
Symposium: Louis Massignon and Orientalism

(Jerusalem-Nablus, 30 May-1 June 2004)

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Louis Massignon and Orientalism
(Jerusalem-Nablus 30 May-1 June 2004)

Louis Massignon (1883-1962), a pivotal figure in the history of European Orientalism, constitutes an excellent opportunity to consider the notion of Orientalism, its practices and effects. Not long after Maxime Rodinson passed away, it seemed appropriate to hold an international symposium on this question, two days in Jerusalem and one day in Nablus, and to extend the inquiry to another controversial individual, Edward Said.

In Jerusalem, the discussions comprised three parts. It began with “Orientalism as theology”, chaired by Father Jean-Michel Poffet, director of the Ecole Biblique. After outlining certain key events in his life, François L’Yvonnet talked about Massignon’s links with the *Dieu vivant* journal and set Orientalism in the context of the Christian community of the time. Rafael Herzstein looked at a particular instance – the teaching of Orientalism at the Université St. Joseph in Beirut, with particular reference to Father Henri Lammens with whom Massignon on occasion took issue.

Reviewing aspects of “Orientalism as science”, Michel Abitbol, the session’s chairman and a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, produced an unpublished letter by Louis Massignon dated 19 July 1929 to Dr. Victor Jacobson, proposing a research programme on mediaeval Jewish-Arab thinking because he believed “that the only way of achieving serious reconciliation between Arab Muslims and the Jews in Palestine is to find a common area of cultural understanding”. He suggests establishing “in connection with the official publications of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem a collection of Arabic texts selected from the great Jewish mediaeval writers”. And he finishes with the following comment: “I would readily agree to my name being included in any committee providing patronage for this social reconciliation undertaking, which pays tribute to a language of which the Muslims are so justifiably proud and which the Jewish people managed to use so gloriously.” Denis Charbit showed the new research into other religions that has been undertaken by Christians, and marked out a kind of map of the rudimentary tolerance of other religions that would result in Vatican II. Thierry

Fabre evoked the great figure of Jacques Berque, who died in 1995, a translator of the Koran and another professor at the Collège de France, where he began in 1956. Throughout his life Berque argued for a “pluralistic Mediterranean”. Remy Leveau, professor emeritus at the IEP in Paris, recounted his experiences as a young scholar of Arabic studies, as the head of the cultural service and the person who set up the CEDEJ, and then as a professor who helped educate and train a good number of today’s specialists. He spoke of the aura radiated by Massignon, but also referred to the tendency to ignore earlier works, pointing out that a fair number of texts very much deserved to be reread.

When chairing the session on “Orientalism as politics”, Leveau also introduced the papers given by François Angelier on Massignon and Jean Richard Bloch in the light of an unpublished correspondence. Then Moustafa Bayoumi, leading up to the Nablus session, sought to establish ties between yesterday’s Orientalism and its current form, “between knowledge and power”. Finally, it was left to David Lazar to tackle the delicate issue of relationships with Judaism and the creation of the State of Israel, topics which are addressed in part of his 1972 book. This is an extremely sensitive area where it would do no harm to await the forthcoming publication of correspondence.

Finally, François L’Yvonnet, a board member of the Louis Massignon Friends Association, moderated the last session in which Guy Stroumsa, with a brief overview of the recent history of French Orientalism, presented the nuances of hostility to Judaism and Israel in a discipline where there is next to no doubt as to his colleagues’ excellence; indeed, this is often acknowledged, but in private... France and Israel could play an essential role in this arena. Lastly, Dominique Bourel went back to the ties between the French world of academe, and Massignon in particular, with *Islamistik*, highlighting the major debt owed to German Jewish scholars.

The Nablus day, conducted in Arabic and introduced by Bernard Fillion-Dufouleur, was called: “From one Orientalism to another”. Focusing on Edward Said, it addressed issues of relationships with the religious missions in Palestine (Nizam Al-Abassi), and with post-colonialism (Hassan Khader), also querying the current conditions of research into Palestinian societies (Sossie Andezian). It was left up to François Burgat and Rashid Khalidi to speculate about the possible forms of a “new Orientalism”.

This symposium, part of which was broadcast on France Culture at the end of August 2004, was yet another example of the fruitfulness of scientific cooperation

between the cultural services of the Embassy of France in Israel and the Consulate-General of France in Jerusalem, with the assistance of the French Foreign Affairs Ministry's Alembert Fund. A bilingual French-Arabic publication is in preparation.

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