of others. As an independent mind and soul, Louis Massignon made himself available to his Muslim neighbours and brethren with a Christian compassion, substitution and finally sacrifice for the sake of the Other.

In the French context this was a singular position. It was clear to any observer that religion held this man in its grip, a kind of experiential religion difficult to assess in rational terms. In France such an intellectual position meant a kind of subversion of the secularist ideology of *laïcité*, certainly in academic quarters. Massignon's religious testimonies thus made him lose much intellectual credibility. And he lacked certain classical scholarly virtues such as simplicity, modesty, and above all discretion.

## 5. Conclusion

All of this leads to a peculiar situation for the student of *Religionswissenschaft* who works in the field of Islamic studies and is interested in this scholar's work. He cannot take Massignon's statements about Islam at face value; consequently he will take his image of Islam as a subject of research. But in order to understand this image, he has to inquire into Massignon's own religion. That is to say, instead of letting himself be inspired by our scholar's spirituality — as so many Massignonians have been — he has to study it in order to understand, and possibly to explain, certain curious biases in Massignon's interpretation of Islam. And of course, he has the results of his own study of Islamic materials to set against Massignon's statements..

The basic conclusion of all this is that we have to be extremely critical with regard to any unreflected impact of Massignon's work in Islamic studies and scholarship in general. It is not only the facts presented but also the interpretation given them and the meanings attached to them which need critical investigation. By exaggerating and even constructing certain meanings of Islamic data, Massignon's work poses a real challenge for any study of Islam concerned with meaning. We have to separate scholarly findings from scholars' private opinions, convictions or beliefs.

I would suggest that, for a properly scholarly study of Islam and Muslim societies and in particular of the meanings Islamic data had or have for particular groups of Muslims, it is necessary to distance oneself from Louis Massignon's religious views, on the basis of which he developed his interpretations. Researchers should work on the basis of empirical data and, as far as research into meaning is concerned, on the basis of the requisite sound theoretical framework. Such a framework should have general validity, according to scholarly criteria. Just as there has been a transition from *philologia sacra* to scholarly philology, and from *historia sacra* to scholarly history, research should leave *religio sacra* behind for the scholarly study of religions, including Islam. This implies replacing any religious framework of Islamic studies by

a scholarly framework to be derived specifically from *Religionswissenschaft*, which forms part of the humanities and social sciences<sup>10</sup>.

Once problems have been formulated in scholarly terms and research carried out on this basis, it will be important to look back again at certain Massignonian interpretations and their scholarly, ethical and spiritual merits. This holds true particularly for Massignon's researches on Islam as a kind of system conveying meaning to Muslims and Muslim societies. It also applies to the constant process of interpretation and application of Islamic prescriptions by Muslims of various orientations who present their particular constructs of Islam in different situations, times and places. And it is valid for further studies in the broad field of relations between Muslims and Christians — or if you like, eventually, between Islam and the West — in history and at the present time. There is urgent need for the creation of an independent scholarly institution to carry out research on this subject under the motto *ut altera pars audiatur* : to give the other party a hearing.

Louis Massignon may be considered to have been one of the most remarkable scholars of Islam in the 20th century, not without a touch of genius, but also with a hint of theatrical effects. From his 25th year onwards his life seems to have been determined by two poles. On the one hand he lived in a French Catholic world, in close contact with other converts. On the other hand he had his second home in the Arab world where he felt at home on the human plane. In order to bridge the gap between these two worlds he appealed to values, norms and truths derived from both of them, in which he passionately believed. Massignon's work and life meant at the time a radical break with rather fixed existing structures and positions in France and beyond. He stood for reciprocity in encounters and for a common search in thought and scholarship. Instead of dominating he was attentive to the state of mind of the other side, looking for a common direction in which both parties could move.

Our problem is how to get his work out of the particular French Catholic and Arab Muslim conditionings of the time so that it can become relevant and fruitful for scholarly research into Islam, Muslim societies and Muslim-Christian relations in general. Massignon's work should also be prised loose from his particular person speaking about and of himself. We should recognize the very subjectivity of his opinions and convictions and leave them for what they are, from a scholarly point of view.

As it stands, Massignon's work as well as his life is too many-sided to be claimed for one particular cause to the exclusion of others, or to be appropriated by particular interests over against other interests. It is rather a universe in itself, a religious universe.

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<sup>10</sup> On *Religionswissenschaft*, see Waardenburg 1993.

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