

THOMAS MERTON,
LOUIS MASSIGNON,
AND THE CHALLENGE OF ISLAM

by **Sidney H. Griffith**

Among the books that Merton was reading on his Asian journey was Louis Massignon's classic study in comparative mysticism, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane*.¹ It is a book that concentrates on the technical vocabulary of Islamic mysticism in the Arabic language. But along the way the author clarifies the terms he studies by comparing them to earlier Christian usages, and sometimes by putting them side by side with the expressions Hindus and Buddhists use to describe similar mystical phenomena. By 1968 such an approach to the study of Christian religious life was, to say the least, very congenial to Merton. And in *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* there are two quotations from Massignon's book that neatly point to the two themes of the present essay.²

Merton was struck by the Islamic critique of monasticism, expressed in part in the famous phrase attributed to Muhammad, "there is no monasticism in Islam" (*Essai*, pp. 145-153).³ Early Muslim mystics had to justify their own behavior in the light of this dictum, and to explain its original import.

1. Louis Massignon, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1964). Hereafter referred to in the text as *Essai*.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*; ed. by Naomi Burton Stone, James Laughlin & Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1973), pp. 263-264. Hereafter referred to in the text as *AJ*.

3. See also, for a different view, Paul Nwiya, *Exegese coranique et langage mystique: nouvel essai sur le lexique technique des mystiques musulmans* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1970), pp. 55-56.

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They advanced in response the notion that what was wrong with Christian mysticism was, as Merton put it, the substitution of "human institutions for divine providence" (*AJ*, p. 263).

Here is just one example of the insightful challenge to Christian life and thought that one can find abundantly in Islamic texts. Given Merton's concern for the reform of monastic life, it is no wonder that his eye lingered long enough over Massignon's discussion of the issue in the works of early Muslim writers to mark the spot and to highlight a telling phrase or two. The issue reminds the reader of the even more far reaching critiques of Christianity one can find in Islamic texts. And the Muslim critic sometimes opens a way to a deeper appreciation of truths at the very heart of the Christian's own response to God. We shall explore below another instance in which Merton followed the guidance of Louis Massignon into just such a matter, the mystic center of the human being that Merton, following Massignon, called "le point vierge."

Another passage in Massignon's *Essai* that took Merton's attention in 1968 and caused him to reach for pen and notebook is one in which the author explained his approach to the study of the early Muslim mystics. He was after "experiential knowledge," he said, by an "introspective method" that seeks to examine "each conscience 'by transparency' . . ." The method was to search "beneath outward behavior of the person for a grace which is wholly divine" (*Essai*, p. 138; *AJ*, p. 263). Again, this idea struck a responsive chord in Merton. It expressed the sympathy Merton felt for Massignon himself that persisted from their first acquaintance in 1959, through Massignon's death in 1962, right up to Merton's final months in 1968.

The purpose of the present communication is twofold: to sketch the outlines of the relationship between Louis Massignon and Thomas Merton; and to give an account of the significance of Massignon's phrase, "le point vierge," which Merton found so evocative that he appropriated it for his own purposes. The emphasis here will be on Massignon, whose biography is not so well known to Americans as is Merton's. And while Merton's use of Massignon's pithy phrase "le point vierge" has received attention, its origins in the study of the martyr mystic of Islam, al-Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 922), has gone unremarked for the most part.⁴

4. See M. Madeline Abdelnour, S.C.N., "Le Point Vierge in Thomas Merton," *Cistercian Studies* 6 (1971), pp. 153-171; Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton: The Development of a Spiritual Theologian*; Toronto Studies in Theology, vol. 20 (New York & Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), p. 9; Anne E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), pp. 69 and 157.

I

MERTON AND MASSIGNON

Thomas Merton was known in the French Catholic intellectual circles in which Louis Massignon was a major figure for almost a decade before they started writing to one another. In the early 1950s Merton published several pieces in the Parisian journal, *Dieu Vivant*, on whose editorial board Massignon served for five of the ten years of the journal's life.⁵ And even after his break with Marcel More, *Dieu Vivant's* moving spirit, Massignon remained friends with many of the magazine's regular contributors. One of these was Jacques Maritain, whom Merton first met in New York in the spring of 1939, and was not to meet again until the philosopher visited the monk at Gethsemani in 1966, although the two had by then been in correspondence for years.⁶ And it was Maritain who, already in 1952, prompted Massignon to visit Merton when Massignon was on a lecture tour in the United States and Canada.⁷ Unfortunately, they never met. But, as we shall see, the writings of Louis Massignon on Islam and other subjects exerted a considerable influence on Merton's thinking in the 1960s. And throughout 1960 they corresponded with one another on an almost monthly basis.

It would be impossible in the small time and space available here to provide even a quick sketch of Professor Louis Massignon (1883-1962) of the Collège de France that could in any way do justice to him. Like Merton, he was a man of many faces, to borrow Glenn Hinson's apt characterization of the numerous roles the monk seemed to assume for the many different people who knew him.⁸ And what is more, for all their manifest differences, there are some remarkable parallels in the biographies of Merton and Massignon.⁹ This feature of their compatibility would have appealed to

5. See Thomas Merton, "Le moine et le chasseur," *Dieu Vivant* 17 (1950), pp. 95-98; "Le sacrement de l'avent dans la spiritualité de saint Bernard," *Dieu Vivant* 23 (1953), pp. 23-43. See also E. Fouilloux, "Une vision eschatologique du christianisme: *Dieu Vivant* (1945-1955)," *Revue d'Histoire de l'Église de France* 57 (1971), pp. 47-72.

6. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), pp. 121-122, 461. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Mott*.

7. Letter of Massignon to Merton, 3 September 1959, Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky. Hereafter referred to as *TMSC*.

8. See E. Glenn Hinson, "Merton's Many Faces," *Religion in Life* 42 (1973), pp. 153-167.

9. A. H. Cutler called attention to the parallels in an appendix to his English translation of Giulio Basetti-Sani, *Louis Massignon (1883-1962): Prophet of Inter-Religious Reconciliation* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1974), pp. 170-177.

Massignon, who was very interested in biography, and liked to plot on the graph of history and current events what he called the “curve of life” of persons whose stories attracted his attention for one reason or another.¹⁰

A — MASSIGNON’S “CURVE OF LIFE”¹¹

Louis Massignon was the son of an artist, a sculptor, who was an agnostic, but his mother was a Catholic, and she reared Louis in the pious style conventional among her kind in nineteenth century France. This is an important item in Massignon’s story, one that will have a strong effect at a later turning point in his life. Meanwhile, the father too was a strong influence, playing no small role in encouraging his son’s academic career. Furthermore, it was the senior Massignon’s network of friends among artists and writers that brought about Louis Massignon’s meeting with the convert-novelist Joris Karl Huysmans (1848-1907) in 1900. Although the meeting was brief, even fleeting, the young Massignon appealed to the novelist, and the memory and influence of Huysmans remained with Massignon for the rest of his life.¹²

Massignon’s first substantive academic project took him to North Africa in 1904 to investigate the terrain in Morocco described by Leo Africanus in the sixteenth century. This enterprise led him to write an appreciative letter, and to send a copy of his thesis on Leo’s geographical work to the earlier explorer of the Sahara, Charles de Foucauld, who was then living as a hermit in the desert regions of the southern Sahara.¹³ And the hermit became a major formative influence in Massignon’s spiritual development.

10. Massignon discussed his idea of the “curve of life” in the context of other major premises of his work in the preface to the new edition of his major life’s work that was published only after his death. See Louis Massignon, *La passion de Husayn ibn Mansur Hallaj* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), I: 26-31.

11. Among the available biographies of Louis Massignon one might note the following: Jean Morillon, *Massignon* (Paris: Editions Classiques du XXe siecle, 1964); *Massignon* (ed. by J.-F. Six), Cahier de l’Herne (Paris: l’Herne, 1970); Vincent Monteil, *Le Linceul de feu* (Paris: Vega, 1987) — hereafter referred to in the text as *Monteil*. In English there is available the book by Basetti-Sani cited in note # 9 above. The best biographical sketch of Massignon in English is by Herbert Mason in the “Foreword” to his translation of *La passion de Hallaj*: Louis Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), I: xix-xliii — hereafter referred to in the text as *Passion*.

12. See Robert Baldrick, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), pp. 286-287. See also B. Beaumont, *The Road from Decadence: From Brothel to Cloister, Selected Letters of J. K. Huysmans* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1989).

13. For an orientation to the life and work of Charles de Foucauld, see R. Aubert, “Charles de Foucauld,” in the *Dictionnaire d’Histoire et de Geographie Ecclesiastique* (Paris: Letouzey et Ane, 1971), XVIII: cols. 1394-1402. See also D. Massignon, “La Rencontre de Charles de Foucauld et de Louis Massignon d’apres leur correspondance,” and J.-F. Six, “Massignon et Foucauld,” in *Presence de Louis Massignon: hommages et temoignages*; ed. by D. Massignon (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1987), pp. 184-191, 201-206.

Difficulties on his North African journey prompted Massignon to master the Arabic language, both the classical tongue and the modern spoken dialects. Eventual success in this purpose led him to Cairo for further studies in 1906. While there he made the acquaintance of yet another spiritual giant. This time the person was long dead, having been executed for blasphemy in the year 922 A. D. He was a Muslim mystic, whose life and teachings it would become Massignon's vocation to explore and to make known not only in the world of Western scholarship, but among Muslims as well. His name was al-Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj (858-922). Eventually Massignon's study of this holy man was published in 1922 as his doctoral dissertation, under the title *La Passion de Husayn ibn Mansur Hallaj: martyr mystique de l'islam*.¹⁴ It became a landmark book that was almost singlehandedly responsible for arousing scholarly interest in the west in Sufism and Islamic mysticism. It would be impossible to overstate the book's importance and influence. There were repercussions even in Roman Catholic theology, in that Massignon's advocacy of al-Hallaj's cause raised the question of the recognition of genuine mysticism beyond the church's formal boundaries.¹⁵

Long before the publication of *The Passion of al-Hallaj*, there were dramatic changes in Massignon's personal life. While on an archaeological expedition in Iraq in 1908, he became entangled in a skein of dramatic circumstances that disoriented him to the point of attempted suicide. But in these very circumstances, Massignon himself had a mystical experience, an encounter with God, with "the Stranger," as he often said, after the manner of Abraham in the story of the visit of the three angels at Mamre, recounted in Genesis XVIII. This experience issued in Massignon's conversion from agnosticism, and a certain moral libertinism, to the Catholicism of his upbringing.¹⁶ He attributed his conversion to the intercessory prayers of his mother, Joris Karl Huysmans, Charles de Foucauld, and to the advocacy of al-Hallaj. Thereafter Massignon lived an intense religious life, supported

14. Louis Massignon, *La Passion d'al-Hosayn-ibn Mansour al-Hallaj, martyr mystique de l'islam* (Paris: Geunther, 1922), 2 volumes. Massignon continued to work on a new edition of this book until he died in medias res in 1962. After his death, the new edition was assembled by a group of scholars working together with Massignon family members and friends. Louis Massignon, *La Passion de Husayn ibn Mansur Hallaj, martyr mystique de l'islam*; 2nd ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 4 volumes. The new edition was translated into English by Herbert Mason: *Louis Massignon, The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 4 volumes.

15. Massignon was pleased by the judgments expressed by J. Marechal, *Etude sur la psychologie des mystiques* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1937), II: 487-531. See also L. Massignon, "Mystique musulmane et mystique chretienne au moyen age," *Opera Minora*, II: 470-484.

16. See the discussion by Daniel Massignon, "Le Voyage en Mesopotamie et la conversion de Louis Massignon en 1908," *Islamochristiana* 14 (1988), pp. 127-199. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Mesopotamie*.

by a rather strict Roman Catholic orthodoxy, purified, as he believed, by the sharp religious challenge of Islam. He recognized in Islam a genuine heritage from the kindred and ancestral faith of Abraham. And on this foundation he built his lifelong campaign for better mutual relationships between Christians and Muslims.¹⁷ The fruit of his efforts is to be seen in the eirenic references to Muslims in the Vatican II documents, *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate*, as well as in the ecumenical efforts of the present day Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions and of the Pontifical Institute for Arabic Studies in Rome.¹⁸

After his conversion, Massignon continued his scholarly career. He married in 1914, after some hesitation over the possibility of a religious vocation. After the First World War, because of his Arabic skills, Massignon assumed a role in behalf of France comparable to that of T. E. Lawrence for England in the Sykes-Picot accords in Syria/Palestine in 1917-1919.¹⁹ All the while he continued both his scholarly and religious interests. In the years 1924-1928, he played a major role in promoting interest in the ideals of Charles de Foucauld, including the publication of the latter's rule for religious life, *The Directory*.²⁰ In 1931, Massignon became a third-order Franciscan, and on the occasion of taking the habit, he also assumed the religious name "Abraham." He professed his private vows in 1932. Meanwhile, in 1931 in Paris Massignon had met Mohandas Gandhi, in whom he recognized a kindred, genuinely spiritual man. In the struggles of the Algerian War, Massignon adopted the non-violent confrontation methods of Gandhi to protest the human rights violations of the French government.²¹

In 1934, Louis Massignon, together with his longtime friend and associate in Cairo, Mary Kahil, founded a religious movement dedicated to prayer and fasting on the part of Arabophone Christians, in behalf of the Muslims under whose political control they lived.²² The organization was called in Arabic, *al-Badaliyyah*, a word that in Massignon's use of it be-

17. See the authoritative study of Massignon's religious thought in Guy Harpigny, *Islam et christianisme selon Louis Massignon; Homo Religiosus*, 6 (Louvain-la-Neuve: Centre d'Histoire des Religions, 1981). See also Maurice Borrmans, "Louis Massignon, témoin du dialogue islamo-chrétien," *Euntes Docete* 37 (1984), pp. 383-401.

18. See Robert Caspar, "La vision de l'islam chez L. Massignon et son influence sur l'église," in *Massignon*; ed. by J.-F. Six (Paris: Cahier de l'Herne, 1970), pp. 126-147.

19. See Albert Hourani, "T. E. Lawrence and Louis Massignon," *Times Literary Supplement* 188 (8 July 1983), pp. 733-734.

20. See D. Massignon, "La rencontre de Charles de Foucauld," p. 191.

21. See Camille Drevet, *Massignon et Gandhi, la contagion de la verité* (Paris: Le Cerf, 1967).

22. See *Louis Massignon, l'hospitalité sacrée*; ed. by Jacques Keryell (Paris: Nouvelle Cite, 1987). This volume includes selections from the letters of Massignon to Mary Kahil, along with many documents from the foundation of the *Badaliyyah*. Hereafter referred to in the text as *L'hospitalité*.

speaks a form of mystical substitution of one person and his merits and prayers for the salvation of someone else. The doctrine of mystical substitution was very prominent in the works of late nineteenth century French writers, especially J. K. Huysmans, who had a considerable influence on Massignon.²³ What is more, Massignon found the doctrine in the thought of al-Hallaj. So it became the focus of his efforts to bring real fasting, prayer, and religious dedication to the joint Christian/ Muslim effort to bring about mutual trust and fidelity between Christians and Muslims.²⁴ In Cairo the *Badaliyyah* movement had a center for its activities run by Mary Kahil, under the name *Dar as-Salam*. There were meetings, prayers, conferences, discussions and fasts held under its auspices. The center also published the bulletin, *al-Badaliya*, as well as a more formal periodical, *Mardis de Dar as-Salam*. In later years Massignon arranged for copies of these publications to be sent to Thomas Merton.²⁵

The better to align himself with other Arabophone Christians, particularly those living in the Islamic world, Massignon received in 1949 the permission of Pope Pius XII to transfer his allegiance from the Latin rite to the Greek Catholic Melkite rite. In 1950, with the tacit permission of the Vatican and the full cooperation of Patriarch Maximos IV, Massignon was ordained a priest in the Melkite rite. To offer the eucharistic liturgy was for Massignon the perfect way to integrate his personal act of mystical substitution for others with Christ's own gratuitous act of vicarious suffering in substitution for the whole of sinful humanity.

In his scholarly career, Massignon never missed an opportunity to integrate his researches with the aims and purposes of his religious apostolate. A case in point is the work he did to search out all he could discover about the early Christian devotion to the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus. According to their story, they slept concealed in a cave through centuries of the persecution of Christians by the Roman authorities, until the Empire itself became Christian and they awoke to testify to the resurrection of justice. Their cult was popular among Christians in the East from the fifth century onward. What attracted Massignon to their story was the fact that it also appears in the *Qur'an*, in a chapter (or *surah*, XVIII) that Muslims recite

23. See the relevant chapter in Richard Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution: The Catholic Revival in French Literature* (London: Constable, 1966), pp. 149-222. It is noteworthy that Louis Massignon is one of the three people to whose memory the author dedicates his work.

24. See Guy Harpigny, "Louis Massignon, l'hospitalite et la visitation de l'etranger," *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 75 (1987), pp. 39-64. See also his *Islam et christianisme*, pp. 161-191.

25. Massignon requested Fr. Joachim Moubarac to send copies of the *Mardis de Dar el Salam* to Merton. Letter of Massignon to Merton, 2 August 1960, TMSC.

every Friday, the day of their communal assembly. So both Muslims and Christians are devotees of the cult of the Seven Sleepers, and crowds of them come to pay their respects at the shrine of the Sleepers in Ephesus to this very day. Massignon bent every effort to trace the devotion in Christian piety. And in his own native Brittany he found a church dedicated to them at Vieux-Marche near Plouaret, where he often led pilgrimages of Christians and Muslims together, especially in his later years when he was protesting French atrocities in the Algerian War.²⁶

From 1953 until his death in 1962, Louis Massignon was engaged in active resistance to the war by every non-violent means at his disposal, in public and in private. His antiwar activities earned him both respect and obloquy, as one might expect. It is important to observe that for Massignon it was not only pacifism and non-violence that motivated him. The Algerian War was a conflict between Muslims and Christians, people who are brothers and sisters in the faith of Abraham whom love and hospitality should bring together. Most painful to Massignon was France's own broken word to the Muslims. To resist the war, to give aid to its victims was a religious act for Louis Massignon, and every demonstration or "sit-in" where he appeared was an occasion to practice the mystical substitution that was at the heart of his devotional life.²⁷

Throughout his career Massignon remained very much the French academic, the professor of the College de France. His scholarly work was enormously influential. And in this role he was almost another *persona*. It is no exaggeration to say that he was among the twentieth century's most important Orientalists, especially in the area of the study of Islamic mysticism and sociology.²⁸ To this day many academics find it almost impossible to reconcile the two sides of the man, the indefatigable researcher, and the passionate believer, a confessor of the faith.²⁹ But they were the same man. Massignon was that rarity in the modern world, a truly saintly scholar.

26. See L. Massignon, "Les 'Sept Dormants', apocalypse de l'islam," and "Le culte liturgique et populaire des VII dormants martyrs de'Ephese (*ahl al-kahf*): trait d'union orient-occident entre l'islam et la chretiente," in L. Massignon, *Opera Minora* (Beyrouth: Dar al-Maaref, 1963), III: 104-180. In the latter article Massignon collected, among many other items, prayers from the liturgies of the "Seven Sleepers." Thomas Merton called his attention to prayers composed by St. Peter Damian. See "Le culte liturgique," p. 180. Massignon asked Merton for this information in his letter of 16 May 1960, *TMSC*.

27. See especially the relevant chapters in Monteil, *Le Linceul de feu*.

28. See Jean-Jacques Waardenburg, *L'Islam dans le miroir de l'occident* (Paris: Mouton, 1963). Massignon is one of the major figures to the study of whose scholarship this book is devoted. See also J.-J. Waardenburg, "L. Massignon's Study of Religion and Islam: An Essay a propos of his *Opera Minora*," *Oriens* 21-22 (1968-1969), pp. 135-158.

29. See Edward W. Said, "Islam, the Philological Vocation, and French Culture: Renan and Massignon," in *Islamic Studies: A Tradition and Its Problems*; ed. by M. H. Kerr (Malibu, California: Undena, 1980), pp. 53-72; Julian Baldick, "Massignon: Man of Opposites," *Religious Studies* 23 (1987), pp. 29-39.

Massignon's bibliography as a scholar is an impressive one. To read down the list of his publications, books, articles, lectures, and reviews, is to see first-hand how broad his interests were.³⁰ It would be out of place even to attempt to sketch the profile of his output here. Suffice it to call attention to two collections of articles and essays that, in addition to his scholarly books, present the essential Massignon to the reading public. The first and most important of them is called *Parole donnee*, a collection that Massignon himself supervised, but which appeared only after his death.³¹ The pieces included in this volume reflect the whole spectrum of his interests, both religious and scholarly. From the perusal of them one truly gets a sense of the man. What is more, Massignon himself was virtually responsible for the interviews with the author that introduce the book and that are ascribed to the editor, Vincent-Mansour Monteil (*Monteil*, pp. 18-29). So we have for all practical purposes a self-portrait.

There are two other collections of Massignon's essays and articles to mention. The first is the three volume *Opera Minora* that Moubarac assembled and published long before Massignon's death.³² These volumes contain more than two hundred Massignon pieces, many of which are hard to find otherwise since they appeared originally in little known or no longer existent journals. And finally one must mention the recent publication of a selection of Massignon's most important essays in English translation.³³ This volume should go a long way toward bringing the personal side of Louis Massignon more to the attention of Americans than has hitherto been the case. It is somehow not surprising that long before the translations, it was Thomas Merton who knew and spoke of Massignon to the American reading public.

B - MASSIGNON AND MERTON IN CORRESPONDENCE

In the mid-1960s it must have brought a wry smile to Merton's lips to

30. See Youakim Moubarac, *L'Oeuvre de Louis Massignon: Pentalogie Islamo-Chretienne I* (Beyrouth: Editions du Cenacle Libanais, 1972-1973). It is interesting to note that in an epilogue to this volume, Moubarac has published the original English and a French translation of Thomas Merton's poem, "The Night of Destiny," pp. 204-207.

31. Louis Massignon, *Parole donnee: precede d'entretiens avec Vincent-Mansour Monteil* (Paris: Julliard, 1962). The book has appeared in two subsequent publications: Paris: Coll. de poche 10/18, 1970; and Paris: Le Seuil, 1983. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Parole*.

32. Louis Massignon, *Opera Minora*; ed. by Y. Moubarac (Beyrouth: Dar al-Maaref, 1963; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969).

33. *Testimonies and Reflections: Essays of Louis Massignon*; ed. by Herbert Mason (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

read in his personal copy of *Parole donnee* what Massignon wrote in 1949 about Trappist asceticism. In that year, when *The Seven Storey Mountain* was holding up the Trappist way of life to Americans as a beacon of spiritual health for all, Massignon was maintaining that "in the face of the growing social perversity and the mystery of iniquity at the present time, the ultimate recourse of humanity is right there," in Trappist asceticism (*Parole*, p. 257). What is more, Massignon went on to say of the Trappists: "When the convents of the strict observance become weak, as we have seen in France prior to 1789 and in Russia prior to 1917, society itself falls into decay" (*Parole*, p. 259).

In context, Massignon was commending to his readers the purifying prayer and fasting that Trappist monasteries preserved in modern times from the long tradition of Christian asceticism that traced its line of descent in the West from Armand de Rance, St. Bernard and St. Benedict, all the way back to St. Augustine, St. Basil, and Pachomius. Massignon thought this was a pedigree of sanity for the modern world. He saw its effects in the lives of those who exercised the most spiritual influence on him, J. K. Huysmans, Leon Bloy, and Charles de Foucauld. So it was perhaps inevitable, given their common friends both ancient and modern, that Merton and Massignon would meet, if only by correspondence.

Jacques Maritain had urged Massignon to visit Merton in 1952.³⁴ But the two men did not in fact meet until the summer of 1959, and then it was only by letter. The person who brought them together was a young American writer, Herbert Mason, who was in Paris for research interests of his own in 1959. He wrote to Merton on 21 May 1959 in connection with his work on St. John of the Cross. And it was not long before Merton and Mason were exchanging letters and poems on a regular basis.³⁵ In a letter dated 2 August 1959 Mason told Merton about his own enchantment with Louis Massignon and presumably sent him an offprint of one of Massignon's articles on the "Seven Sleepers of Ephesus."³⁶ For by the end of the month Merton wrote Mason to say: "One of the most fascinating things I have had my hands on in a long time is that offprint of Louis Massignon about the Seven Sleepers" (*Memoir*, pp. 117-118). And in the meantime Merton had sent a reprint of his Pasternak article to Paris. In a letter of 31

34. Massignon to Merton, 3 September 1959, *TMSC*.

35. See Herbert Mason, *Memoir of a Friend: Louis Massignon* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), pp. 62-63. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Memoir*.

36. Mason's letters to Merton are in the archives of the *TMSC*.

August 1959 Mason mentions receiving it and promises to show it to Massignon. By 3 September 1959 Massignon himself is writing to Merton to thank him for the "Pasternak," and with this letter the Merton-Massignon correspondence began.³⁷

In the archives of the Thomas Merton Studies Center there are fourteen letters from Louis Massignon to Merton, written in English, and dating from 3 September 1959 to 26 April 1961. They are brief letters for the most part, but they reveal much about the two correspondents. It is clear that they are both searching for holiness, and they are both convinced that their search for it must include some attempt to address themselves to the evils of their own societies. By this time Massignon was actively engaged in his protests against the atrocities of the Algerian War. On 2 August 1960 he explained his ideas about civil disobedience to Merton: "Peace could not be gained by rich means, but through the outlawed, and it was required of us 'to assume their condition' (spiritually I mean), in 'substitution' as our dear Lord did in Gethsemani."³⁸

In this brief paragraph Massignon neatly put a practical point on one of his most cherished convictions, the notion of "mystical substitution," an idea that he had spent a good deal of time expounding in his writings over the years. It is not unlikely that Massignon's thinking on this point had an effect on Merton. Already in a letter to Mason, dated 3 September 1959, the same day of Massignon's first Merton letter, Merton wrote: "I want to say how deeply moved I am at this idea of Louis Massignon's that salvation is coming from the most afflicted and despised. This of course is the only idea that makes any sense in our time" (*Memoir*, pp. 122-123).

By spring of the following year, Merton in Gethsemani was fasting in solidarity with Massignon's political actions on behalf of the afflicted and despised North Africans in Paris. On 21 April 1960, Merton wrote to Jean Danielou:

Louis Massignon strikes me as a grand person. He has been writing about all the causes in which he is interested and I am going to try and do a little praying and fasting in union with him on the 30th of the month when there is to be a demonstration outside Vincennes prison — even Gabriel Marcel participating. This is one way in which I can legitimately unite myself to the *temoignage* and work of my brothers outside the monastery.³⁹

37. Merton wrote two pieces on Pasternak in 1959. See *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*; ed. by Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), pp. 37-83.

38. Massignon to Merton, 2 August 1960, TMSC.

39. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*; ed. by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 134. Hereafter referred to in the text as HGL.

There are other issues in the correspondence that were of more interest to Massignon than they were to Merton. One of them is Massignon's devotion to St. Charles Lwanga and his companions, young Christian men of the royal court of Uganda who in 1886 forfeited their lives rather than renounce Christianity or yield to the sexual requirements of their nominally Muslim ruler.⁴⁰ Immoral sexual practices in Christian societies, and even in the priesthood, were of great concern to Massignon. He told Merton in a letter of 30 April 1960 that he had spoken of his concern about these matters to Pope Pius XII in 1946. Now he wanted Merton to help him find out whether or not there was a Trappist monastery in Uganda or neighboring parts of Africa, where prayers and fasting would be offered in solidarity with the sacrifices of Charles Lwanga and his companions.⁴¹ Such an interest was typical of Massignon. It reminds one that for Massignon himself, and for his spiritual friends such as Huysmans, Bloy and de Foucauld, not to mention Merton, Trappist discipline had been their own means of conversion from lives in which incontinence had been a debilitating factor (*Mesopotamie*, p. 189).

One result of the exchange of letters between Merton and Massignon was their widening network of mutual friends. A notable instance is Massignon's encouragement of the Pakistani Ch. Abdul Aziz to write to Merton on 1 November 1960. Merton replied on 17 November 1960, and so there began a correspondence that was to continue until 1968, and one in which Merton revealed much of his inner life in contrast to his usual reticence about his personal religious practices (*HGL*, pp. 43-67). On 31 December 1960, Massignon wrote to Merton to say: "Ch. Abdul Aziz (he is the son of a converted Hindoo) wrote me [of his] joy to come in touch with you. He is a *believer* in Abraham's God without restriction."⁴²

Merton and Massignon continued to correspond until 1961. And Merton mentioned Massignon with some awe in letters he wrote to other people. But Massignon died on 31 October 1962, thus bringing to an end their correspondence. Nevertheless, there were still Massignon's numer-

40. On Charles Lwanga and his companion martyrs, see the documents in the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 56 (1964), pp. 901-912.

41. Massignon to Merton, 30 April 1960; July 1960. On 3 April Massignon sent Merton a prayer card dedicated to Charles Lwanga and companions. On 3 June 1960, Merton said Mass "for Louis Massignon and for his project for African boys, under the patronage of Blessed Charles Lwanga. I happened in a curious and almost arbitrary manner to pick June 3d, and only today did I discover by accident that June 3d is the Feast of the Uganda Martyrs." Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1968), p. 144; hereafter referred to in the text as *CGB*. We know the date from Merton's letter to Mason on 1 June 1960 (*Memoir*, p. 158).

42. Massignon to Merton, 31 December 1960, *TMSC*.

ous articles and books. Merton was reading them up until and even during his journey to the East.⁴³ They had begun to exchange books and offprints at the very beginning of their acquaintance. At that time Herbert Mason was often the go-between. After Massignon's death, he continued to be Merton's contact with the world of Louis Massignon. But already in 1959 Mason was receiving such requests as the following one from Merton: "By the way, I want to put something about Hallaj in the book I am writing, and have nothing at hand. Can you lend or send me anything?" (*Memoir*, p. 124).

By the spring of 1960 Merton had received Massignon's *Akhbar al-Hallaj* and *Diwan de al-Hallaj*. Massignon thought the former book in particular had shaken Merton, and he wrote to Mason: "Tom is not mistaken in believing that my thought can be found through the curve of my life substituted by the Hallajian thought" (*Memoir*, p. 152).⁴⁴ It was probably somewhat earlier that Merton had received a copy of *La passion d'al-Hallaj*. By August of 1960, when Herbert Mason visited Gethsemani, Merton had already read much of it and, as Mason says: "Hallaj and M[assignon] himself struck him deeply as 'knowing the way.' I think Merton sensed M[assignon] was spiritually revolutionary for future Islamic/ Christian influences."⁴⁵

It was al-Hallaj, the Muslim mystic, who had fired Massignon's enthusiasm and who played a role in his conversion back to his own ancestral Roman Catholicism. Hallaj the Muslim showed him the way back to God. This was the point that struck Merton: the fact that a compassionate encounter with another, a seeker of the God of Abraham in another tradition, could open a way for one to reach God in one's own heart. The challenge of Islam then meant a challenge to open oneself to the "Other." This was the challenge of *La passion d'al-Hallaj* for Merton, as Herbert Mason reports it: "Merton told me himself of the far-reaching effect this book had on his life, coming at a particularly critical moment for him, in helping turn his attention toward the East."⁴⁶

Merton also had a copy of Massignon's *La parole donnee*, the collection of essays Massignon himself chose to represent the spectrum of his thought, although it was published posthumously. The copy is now in the

43. Merton dedicated his next published book: "In memoriam: Louis Massignon 1883-1962." Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1963).

44. There is a copy of Massignon's *Akhbar al-Hallaj* in the "Marginalia Section" at the TMSC. Unlike the copy of *Parole donnee*, however, the only other Massignon title in the collection, there are no reader's marks by Merton in the *Akhbar*.

45. Herbert Mason to Sidney H. Griffith, 21 October 1988.

46. Herbert Mason, "Merton and Massignon," *Muslim World* 59 (1969), p. 317. Hereafter referred to in the text as Mason.

collection of the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine. In certain sections of the book Merton marked passages that particularly appealed to him, especially in the essays on Foucauld, al-Hallaj, and Gandhi, although there are marks scattered throughout the book, indicating a relatively thorough reading. It is clear that reading Massignon did not restrict Merton to Islam. In a letter to James Forest on 20 May 1964, a single sentence makes the point: "I am reading some fantastic stuff on Islam by Louis Massignon, and Buddhist books which I now have to review for [a] magazine of the Order" (HGL, p. 280).

So it is clear that the Merton/ Massignon correspondence was a fruitful one. Each one of them gave his impression of the other man to yet other correspondents. Merton had sent some of his poems to Massignon, who spoke of them to Herbert Mason, saying: "[H]e couldn't judge the verses' merit but they showed he was a poet rather than a dry theologian" (*Memoir*, p. 143). This was a mark of respect on Massignon's part, who had a dim view of merely academic theologians. As for Merton, he wrote of his respect for Massignon in a letter to Abdul Aziz, just about two months after Massignon's death:

The departure of Louis Massignon is a great and regrettable loss. He was a man of great comprehension and I was happy to have been numbered among his friends, for this meant entering into an almost prophetic world, in which he habitually moved. It seems to me that mutual comprehension between Christians and Moslems is something of very vital importance today, and unfortunately it is rare and uncertain, or else subjected to the vagaries of politics. I am touched at the deep respect and understanding which so many Moslems had for him, indeed they understood him perhaps better than many Christians. (HGL, p. 53)⁴⁷

II

LE POINT VIERGE

Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, published in 1966, is the book in which one finds the most explicit published trace of Merton's colloquy with Louis Massignon. This is not surprising since he compiled *Conjectures* from notes, correspondence and reading from the previous decade (Mott, pp. 429, 631, n. 470).⁴⁸ He had been in correspondence with Massignon

47. Merton himself published this letter in "Letters in a Time of Crisis," *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1964), no. 27, "To a Moslem," pp. 300-302.

48. William H. Shannon, "Thomas Merton and the Living Tradition of Faith," in *The Merton Annual 1*; ed. by R. E. Daggy et al. (New York: AMS Press, 1988), pp. 90-93. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Shannon*.

throughout 1960, and he was reading and marking books by Massignon well into 1964, as we have seen. And in *Conjectures* the passage that most commentators cite as evidence of Merton's debt to Massignon is the following one:

Massignon has some deeply moving pages in the *Mardis de Dar-es-Salam*: About the desert, the tears of Agar, the Muslims, the "point vierge" of the spirit, the center of our nothingness where, in apparent despair, one meets God — and is found completely in His mercy. (CGB, p. 151)

One must hasten to point out that contrary to what one sometimes reads, *Les Mardis de Dar-es-Salam* is not the title of a book by Louis Massignon, but the name of the periodical edited by him and published in Paris and Cairo under the auspices of the *Badaliyyah* movement.⁴⁹ In 1960, Massignon arranged for copies of the journal to be sent to Merton.⁵⁰ And in the volume for 1958-1959, there is an article by Massignon on the subjects Merton mentions in the quotation from *Conjectures*.⁵¹ The phrase, "le point vierge," duly appears in the article, but Massignon uses it only in passing here, and one must look elsewhere in his writings to learn what it really means.⁵² Clearly, the phrase caught Merton's fancy when he had read it in this place and elsewhere in pieces by Massignon.⁵³ The vague reference to *Mardis de Dar-es-Salam* must then have been simply the closest reference to hand when Merton made the note that appears in *Conjectures*. For he clearly understood the deeper significance of the phrase, and it will repay one to see how Massignon himself used it before returning to Merton's appropriation of it for his own purposes.

In the sense in which Massignon employed the phrase *le point vierge*, it has its roots in the mystical psychology of Islam, especially as one finds it in the thought of the martyr-mystic, al-Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj, to the study of whom Massignon dedicated so much of his scholarship. Massignon was fond of quoting a saying of al-Hallaj to the effect that "our hearts are a virgin that God's truth alone opens."⁵⁴ To understand the saying,

49. See the citations in n. 4 above.

50. Massignon to Merton, 2 August 1960, *TMSC*.

51. Louis Massignon, "Foucauld au desert: devant le Dieu d'Abraham, Agar et Ismael," *Les Mardis de Dar-es-Salam* (1958-1959), pp. 57-71. The article is reprinted in *Opera Minora*, III: 772-784.

52. In context, Massignon is speaking of the training both he and Foucauld had received to gather intelligence in North Africa for the sake of the government's military purpose there, a purpose that Massignon now said he thought of "comme d'un 'viol du point vierge' des Musulmans." Massignon, "Foucauld au desert," p. 59; *Opera Minora*, III: 774.

53. Merton marked and underlined the phrase when he read it in his copy of Massignon's essay on Gandhi in *Parole*, p. 132.

54. He quotes it in this form in a letter to Mary Kahil, 26 March 1948, *L'hospitalite*, letter 134, p. 249. As we shall see below, Massignon quotes this saying in several forms.

one must know how al-Hallaj thought of the mysticism of the heart. Massignon offered the following explanation:

Hallajian psychology . . . allows man the guiding rule and basic unity of an immaterial principle: *qalb*, heart, or *ruh*, spirit How does man bring about the purification of his heart? Hallaj retains the vocabulary of previous mystics who, preoccupied with their asceticism, subdivided and parceled out the heart into successive "boxes," running the risk of confounding it and destroying it with its "veils" out of desire to reach beyond it to God. Hallaj retains and expands the Qur'anic notion that the heart is the organ prepared by God for contemplation. The function cannot be exercised without the organ. Thus, if he mentions the successive coverings of the heart, he does so without stopping at them At the end, he declares mystical union to be real; far from being the total disappearance of the heart . . . it is its sanctifying resurrection The final covering of the heart . . . is the *sirr*, the latent personality, the implicit consciousness, the deep subconscious, the secret cell walled up [and hidden] to every creature, the "involute virgin." The latent personality of man remains unformed until God visits the *sirr*, and as long as neither angel nor man divines it. (*Passion*, vol. III, pp. 17-19)

This long quotation from *La passion d'al-Hallaj* has been necessary for it to become clear that for al-Hallaj and for Massignon, "the virgin" is the innermost, secret heart (*as-sirr*) — the deep subconscious of a person. It is to this heart that the saying of al-Hallaj applies: "Our hearts, in their secrecy, are a virgin alone, where no dreamer's dream penetrates . . . the heart where the presence of the Lord alone penetrates, there to be conceived."⁵⁵

If the innermost heart is "the virgin," the other term in the phrase we are investigating, "the point," puts one in mind of "the primordial point" (*an-nuqtah al-asliyyah*) of which al-Hallaj and other Muslim mystics often speak. It is the apophatic point of the mystic's deep knowledge of God.⁵⁶ So the "virgin point," *le point vierge*, in Massignon's parlance, is by analogy the last, irreducible, secret center of the heart. The phrase used in this way begins to appear in Massignon's writing in the 1940s, where he uses it even to express a profoundly Christian sentiment. For example, at Christmas 1948, he wrote to Mary Kahil:

The return to our origin, to the beginning of our adoption — by re-entering our Mother's womb, as our Lord told Nicodemus, to be born again — by finding again at the bottom of our heart, the virgin point (*le point vierge*) of our election to Christianity and the action of God's will in us. (*L'hospitalite*, p. 257)

55. For this form of al-Hallaj's saying, see Louis Massignon, "Le 'couer' (*al-qalb*) dans la priere et la meditation musulmanes," in *Le Coeur; Les etudes carmelitaines* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1950, p. 97. Massignon's article is reprinted in *Opera Minora*, II: 428-433.

56. Louis Massignon, *Kitab al-Tawasin par abou al-Moghith al-Hosayn ibn Mansour al-Hallaj* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1913), pp. 196-197.

Perhaps the clearest expression Massignon was to give to what he meant by the phrase *le point vierge* came in an essay he published in 1957, in comparing Muslim and Christian mysticism in the Middle Ages. He wrote:

The "science of hearts," the early nucleus of the methodological traits of mysticism in Islam, began with the identifying of anomalies in the spiritual life of the believer who prays, who must be simple and naked; the early technical terms served to designate the errors of judgment, the mental pretences, the hypocrisies, . . . The "heart" designates the incessant oscillation of the human will which beats like the pulse under the impulse of various passions, an impulse which must be stabilized by the Essential Desire, one single God. Introspection must guide us to tear through the concentric "veils" which ensheathe the heart, and hide from us the virginal point (*le point vierge*), the secret (*sirr*) wherein God manifests Himself.⁵⁷

Having found this felicitous phrase well apt to evoke al-Hallaj's thoughts about the meeting place of God and man in the human heart, Massignon used it often in other contexts. Presuming its primary sense in al-Hallaj's mystical psychology, Massignon then borrowed the phrase, so to speak, to give sharper focus to the discussion of other issues. For example, he spoke of the faith of Abraham as the very axis of Islamic teaching, the "true virgin point (*point vierge*) that is found at its center, that makes it live and by which all the rest is sustained invisibly and mysteriously."⁵⁸ And in the passage to which Merton referred in the article in *Les Mardis de Dar-es-Salam*, the "virgin point" is the manly honor of the Muslims, expressed in the rules of sacred hospitality, that by 1960 Massignon was prepared to say he and Foucauld had raped by their "rage laïque de comprendre, de conquérir, de posséder" before the First World War (*L'hospitalité*, p. 155, n. 73).

Massignon's friends also adopted the phrase. In a letter to Merton, Herbert Mason wrote: "More and more I understand the visiting of prisons; for once the soul has been dragged out to its virginal point by the sharpest sin, as a friend here said," grace may enter in.⁵⁹ The friend was most probably Massignon himself. And it was in offering praise to Massignon's memory that Fr. Georges Anawati, O.P., used the phrase in a way that recalls its true mystical meaning. He spoke of Massignon's own personal ability to

57. Herbert Mason, *Testimonies and Reflections*, p. 127. For the original see Louis Massignon, "Mystique musulmane et mystique chrétienne au moyen âge," in *Orient e Occidente nel Medioevo* (Rome: Accademie Nazionale, 1957), pp. 20-35. The piece is reprinted in *Opera Minora*, II: 470-484.

58. Louis Massignon to Robert Caspar, 12 November 1955, quoted in Caspar, "La vision de l'islam chez L. Massignon," p. 132.

59. Undated letter from Herbert Mason to Thomas Merton, *TMSC*. The letter must date from the second half of 1959 or the first half of 1960, when Mason was still in France.

discern the problems of other people, "to touch within them," he said, "the virgin point where the conscience is affected and disarmed before the living God."⁶⁰

Merton too found the phrase both apt and untranslatable. In view of its mystical sense, it is noteworthy that Merton chose it to help express what he had experienced on 18 March 1958, on the famous occasion of his sudden "realization" at the corner of 4th and Walnut in Louisville. He later wrote of this event in *Conjectures*, describing how he realized that "I loved all those people" crowding the center of the shopping district. And toward the end of the account he wrote:

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes Again, that expression, *le point vierge*, (I cannot translate it) comes in here. At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God This little point . . . is the pure glory of God in us It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in every body. (CGB, pp. 156-158)

Reading this passage it is not surprising to learn that Merton was composing this section of *Conjectures* in 1965 by which time he was already steeped in Massignon's thought and had already adopted the phrase *le point vierge* as his own (Mott, pp. 310-311). He used it in another place in *Conjectures* in a way one cannot quite imagine finding it in something Massignon would have written, but it is true to al-Hallaj's thought. Merton wrote:

The first chirps of the waking day birds mark the "*point vierge*" of the dawn under a sky as yet without real light, a moment of awe and inexpressible innocence, when the Father in perfect silence opens their eyes. They begin to speak to Him, not with fluent song, but with an awakening question that is their dawn state, their state at the "*point vierge*." Their condition asks if it is time for them to "be." He answers "yes." Then, they one by one wake up, and become birds. (CGB, p. 131)

The phrase lingered in Merton's thoughts and appeared later in another published piece as a theme in variation. In *The Asian Journal* one finds the following statement about the contemplative life:

It should create a new experience of time, not as stopgap, stillness, but as "*temps vierge*" — not a blank to be filled or an untouched space to be conquered and violated, but a space which can enjoy its own potentialities and hopes — and its own presence to itself. One's own time. (AJ, p. 112)

60. Quoted by Jacques Jomier, "Le centenaire de la naissance du professeur Louis Massignon, sa celebration au Caire (11-12 octobre 1983)," *Islamochristiana* 10 (1984), p. 43.

To follow the trail of a single catchy phrase in Merton's work shows the searcher how inventive a writer he was. It is clear that he met and communicated well with such an idiosyncratic thinker as was Massignon. But Massignon was only one of many persons whose works Merton read, with whom he corresponded, and whose happier phrases he made his own. He was truly a man of many faces. But Massignon was not wrong to have thought "he was a poet rather than a dry theologian."

III

THE CHALLENGE OF ISLAM

One thing Massignon and Merton surely had in common was an interest in other people, both in the present and in the historical past. Both of them conducted a vast correspondence with like-minded persons around the world, and both of them spent an enormous amount of their time in research in works written by scholars and saints, not only from the past, but from several religious traditions, not to mention numerous language communities. What is more, this interest in persons, in biography one might say, was not just a passing fancy. For both Merton and Massignon understood that their own access to God ran through the hearts of other people. In the first place, of course, there is the heart of the incarnate Son of God to lead one into the depths of the divine. But for both Merton and Massignon, in addition to their faith in Jesus Christ, their encounters with other people who had met God were also of great moment. And no where was this more the case than in their encounters with people of other religions. For both of them, other religions were other people, and not just sets of other doctrines.

It was through Massignon initially that Merton came to know Muslims, Islam, and something of the Sufi mystical tradition. Massignon put Merton into touch with Abdul Aziz, the Pakistani scholar of Islamic mysticism, who was the person who elicited from Merton the clearest description we have of his own prayer practices (*HGL*, pp. 63-64). But it was not Islam that was the other religion which most enticed Merton. Taoism and Zen Buddhism probably enchanted him more. Nevertheless, there are those who believe that it was Massignon's relationship with al-Hallaj and his evocation of the Muslim's life of holiness that helped Merton to see the powerful force of the other, the religious stranger, as one who can kindle one's own fires anew (*Mason*, p. 317).

Massignon was fond of saying in so many words that it was not he who possessed al-Hallaj, but al-Hallaj who had co-opted him. The Muslim mystic captured his fancy when he was a young man still living a life of incontinence, and still an unbeliever. Al-Hallaj was present to him at his conversion, and remained the focus of his life work in the scholarly world. In his religious life he wrestled not only with questions of vocation and holiness, but with how to find a place for al-Hallaj with him in his Catholic life.⁶¹ On his death bed he was still exhorting his friends to do whatever they could do to make al-Hallaj better known in the world.⁶²

Massignon's personal relationship with al-Hallaj brought him to the very heart, one might say *le point vierge* of the Muslim world. With al-Hallaj he encountered Muhammad, who was caught up with a word of God he was compelled to recite. The *Qur'an*, coming to the Arabic-speaking world by way of Muhammad's experience of God, brings one face to face with Abraham, his concubine Hagar, his son Ishmael, who were also recipients of God's blessing and promise. Massignon had the sense of a deep personal relationship with Abraham and, as we have seen, took his name when he became a third order Franciscan. He informed Merton of this fact in his second letter to him, dated 9 September 1959.⁶³ Of Massignon's relationship with Abraham, one modern historian of religion has written: "In short, it seems to us that for him the religion of Abraham was the "natural religion," or the nature of religion; mysticism is its essence, and sacrifice is its end."⁶⁴

Massignon brought all of his personal relationships somehow back to Abraham: al-Hallaj, Muhammad, the Seven Sleepers, St. Francis, Huysmans, Bloy, de Foucauld, Gandhi.⁶⁵ And it is in this context too that one sees how the religious values of "substitution" and "compassion" functioned for him.⁶⁶ "Substitution" is personal. It requires meeting another person in what Catholics would call the communion of saints. It involves carrying one another's burdens, putting oneself in another's place, accepting another's help. Within the embrace of the immortal communion of the saints, such a

61. See the very revealing letters in *Paul Claudel / Louis Massignon (1908-1914)*; ed. by Michel Malicet; *Les grandes correspondances* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1973).

62. See Louis Gardet, "Esquisse de quelques thèmes majeurs," in *Massignon*; ed. Six, p. 78.

63. Louis Massignon to Thomas Merton, 9 September 1959, *TMSC*.

64. Jacques Waardenburg, "regards de phénoménologie religieuse," in *Massignon*; ed. Six, p. 148.

65. See especially Louis Massignon, "Les trois prières d'Abraham, Père de tous les croyants," *Parole*, pp. 257-272; English translation in Mason, *Testimonies and Reflections*, pp. 3-20.

66. On these themes see especially J.-F. Six, "De la prière et de la substitution à la compassion et l'action," in *Presence de Louis Massignon*; ed. D. Massignon, pp. 155-166.

personal encounter is a mystical experience. One might say the same thing for "compassion." For Massignon, "compassion" meant getting it right, feeling the other person's predicament to the point that it provokes oneself to action. Massignon's own action in the last years of his life consisted in prayer, fasting, public demonstration and civil disobedience in behalf of the victims of the Algerian War. The supreme model for Massignon, the one to whom Abraham points, is, of course, Jesus the Christ, God Incarnate.

It is at this point that Massignon meets the challenge of Islam. In a letter to Merton, Herbert Mason once wrote that Massignon used to say that communism is a "cross examination of Christianity."⁶⁷ One can say much the same for Islam on the religious level, especially in reference to the testimony of the truth about Jesus Christ. For Muhammad and the *Qur'an*, Jesus, Mary's son, is but a man, a messenger of God. In terms of Massignon's thought, it is instructive to observe the role he sees for al-Hallaj in this regard: "Muhammad halted at the threshold of the divine fire, not daring 'to become' the Burning Bush of Moses; Hallaj took his place out of love."⁶⁸

But Islam's challenge to Christians still stands. In this regard Massignon was struck by what happened on one occasion when a body of Christians came from the old Arabian city of Najran to meet Muhammad at Medinah. The *Qur'an* only alludes to that event, but Islamic tradition has it that on that occasion Muhammad proposed an ordeal by fire to test who was telling the truth about God and Jesus the Christ, with the Christians themselves and Muhammad and his family ready to be holocaust victims. The Christians withdrew from the challenge on that occasion (*Parole*, pp. 147-167). But for Massignon the challenge still stands. He noted that in November 1219, at Damietta, St. Francis of Assisi stood to the challenge on the Christians' behalf once again, in the presence of the Muslim Sultan. They let him go, and he returned to Italy to receive the stigmata. But in our own day, the same challenge is still before us.⁶⁹

Massignon, together with his friend Mary Kahil, formed the *Badaliyyah* as a way in which Arabophone Christians might themselves accept the Islamic challenge — to put oneself in the place of the other and to take the consequences. He once tried to explain his actions in one of his letters to Merton:

67. Herbert Mason to Thomas Merton, no date, *TMSC*.

68. Quoted in Six, "De la priere," p. 156.

69. See Louis Massignon, "Mystique musulmane et mystique chretienne," *Opera Minora*, II: 483-484.

My case is not to be imitated; I made a duel with our Lord, and having been an outlaw (against nature in love), against Law (substituted for Moslems), and Hierarchy . . . (leaving my native proud Latin community for a despised, bribed and insignificant Greek Catholic Melkite church), I die lonely in my family, for whom I am a bore . . . I am a gloomy scoundrel.⁷⁰

This is not a statement of despair, but a summary statement of his own situation, as Massignon saw himself. It was all part of the price of putting himself in the other's place, following al-Hallaj, J. K. Huysmans, — Jesus Himself. It was his way of facing the challenge of Islam.

As for doctrine, Massignon was convinced that contrary to much Christian polemic against the Muslims, Muhammad was a prophet, a negative prophet he used to say, summoned to challenge the Christians and other religious people to the truth of the natural religion of Abraham, and to warn them away from their moral errors. As for the *Qur'an*, it points to Christ for Massignon. But it is a revealed scripture only in terms of the truth it contains. He called it "an Arabic edition of the Bible with a conditional authority" — conditional because in the end it excludes the full revelation of Jesus the Christ in the Gospel and in the Church.⁷¹

From Massignon's perspective, Islam and Islamic mysticism, encountering the God of Abraham, pose a challenge for purity of heart to Christians. In concrete terms, Sufism poses this challenge to Christian monasticism. Perhaps that is why in Merton's case he began, in 1967 and 1968, reading steadily in Islamic literature and giving lectures to the monks at Gethsemani on Sufism (*HGL*, p. 97). And it is why he was still reading Massignon and wondering about the Islamic view of Christian monasticism on his Asian journey. Merton finally thought he understood it this way:

The Moslem interpretation of this: that Allah did not prescribe the monastic life but some disciples of Jesus invented it, with its obligations, and once they accepted its obligations they were bound to them in His sight. The moral being: how much more will He require others to keep what He has prescribed. (*AJ*, p. 264).

This is the point at which we began to follow the course of the Merton/Massignon correspondence. It is a good point at which to bring it to a close. Their dialogue was a fruitful one. It continued past the point of no return for both of them.

70. Louis Massignon to Thomas Merton, 31 December 1960, *TMSC*.

71. See M. Hayek, "Louis Massignon face à l'islam," in *Massignon*; ed. Six, pp. 188-199; Martin Sabanegh, "Le cheminement exemplaire d'un savant et d'un chrétien à la rencontre de l'islam," in *Présence de Louis Massignon*; ed. D. Massignon, pp. 113-128. On these subjects, see some of the ideas of Massignon in Giulio Basetti-Sani, *The Koran in the Light of Christ: An Interpretation of the Sacred Book of Islam* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977).