

# Review of Memoir of a friend: Louis Massignon, by Herbert Mason

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*Memoir of a Friend: Louis Massignon*, by Herbert Mason. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988. 170 pages. \$18.95.

Louis Massignon (1883-1962) became celebrated, at least throughout the French-speaking world, in three very different roles: as the foremost Islamicist of his time, whose pioneering works and lifelong teaching and travels influenced several generations of students throughout the Arab world and Iran, as well as in France; as a prolific and profoundly committed Catholic intellectual, whose personal spiritual quest (after a dramatic conversion experience in 1908 and decisive friendships with J.K. Huysmans and Charles de Foucauld) led him to become a Franciscan tertiary and eventually a Melkite priest; and as a passionate activist and crusader for human rights, especially during the Algerian war and other decolonization struggles of the 1940's and 50's. The present work, by the translator of Massignon's magnum opus, *The Passion of al-Hallaj* (Princeton, 1983), focuses on the latter two aspects of Massignon's life and work, but also reveals some of the deeper personal roots of Massignon's writing about and fascination with the Middle East.

The opening section (pp. 5-56) is an excellent summary of some of the most striking aspects of this multi-faceted personality, traits that are palpable in all his writings: his linguistic genius, poetic intuition, almost superhuman erudition, moral and spiritual intensity, insatiable intellectual and personal curiosity, driving energy, and lifelong fascination with the Sufi martyr al-Hallaj as both inspiration and "mirror" of his own spiritual search. The remainder of the book consists of excerpts from Prof. Mason's own diaries during his decisive youthful encounter with Massignon (April 1959-June 1960), which offer a glimpse of the waning days of his circle of distinguished Catholic intellectuals—C Claudel, Maritain, Mauriac, Bernanos, Danielou, Chardin and (by correspondence) Thomas Merton—against the dramatic backdrop of France's last civil war.

In an age when the public "encounters" of Islam and the West so often tend to discourage even the most basic human understanding, hopefully this brief personal memoir will encourage those encountering Massignon for the first time (or who have known him only as an Orientalist) to move on to discover the complex, vividly living witness revealed in his later writings and

more recent commemorative volumes (e.g., *Presence de Louis Massignon: hommages et temoignages*, Paris, 1987).

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