

2021

## Review of The Theology of Louis Massignon: Islam, Christ, and the Church

Jon Armajani  
*College of St. Benedict/St. John's University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social\\_encounters](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters)



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), [Islamic Studies Commons](#), [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Armajani, Jon (2021) "Review of The Theology of Louis Massignon: Islam, Christ, and the Church," *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2, 153-156.

Available at: [https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social\\_encounters/vol5/iss2/21](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol5/iss2/21)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Social Encounters by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csbsju.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csbsju.edu).

***The Theology of Louis Massignon: Islam, Christ, and the Church.* Christian S. Krokus. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2017, hardcover, \$65.00, ISBN: 9780813229461.**

Jon Armajani  
College of St. Benedict/St. John's University

Louis Massignon (1883-1962) was an influential Catholic scholar of Islam and significant in Catholic-Muslim dialogue. Massignon's scholarly work focused on the Quran, the prophet Muhammad, Arabic, Sufism in general, and the Sufi mystic al-Hallaj (858-922) who was crucified for proclaiming ideas which contradicted those of some powerful Muslims of his time. Yet, Massignon believed that some of al-Hallaj's ideas overlapped with Christianity and that his viewpoints provided a basis for Catholic-Muslim dialogue. Massignon's writings and personal contacts established a foundation for official Roman Catholic statements about Islam, including such statements as *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate*, which were released by the Second Vatican Council that convened from 1962 until 1965.

In the *Theology of Louis Massignon*, Christian S. Krokus argues that Massignon's achievements in Christian-Muslim dialogue, his activism on behalf of Muslim immigrants, refugees, and Middle Eastern Christians, as well as his understandings of Islam must be understood in light of his Catholic convictions in relation to God, Christ, and the church. With a large number of references to primary literature, some of which have been translated into English for the first time, Krokus analyzes some of the main points of Massignon's religious ideas, which influenced scholars involved in Christian-Muslim dialogue, comparative theology, and religious pluralism.

Krokus's introduction provides an overview of Massignon's influence, ideas about the relevance of Krokus's book to Muslim-Christian relations in the contemporary world, and a brief biography of Massignon. In Krokus's first chapter, entitled "Louis Massignon: Method," he states that Massignon's scholarly method had four characteristics, which included an attitude of hospitality, a love of textual truth, an interiorist disposition, and perspectives in favor of historicity, integrity, and originality. For Krokus, hospitality was a central theme of Massignon's life and work, which Massignon understood to be a concrete virtue that undergirded his approach to Islam. In terms of Massignon's love of textual truth, Krokus describes Massignon as a collector, editor, and translator of crucial Arabic and Persian manuscripts. His approach to such manuscripts had a profound influence on many scholars of Islam who followed him, particularly in terms of Massignon's careful analyses of those texts and his descriptions of their relationships to their historical contexts. Massignon's interiorist method involved understanding Islamic texts from the inner vantage point of their authors. This approach is particularly compelling in analyzing mystical texts, such as those written by Sufis, because of the interior nature of mystical experiences. In terms of Islam's religious originality, Massignon explained the distinctive and original aspects of Islamic texts, while describing some of their similarities and differences compared to relevant texts from Christianity. This was one type of scholarly work which formed a basis for Christian-Muslim dialogue,

In Krokus's second chapter, entitled "God: Visitation of the Stranger," he describes Massignon's belief that Islam is a religion which is rooted in faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Ishmael.

*Book Review:*  
*The Theology of Louis Massignon: Islam, Christ, and the Church*

Krokus also explains Massignon's belief that Islamic faith constitutes "faith in our God," with the "our" referring to Christians ( p. 46). For Massignon, Semitic languages such as Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic "have the unique privilege of having been elected to receive the revelation of the transcendent God of Abraham" ( p. 46.). According to Massignon, outside the Bible and Quran, the God of revelation has been captured best by the writings of the mystics. While Massignon recognized some of the similarities between Christian and Islamic mystical experiences, he asserted his Christian belief in the Trinity, recognizing that this belief diverged significantly from Islam, in that Muslims reject the Trinity, believing it comes dangerously close to polytheism. Krokus states that Massignon's reflections on the Trinity were primarily experiential. For Massignon, revelation of the Trinity confirms that the Incarnation was first and foremost an indication of "the dynamism of the divine life" and "of the procession of love by which by which we have been invited to participate in faith" ( p. 81).

In Krokus's third chapter, entitled "Christ: Substitute Spirituality," he conveys that Massignon stated that he begins every day at the foot of the cross. Krokus maintains that there is a Christological key to all of Massignon's reflections on God, Christian and Islamic mysticism, and the relationship between the church and Islam. For Massignon, Jesus is God's definitive self-expression in history. He is the model of human sanctity; his wounds are evident in mature religious lives. According to Massignon, Christ's incarnation grounds the possibility of mystical union with God, and it is in Jesus's redemption of humanity that all who are saved participate, no matter their religious tradition. Even Massignon's ordination to the Melkite priesthood was about identifying with Christ's sacrifice. In this context, Jesus's presence in the Bible and Quran is a crucial basis for dialogue between Christians and Muslims (p. 17).

In chapter four, entitled "Islam: Traditional Muslim Apologetic," Krokus states that Massignon's understanding of Islam was thorough, vast, and intricate. At the same time, Massignon traveled frequently in the majority-Muslim world. Krokus divides Massignon's scholarship into phases, including early and late. In Massignon's early writings about Islam, he emphasized the doctrinal differences between Christianity and Islam, in part by drawing a severe contrast between Christian and traditional Muslim apologetics. The latter represented for Massignon a narrow interpretation of the Quran and an exaggerated insistence on the separation of Creator and creation. In contemporary times, one may associate the traditional Muslim apologetic with an Islamist, literalist, legalistic interpretation of the Quran and implementation of Islam. It represents an intellectualist abstraction devoid of mystical tendencies and of humanist artistic, literary, or musical impulses. Massignon did not believe that this abstraction described Islam as a whole. Rather, he addressed the traditional Muslim apologetic in the context of his study and responses to Islamic anti-Christian polemic, where for the sake of effective disputation, clear propositional lines are drawn. According to Krokus, during the late phase of Massignon's life, as his knowledge of Islam deepened, his mature and more conciliatory views about Islam emerged.

In chapter five, entitled "Islam: Massignon's Positive Judgments," Krokus states that although Massignon maintains a sharp distinction in his later writings between Sufism and the traditional Muslim apologetic, he also displays sympathetic appreciation for those aspects of Islam that he refuted in his earlier texts. Krokus states that Massignon's views about Islam evolved, and one reason may be that Massignon's context shifted. His conversion to Catholicism was decades old at this point, and some of the "defensive enthusiasm" of the recent convert may have matured (K

p.134). In addition, in the 1930s and 1940s, Massignon was no longer primarily answering the charges of anti-Christian polemics. Instead, he was often introducing to Catholic audiences, in Catholic journals, the positive qualities of Islam, a religion which he wanted to make better known and appreciated.

In chapter six, entitled “Islam: Abrahamic Schism,” Krokus calls Massignon’s midlife period his Abrahamic cycle. According to Krokus, in Massignon’s writings about Islam, he articulated a thesis which is simple and profound: Islam is an Abrahamic religion. For Krokus, while Massignon’s phrase “Abrahamic faiths” has become ubiquitous among supporters of Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue, and while popes in the modern period have embraced that idea, it is not the Catholic church’s official position. As Massignon argued that Islam is an Abrahamic faith, he also maintained that Islam “is almost an Abrahamic schism, like Samaritan religion and Talmudism were Mosaic schisms, like Greek orthodoxy was a post-Chalcedonian schism” ( p. 168). For Massignon, Islam “is a true community, which can be judged as infidel neither by the law of fear nor the law of grace – for, although formed after their dispensation, it has been provided an abridgment of the Bible that places it anterior, not only to Pentecost, but to the Decalogue” ( p. 168). For Massignon, the term “schism” is not negative; rather he believed that Islam’s separation from Judaism and Christianity is “less a function of doctrinal dissent than it is a product of historic-geographic circumstances” ( p. 169), which opens possibilities for Christian-Muslim dialogue.

In chapter seven, entitled “Church: Badaliya,” Krokus states that the most theologically significant expression of Massignon’s vision during the latter period of his life was the sodality (Catholic devotional society), which he and Mary Kahil (an Eastern Christian of the Melkite rite) founded. This sodality is named *Badaliya* which, in this context, connotes substitute and substitution in Arabic. In terms of this sodality, *Badaliya* suggests the substitute saints as the ones, who chosen by God, substitute themselves empathetically for the protection of another person or persons ( p. 198). The *Badaliya*’s members would live, through their vows, in accordance with the Christian mission of self-emptying love as a means for empathizing with Muslims. In addition, the *Badiliya*’s members would become spiritually dependent on Muslims by offering their lives to God in a spirit of love for Muslims. The *Badaliya*’s members’ vows were officially sanctioned by Pope Pius XI in 1934, and that sodality’s statues received formal recognition (an imprimatur) from Pierre Kamel Medawar, who was the Melkite auxiliary patriarch, in 1947, and then by Pope Pius XII. Pope John XXIII renewed that approval in 1959 ( pp. 198, 200).

The *Badaliya* was centered in Cairo and was intended mostly for Eastern Christians who were living among Muslims, although Latin Christians participated from the beginning. Among other endeavors, the sodality sponsored a series of presentations and discussions, named *Tuesdays at the House of Peace*, which took place near the Church of Saint Mary of Peace in Cairo. Satellite groups formed in other cities, including Beirut, Damascus, Paris, and Rome. The groups met on a regular basis for prayer, planning, and reporting on the members’ work. From 1947 until Massignon’s death in 1962, Massignon directed the sodality, while writing and distributing to its members fifteen annual letters which explained the *Badaliya*’s philosophy and reported on its work. He also wrote ninety-one “convocations,” which were communications chronologically between the issuance of the annual letters. ( p. 201).

*Book Review:*  
*The Theology of Louis Massignon: Islam, Christ, and the Church*

In Krokus's conclusion, he states his hope that *The Theology of Louis Massignon* will facilitate a wider theological conversation about Massignon's work, while illuminating his thought as a scholar of Islam and as a Christian. For Krokus, the evolution of Massignon's ideas about Islam reflects stages of other forms of authentic dialogue, "from passionate interest, to recognition of genuine differences, to understanding the religious other in the terminology and categories of one's own tradition, to an engagement with the other in mutual [understanding] and love" ( p. 226). According to Krokus, Massignon's "work demonstrates the value of grounding interreligious dialogue in scholarly learning, and it charts a path for the Church that is both Christian and knowledgeable about Islam, in contrast to many current approaches that sacrifice one or the other essential dimension" ( P. 226).

Krokus's book is a compelling and thorough analysis of Massignon's life and work as a Christian and scholar of Islam. The book conveys a remarkable empathy to Massignon, Christianity, and Islam. At the same time, it contextualizes Massignon's Christian theology and scholarship on Islam, while explaining their relevance to the contemporary world. Krokus's book is clear, organized, and compelling while giving careful attention to the nuances of Massignon's ideas. Its scholarly apparatus, including the footnotes and bibliography, are enormously useful. This volume may be particularly beneficial to scholars of Christianity, Islam, and Muslim-Christian dialogue, in that it explores themes within those disciplines with respect to Massignon and broader historical contexts. At the same time, it can be assigned to advanced undergraduate students and graduate students for relevant courses in Peace Studies, Theology, and Religious Studies. *The Theology of Louis Massignon* constitutes a vital contribution to scholarly literature on Massignon's life and work, and Christian-Muslim dialogue.

### References

The following article and book provide further information about Mary Kahil and the Badaliya sodality:

- Buck, D.C. (Ed.). (2016). *A pioneer of interfaith dialogue: Louis Massignon (1947-1962): The Badaliya Prayer Movement*. Clifton, NJ: Blue Dome Press.
- Wilkins, A. (2017). Mary Kahil and the encounter between Christianity and Islam. *Downside Review*. Vol. 135(3), 131-143.

For the correspondence between Thomas Merton, Massignon and their friend Abdul Aziz on Sufism:

- Baker, R., & Henry, G. (Eds.). (2005). *Merton and Sufism: The untold story; A complete compendium*. Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae.

For a collection of essays by Massignon, including Gandhian outlook and techniques, see:

- Mason, H. (Ed.). (1989). *Testimonies and reflections*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.