

força creadora del pensar. És per això que penso que un ateu que es prengui el seu ateisme seriosament és més a prop del creient que exerceix la raó religiosa que de tot ateisme crèdul i, a la inversa, qualsevol forma de creença crèdula, de respostes simples i somriures superficials a les complicades preguntes de la vida és molt a prop de l'ateisme crèdul i autocomplaent del qual se'n riu el boig.

La principal divisió que estableix el criteri de raonabilitat no és entre els creients i els no creients, ja que l'exercici mateix de la raó religiosa transcendeix l'àmbit religiós (exercitant-la un creient pot tornar-se ateu i a l'inrevés), sinó entre els que Charles Taylor i altres sociòlegs contemporanis denominen cercadors i sedentaris<sup>88</sup>. Entre els sedentaris tant hi pot haver creients instal·lats còmodament en les estructures mentals i institucionals tradicionals d'una religió com ateus aposentats en un ateisme dogmàtic i anquilosat. I entre els cercadors tant hi pot haver ateus com creients que, exercint la raó filosòfica i religiosa, guarden un gran parentiu en la pregunta i en el tempteig de la realitat. Si de cas hi ha Déu, viu més en el dubte i en la recerca, en l'obertura de la raó, que en les seguretats que sempre acaben intentant tancar-la.

La raó que sent no és autosuficient, no arriba mai a veritats eternes i és una raó corporal llastada per una gran quantitat de condicionants. Però això no vol dir que mitjançant aquesta raó pobra, provisional i gandula no puguem anar elaborant sabers, que no puguem anar creant i provant sentits que continguin alguna esclatxa de veritat i que no aconseguim anar tirant tots els panys que pretenen amagar l'obertura gegantina davant la qual ens col·loca la raó. És l'únic que tenim per no quedar a mercè del poder i el seu règim de postveritats. Res més, però tampoc res menys.

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# LOUIS MASSIGNON AND MARY KAHIL: A SPIRITUAL ENCOUNTER

RESUM: Aquest article descriu la relació entre Louis Massignon, savi catòlic de l'Íslam i pioner en l'entesa entre catòlics i musulmans, i Mary Kahil, cristiana oriental. La seva va ser una amistat espiritual notable que va durar molts anys, i que ha estat exemple de com dues persones que no s'assemblen poden compartir un profund compromís amb l'Íslam i els musulmans.

MOTS CLAU: espiritualitat, amistat, relacions entre cristians i musulmans, Louis Massignon, Mary Kahil.

ABSTRACT: This paper describes the relationship between Louis Massignon, a Catholic scholar of Islam and a pioneer of Catholic-Muslim mutual understanding, and Mary Kahil, an Eastern Christian. It was a remarkable spiritual friendship which lasted many years. An example of how two very different people, could share a deep commitment to Muslims and Islam.

KEYWORDS: spirituality, friendship, Islam-Christian relations, Louis Massignon, Mary Kahil.

The main source of information for the relationship between Louis Massignon and Mary Kahil is the book by Jacques Keryell, *L'Hospitalité Sacrée*, published in 1987. Keryell, who was 50 years Massignon's junior, first met him in Damascus in 1954 where he was a student of Arabic. Writing 32 years later he records his first reactions to the man he had admired from afar, and for whom, he says, he was full of "reverential fear and admiration"<sup>1</sup>. He had heard of him only four years earlier and was reading his works on Islam. But it was Mary Kahil, whom he met on one of her visits to the south of France in 1950, who opened his eyes to see another dimension to his character. He knew him by reputation as an eminent scholar who was also engaged in politics and religious activism, but after conversations with Mary he saw him also as a friend and spiritual master. Keryell went on to meet Mary on several occasions in Jerusalem, Lebanon and Cairo. But it was in August 1972 when she was staying at the Greek Melkite patriarchate in Lebanon that he had the chance to visit her regularly and speak in depth about her life. It was here that he heard about her first meetings with Massignon and the events surrounding the foundation of the Badaliya, and fortunately for posterity he had the foresight to record all she said on tape. Later in the same year he visited her in her own home in Cairo, where she allowed him to read all the letters she had received from Massignon. These comprised a huge collection of 1488 manuscripts pages. It was Mary's intention to make the correspondence public, because, after much prayer and reflection, she had concluded that they were not meant for her alone<sup>2</sup>. Most of these letters are now in the Vatican Archives, but Keryell believes that he has been faithful in what he has written to the overall

88 PHILIP J. ROSSI (ed.), *Seekers and Dwellers: Plurality and Wholeness in a Time of Secularity*, Washington: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2016, pp. 17-46.

1 KERYELL 11.

2 Cfr. *ibid.* 13.

message. A copy of *L'Hospitalité Sacrée* in my possession is inscribed by Keryell himself, who refers to the relationship between Massignon and Mary Kahil as strange and wonderful. That is a very apt description of an unusual relationship, whose importance in Massignon's life cannot be overestimated.

The intention in this study is to give brief biographical accounts of both their lives, concentrating on the elements which will be significant in their friendship, before describing and trying to understand the complexities and significance of their relationship. Certain strands will run through these narratives, which will be gathered together in some concluding remarks at the end. These will include Massignon's spirituality and asceticism, Abraham as a link between Christianity and Islam –and Judaism also– friendship in its various manifestations, including as model of the Church in her relations with the world and other religions, and Muslim/Christian relations in general. All of these can be subsumed under the heading of *Sacred Hospitality*, a term frequently flowed from the pen of Louis Massignon, and was an all-encompassing reality that was fundamental to his life and thought<sup>3</sup>. He experienced it in a very powerful, life changing way during his conversion experience, but in a broader sense he saw it as underlying all spiritual reality.

Before I describe the relationship between Massignon and Mary, there follows a brief account of Mary's life before she met Massignon.

#### Mary Kahil: a biographical outline

When she met Massignon for the first time, Mary was "a wealthy young Egyptian woman of twenty five, descended from a Catholic family which had come to Egypt in 1775. She had a Syrian father and a German mother, and reflected the polyglot nature of Cairo's upper class society at the beginning of the century. Fluent in Arabic and educated in European schools, she was an accomplished young woman at home with the Egyptian royal family and the European diplomatic corps"<sup>4</sup>.

However she could hardly be called a scholar, certainly nowhere approaching Massignon's level. She was also far removed from him in lifestyle; at the time of their first meeting Massignon was a recent convert, seriously contemplating joining Charles de Foucauld in a life of austerity and contemplation (combined with some study) in the Algerian desert.

Before this time, Mary's childhood had been happy and secure. She was born in 1889 in Damietta, the coastal town on the Nile made famous by the visit of St. Francis to the Sultan Malik al-Kamil, during the Crusades, in order to try and to convert him to Christianity. There was a small Franciscan church there where she and Massignon took the Badaliya vow. As a young child still playing with her dolls, Mary remembers being in the close proximity of a mosque from which she would hear the frequent calls to prayer, and she recalls that they brought her great joy and a sense of peace<sup>5</sup>. She had a Muslim nurse, and a Muslim gardener tended the grounds of the family house.

The Egypt in which Mary grew up was very different from the Egypt of today. Mohammed Ali, the ruler (*khédive*) of Egypt between 1806 and 1864, was desirous of opening up his country to European ways. With this in mind, he saw the Christian minority of the country as an enterprising élite who would help him further this end, and so abolished all discriminating policies against them. The Kahil family benefitted from this approach, and served on Mohammed Ali's Council, where they were given some responsibility for the financial and legal affairs of the country to them. Mary's father made his fortune in the wholesale lumber business, which operated internationally on behalf of the government. He bought

several properties in and around Cairo, and the Greek Melkite Cathedral was built on his land. With his German wife he had two sons and three daughters, Mary being the youngest<sup>6</sup>. Mary's education began in Cairo with French nuns, Religieuses de la Mère de Dieu, and continued in Beirut, again with nuns, the Soeurs de Nazareth. In 1905 when she would be 16, her father died and she had to return at home, where she seems to have stayed for some time because of the acute distress of her mother. Eventually she returned to a boarding school (she does not say where), but when she was nineteen she returned to Cairo without having completed her studies; she does not say why<sup>7</sup>. Perhaps a hint can be obtained from the fact that she mentions that Arabic was considered a very important subject in her former school (in Beirut), but the daily lessons in the middle of the afternoon used to send her to sleep<sup>8</sup>.

Brief mention must be made of her activities between the age of nineteen and twenty five, when she first met Massignon. Her family wished her to marry, and unsurprisingly, because of her attractiveness and wealth, she received numerous proposals. However, rather than going down that route she chose to throw herself into the Egyptian feminist movement, which closely paralleled the suffragette movement in England, and was a co-founder in 1923 of the Feminist Union of Egypt<sup>9</sup>. This group fought for women's rights, and was in contact with other feminist movements throughout the world, but they were also involved in charitable works such as providing dispensaries, workrooms for women, and help for illiterate women etc.

Some remarks of Jacques Keryell are relevant here. He writes:

This great lady... who lived her life in the limelight and loved it, did not seem at all prepared to be associated with the strange vocation and mysterious destiny of the austere professor Louis Massignon when they met for the first time in 1912, and again in 1934, the year which sealed their union. She seems to have been drawn, despite herself, into this spiritual adventure...<sup>10</sup>

Keryell goes on to recall a remark that she made at their first meeting in 1950. She said: "I am afraid of suffering... and I have never sought it. Those which the Good God sends me are enough. What is more I have never taken any vow except to love, to love to the end. I know well that I did not know what I was letting myself in for in 1934, at Louis Massignon's side"<sup>10</sup>.

Before describing this unlikely relationship, there follows a brief description of some relevant aspects of Massignon's spirituality.

#### Louis Massignon: His Asceticism and Spirituality

Massignon's life story is well known. Here the intention is just to outline certain features of his spirituality that have relevance for his relationship with Mary, and for the wider cause of Muslim/Christian relations.

There can be little doubt that the most formative event in Massignon's life was his conversion from agnosticism (even atheism?) back to the Catholic Christianity of his childhood in May 1908, when he was 25 years old. Any conversion experience is typically preceded by some form of crisis, and in Massignon's case it was a very serious one. The only European on board a small Turkish steamer on a river in Iraq, suspected of espionage and other crimes, knew that his life was in imminent danger and attempted to kill himself with a sharp dagger that he was carrying. In this desperate situation he

3 Cfr. *ibid.* 25.

4 *ibid.* 78.

5 Cfr. *ibid.* 86.

6 Cfr. *ibid.* 78.

7 Cfr. *ibid.* 90.

8 Cfr. *ibid.* 89.

9 Cfr. *ibid.* 105.

10 *ibid.* 124.

speaks of the visitation of a presence he calls the *Stranger*, “who visited me [he said] one evening in May, in the cabin of my prison, when all the doors were closed, and the cords about me had been tied doubly tight because of my two attempts at escape. There he lit a fire in my heart, which the knife had failed to reach, thus cauterising my despair”<sup>11</sup>. He then forgot about the threat of imminent death, so overwhelmed was he, in the light of this *visitation*, by a sense of his own sinfulness. He later records that he was “haunted by impure desires... and it caused me great suffering. Look how far I have sunk”<sup>12</sup>, he exclaimed, “after four and a half years of immorality...”<sup>13</sup>

This experience took place in the desert places of Iraq, which highlights another important feature of his spirituality. The birth place of an austere form of monasticism and still one of its living symbols, the desert had attracted Massignon from a very young age. Sent to the Algerian desert by his agnostic father at the age of seventeen, and by this time agnostic himself, it filled him with a primitive religious awe. He was struck by its beauty and later exclaimed in a letter to his friend, the poet Paul Claudel: “Do you think there is before God on the earth beauty more remarkable, more persuasive, and more rhythmical than the desert?”<sup>14</sup>, and in another letter said: “It was there that I was truly born”<sup>15</sup>.

The desert was also very important in his life because it brought him into close contact with Charles de Foucauld, who influenced him to such an extent that he was torn for years between the desire to join him in his solitary life in the desert or pursue a serious academic career. De Foucauld’s story is also well known, and his sanctity now has been publicly recognised by the Church, but when Massignon encountered him, he was an ex-Trappist, an ex-soldier, converted like himself from a life of dissipation to his native Catholicism in a Muslim environment. Here two strands of Massignon’s spirituality meet, the desert combined with his strong belief in *mystical substitution* by which he means the efficacy of one person’s prayer for others. Charles, he believed, through the offering of his life and prayers, specifically for Massignon, was instrumental in bringing him back to the faith of his childhood. This *mystical substitution* on behalf of others became the foundational idea of the Badaliya. Massignon sought out Charles in the desert because he was engaged, before his conversion, on a thesis about Leo Africanus, a sixteenth century geographer of Morocco, with which he believed Charles, who had explored the area, could help him. It was one of those providential encounters destined to affect him profoundly all his life. De Foucauld mistakenly thought that he had found in Massignon the person who was destined to succeed him in the desert and kept encouraging him to join him there. Massignon was indeed strongly attracted to Charles’ way of life but could not make up his mind. This struggle, we may note here, was still going on when he met Mary for the first time in 1912. It was only in hindsight that he saw Charles as instrumental in his own conversion. It came about as follows: having completed his thesis, he sent a copy to de Foucauld, who responded politely praising his work, but then added at the end “I offer to God for you my poor and unworthy prayers, begging him to bless you, to bless your work and your whole life”<sup>16</sup>. He remembered this at the time of his conversion; Charles, he believed, was one of the people who, by his prayers and *presence* at the time was instrumental in bringing it about. It was an enduring sorrow to Massignon that he did not join Charles in the desert, and he parted from him with a strong sense of having let him down. A woman who knew him well wrote after his death: “It seems that Massignon always bore a wound in his heart because of the disappointment he caused de Foucauld by not joining him”<sup>17</sup>. Charles was left alone in the desert without followers or converts,

and the order he wished to found as remote as ever. He was murdered senselessly by a panicky 15 year old boy on December 1<sup>st</sup> 1916. But after his death his spiritual heritage began with the founding of The Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus, now spread throughout the world. These grew out of a Third Order, The Union of the Brothers and Sisters of the Sacred Heart, of which Massignon was one of its first members. All his life he thought of himself as entrusted with a mission by de Foucauld, which was “the sanctification of Islam by uninterrupted intercession before God”<sup>18</sup>; “although Massignon never fulfilled de Foucauld’s deepest wish for him, their friendship influenced him profoundly until the end of his life”<sup>19</sup>.

Another very important aspect of Massignon’s spirituality is his devotion to the patriarch Abraham. He took the Arabic form of this name when he became a Franciscan tertiary in 1932, and Mary Kahil normally called him Ibrahim rather than Louis. It is commonplace today to refer to Judaism, Christianity and Islam as *Abrahamic religions*, but it was not so at the time of Massignon’s conversion or for some considerable time after it. We are now familiar with the fact that in *Nostra Aetate* it says of Muslims: “they strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God’s plan”<sup>20</sup>. The council fathers stopped short of declaring outright that in their judgement Muslims do in fact profess the faith of Abraham, but they “nevertheless clearly recognised the importance of Abraham in the self-understanding of Muslims, and thereby they provided Catholics with a theological and biblical point of reference in view of which to esteem Muslims”<sup>21</sup>. It would seem that we owe it to Massignon that this particular point of reference was written into this document<sup>22</sup>.

Massignon had a long-time personal devotion to St. Abraham, and formally dedicated his life to him when he took the habit as a Third Order Franciscan in November 1931<sup>23</sup>, and it became a key referenced point for him as he tried to understand Islam from within. However, for the first two decades of his life after his conversion his views were very conservative and in accord with current Catholic doctrine, which was very negative towards Islam. For instance, in an article in *The Moslem World* in 1915 (p.130), he states specifically the official Church position that Christians are the true heirs of Abraham, to the exclusion of Moslems and Jews. This is based on Paul’s letter to the Galatians (Gal. 4:21-31), and God’s promise to Abraham in the Torah, (Gn 21:12) that Isaac was the true heir to the promise, but nevertheless Ishmael, the son of Hagar the slave girl, would also become a *great nation*. So how did the figure of Abraham become the very symbol of the age of dialogue between the *Abrahamic* faiths? Massignon’s mature view of Islam took time to evolve, as can be traced through his articles, published and unpublished, but a key feature is his belief that the Arab race is descended directly from Abraham through Ishmael. This gives Muhammad himself a connection with the patriarch Abraham and “potentially a natural, if not a scriptural legitimacy in the eyes of Christians”<sup>24</sup>. This would involve Massignon in considerable controversy as “practitioners of the historical-critical methods of scholarship would systematically rule out any plausible historical connection between Muhammad and the Arabs on the one hand, and Ishmael and Abraham on the other”<sup>24</sup>. Neither was any such connection recognised at Vatican II, but it remained valid on a spiritual level, for after all, the same criterion applies to Christians – it is the faith of Abraham that we seek to emulate; physical descent is of no importance.

Another key to Massignon’s evolution of thought in this area is his “almost patristic style of

11 BORRMANS 17.

12 KERYELL 150.

13 BORRMANS 18.

14 SIX 27.

15 GUDE 9. Letter 46, 26<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2010. Claudel/Massignon correspondence.

16 SIX 27, quoted by GUDE 19.

17 GUDE 82.

18 FITZGERALD 77, quoting HARPIGNY.

19 GUDE 84.

20 VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Nostra Aetate*, n. 3.

21 GRIFFITH 193.

22 Cfr. KROKUS, *Louis Massignon’s Influence*; ROBINSON 191.

23 Cfr. GRIFFITH 198.

24 *Ibid.* 196.

typological thinking<sup>25</sup> which is in accord with his mystical inclinations, and in practice not unlike monastic *lectio divina*, which is almost the antithesis of the historical-critical approach. He says of the Qur'an, for instance, that it "combines and condenses fragments of the Pentateuch, of the Psalter, and of the Gospel, under a singularly elliptical form. This book, which a superior restraint seems to seal, imprisons under several literal and earthly equivocations, the sources of grace springing up in the sacred texts, as if the Qur'an was to the Bible what Ishmael, the one expelled, was to Isaac"<sup>26</sup>. This approach is perhaps a direct result of the fact that "Massignon was a devout Catholic with a mystical inclination and a lively sense of faith which brought him to engage religiously with the Muslims he met, and ultimately to attempt to explore Islam *from within*... an effort which to this day sometimes puts the more academically inclined orientalist off his writings"<sup>27</sup>.

One more trait of Louis Massignon needs to be mentioned before I proceed to discuss his relationship with Mary Kahil, as it will have some bearing on the later stages of their friendship. This is his propensity for fasting, which is of course associated strongly with the desert spirituality to which he was greatly attracted as an admirer of Charles de Foucauld. It was also his desire to be like the first Christians and like those Muslims whose strict Ramadan fast he admired. He said: "The Church is not worthy of its Head... unless she returns to her primitive discipline... fasting, penitence... the desire for martyrdom"<sup>28</sup>. However, in practice it would seem he was not generally so severe, at least not all the time, and not for others. As he wrote to Mary Kahil in 1960: "...Rather than a material fast [from food], the fast that you should practice ought to be gentle, that is to say, a spiritual fast"<sup>29</sup>. As we shall see, when the time came for her to *fast* in the way Massignon asked of her, it was not at all *gentle*. Massignon practiced fasting from dawn to dusk, as Muslims would during Ramadan, and encouraged his followers in the Badaliya to do the same every first Friday of the month, for the intention of obtaining a "serene peace between Muslims and Christians"<sup>30</sup>.

### Louis Massignon and Mary Kahil: the first encounter

At the first encounter of these two young people (Massignon was then 29, Mary 25), they were certainly not fasting. Massignon happened to be in Cairo where he had been asked to give a series of lectures on Muslim philosophy at the new modern University of Cairo. This was a very important assignment for him, coming at a time in his life when he could not decide whether to join Charles de Foucauld in the desert or give himself over definitively to his academic pursuits; it helped steer him definitively towards the latter. Whilst in Cairo he was a frequent visitor in the evenings at the residence of the Countess of Howenwaert. Mary Kahil also used to socialise there, and on this evening of their first meeting the Countess introduced them thinking they would like to speak Arabic together. Mary has described Massignon's appearance at this first introduction. He was, she said, "tall, slim and distinguished looking, dressed all in black"<sup>31</sup>. As an Egyptian feminist, and rather anti-French, she expressed her disapproval on discovering he had just been to Syria promoting French interests and opening a school dedicated to Joan of Arc. Massignon, of course, was a passionate Frenchman and so they did not exactly

take to each other at this first encounter! There was a friend of both Massignon and Mary, a Spanish nobleman, Luis de Cuadra, who also attended these social evenings, and it happened that around this time he became very ill with typhus fever and was hospitalised. A convert to Islam, Luis had caused his mother much distress on this account, and she begged prayers on his behalf. Mary as his friend was naturally concerned, and Massignon suggested they pray together for him. However, it would seem the request involved probably a little more than Mary was prepared for at that time. He said: "You are unhappy because he [Luis] is going to die, but you must make a sacrifice for him, the sacrifice of your life. You must offer your life for the conversion of Luis"<sup>32</sup>. Mary rebelled at first but eventually agreed, and so they both made a vow together, though not of the serious nature of the later Badaliya vow. Mary was more concerned with Luis' recovery from sickness than his conversion and, in fact, he did not reconvert to Christianity, and in the end sadly committed suicide. This offering, on Massignon's part, "could be discounted as the isolated, emotional response of a recent convert wishing to share his new found faith"<sup>33</sup>, but, according to Mary Louise Gude, "the offering of substitution for Luis de Cuadra ran like a thread through Massignon's entire life and was manifested in different ways through the years"<sup>33</sup>.

Before going on to describe the next stage of their relationship, it seems appropriate here to say something about the rather significant relationship that Massignon had with Luis de Cuadra, over a number of years. It began in 1906, before his conversion. He had just obtained the diploma in Arabic at the School of Oriental Languages, and was on his way to Cairo where he had just been made a member of the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire. Luis de Cuadra, a young Spanish aristocrat, age 29, was also on his way to Cairo where he had previously converted to Islam. They met on the boat sailing from Marseilles. Gude says: "The homosexual nature of this involvement is well known because Massignon, whose fierce reticence on some subjects was matched only by his compelling need to discuss others, was always explicit about its nature... and it was a relationship that marked him forever"<sup>33</sup>. The friendship continued after Massignon's conversion, weekly letters only ceasing after de Cuadra's suicide in 1921. Massignon "ultimately rejected its homosexual expression, but [w]hile one cannot assess the degree to which Massignon's homosexual experiences as a young man influenced him, by his own admission their impact was profound, and must be considered in any attempt to understand his adult life"<sup>34</sup>. Luis was also significant in his life for being the first to introduce him to Hallaj—he pointed out the verse which meant so much to Massignon, and set him off on his scholarly work on the Sufi mystic.

All this background was unknown to Mary, of course, when they met in the evenings at the house of the Countess of Howenwaert. However, it was shortly after their shared prayer for Luis that Massignon, fearing that Mary was becoming too attached to him, returned quite suddenly to France. He confessed to being surprised by this feminine onslaught on his *sinful misogyny* and the *Manichean* asceticism he had imposed on himself since his conversion, including a vow of chastity. The Countess had tried to dissuade him, but to no avail, and moreover he wrote to her sometime later that he had married his cousin who had apparently been in love with him for a long time. This happened in 1914. The question arises here: did Massignon in fact overestimate Mary's *attachment* at the time of his flight? Mary simply ends her account of this time with the words, "and so, I never saw him again until 1934"<sup>34</sup>. Here one might ask: was Mary really as detached as that final remark might suggest, and were other factors involved in Massignon's sudden departure and marriage? I would suggest that he was correct in assessing Mary's growing attachment. As time passed, especially in the later stages of their relationship, this *emotional attachment* becomes something very painful, which however is taken up onto a spiritual

25 *ibid.* 197.

26 MASSIGNON, *La conversion*, quoted by GRIFFITH 197.

27 GRIFFITH 194.

28 MASSIGNON, *Écrits*, 268, quoted by BORRMANS 52.

29 KERYELL 314.

30 BORRMANS 52.

31 KERYELL 92.

32 GUDE 65.

33 *ibid.* 23.

34 KERYELL 94.

level. She says in her diary in the year he died:

Is his death real, is it possible? He who sowed life everywhere... he died at 11.30 on the eve of All Saints. He will never be invoked among all those other saints. He is a saint all alone. He will be a saint. And I navigate through bitter waters, buried in mud right up to my neck... sadness and even despair enveloped me in their dark shadow. But then [she continues], I returned to the little Franciscan chapel that he loved so much. There before the crib, I suffered greatly, and prayed, O Jesus, I have told you how much I loved him, and my heart burns like a furnace... And you, Jesus, allowed me to love him, you who have placed this love in my heart, like a cross... it is my own cross, this burning love for Massignon. He also said that Jesus commanded this love for me, although it is incomprehensible. It is a divine secret, a command from God, that we should love each other, completely, every instant, because God is love... And so I understood that my cross is Ibrahim, and I carry this luminous cross lovingly on my shoulders<sup>35</sup>.

On Massignon's side, at the time of his departure from Cairo not long after meeting Mary, it needs to be born in mind that he was still struggling with indecision about his future –whether to join de Foucauld in the desert, or pursue his academic career. Also it may be remarked that he was most likely still very emotionally attached to Luis de Cuadra.

### The second meeting of Massignon and Mary Kahil: the Badaliya vow, the priesthood

Mary passed the following few years after Massignon's return to France in Europe with her mother's family, far from the combat zone of the Great War of 1914-1918. On her return to Egypt, she threw herself once more into the work of the Feminist union and her various charitable works. Then one day she received a postcard from Massignon, which simply said: With respectful memories. Shortly afterwards she was taking tea with in a friend's house when her neighbour suddenly turned to her and asked if she was aware that Louis Massignon was in Cairo at the Institute of Archaeology. She did not respond but a little later slipped away secretly and went straight to the Institute where she found him in the library. There was instant recognition, although he was now 51 years old, and she 46. She describes the man that she encountered on entering the library as "a rather quaint figure, a little stooped with his head bent over his work, a slight ageing evident in the *very tall, upright man* she remembered"<sup>36</sup>. However, their relationship resumed the next morning as if no time had passed, when Mary arrived at the Institute with her car and they went to mass together.

They continued to associate with each other fairly regularly and discovered they were both very involved in Muslim affairs. Massignon suggested to Mary that he thought this involvement of hers with Muslims was her vocation. She reacted with surprise, asserting that she had no religious vocation. He responded that her vocation was just to occupy herself with Muslims and their affairs. Reflecting on this in her personal account of this time, Mary says: "It seemed to me that he had confirmed me in what I was already doing, when he said I had a vocation to live among Muslims and devote myself totally to them. And thus, I became attached to Massignon, not as a man, but as my spiritual master. It was a silent call in the depths of my being, quite unexpected"<sup>37</sup>. However, she also had a profound spiritual influence on him, as exemplified particularly in her part in his decision to become a priest. It happened as follows:

She asked him one day, knowing that it was something he very much wanted, why he had not become a priest. He replied that he had married instead, in obedience to his confessor. Mary expressed her amazement that a man of his age should obey his confessor to that extent. She relates: "And thus he confided to me... that [despite his marriage] he had always wanted to be a priest in order to be closer to the Lord Jesus"<sup>37</sup>. She suggested to him that it was still possible, and he promised to think about it. The outcome was that Massignon eventually received permission from Rome to transfer his allegiance to the Melkite Church to which Mary belonged, and which allowed married priests. He was ordained on 20<sup>th</sup> January 1950, in Cairo.

Some comment is in order here as to why Massignon did actually marry. It is not only Mary who might be surprised at his willingness to obey his confessor in this vital matter. The reasons may have been complex, and he did not do it without much thought and prayer, after many years of often agonised indecision about his future. He felt it deeply that he had disappointed Charles de Foucauld by not joining him in the desert, where he could have been secretly ordained, according to Charles.

Paul Claudel, another friend and correspondent, lamented the *mediocre state* he was committing himself to by comparison. However, in the end, de Foucauld supported him in his decision, saying "If God wishes marriage for you, do not accept it as expiation, but as the state where he has reserved for you the greatest grace, the state where you are best able to glorify him, and to sanctify yourself"<sup>38</sup>. Of this complex area in Massignon's life, Mary Louise Gude concludes: "From the evidence available, it would appear that Massignon married in order to anchor his life and give it a stability which would then free him to pursue his work as teacher and scholar. Misgivings and ambivalence remained until the end of his days"<sup>39</sup>.

After the 1934 meeting with Mary, that took place after a gap of 21 years, Massignon wrote to her to say how much it meant to him: "[It] pierced my heart right through to the burning wound of my conversion... and revived in me in a wrenching manner my promises to belong to God alone, in all holiness, forever"<sup>40</sup>; and a little later: "How silent it is, the wonderful perfume of incense, the mute prayer of my Arab sister, of Maryam, which rises toward God and reaches me here by a supernatural delicacy of grace... This grace I had never known in such a direct way, constituted by the spiritual presence of a soul-friend who understands and who shares"<sup>41</sup>. According to Mary Louise Gude, "no parallel existed for the depth of understanding he found in her"<sup>42</sup>. By this time of their second meeting, Massignon, of course, was married, and "the relationship was always articulated at the level of their mutual interest in Islam and the search for God. However, evidence suggests a bond far transcending that of spiritual director and directee; they occupied a unique place in each other's lives....[t]heir devotion to each other was reciprocal, expressed in regular and voluminous correspondence between them; it extended from 1934 to 1962"<sup>43</sup>, with the exception of a break in the 1950's.

The spiritual closeness of Massignon and Mary grew quickly in the period following their second meeting in 1934, so that their mutual understanding was such that they were able to take the Badaliya

35 *ibid.* 333.

36 *ibid.* 97.

37 *ibid.* 98.

38 GUDE 81.

39 *ibid.* 82.

40 KERYELL 175. Letter 4, 10<sup>th</sup> Feb. 1934.

41 *ibid.* 183. Letter 15, 20<sup>th</sup> March 1934.

42 GUDE 134.

43 *ibid.* 133-134.

vow together. To all appearances this vow seemed to be taken spontaneously and without due preparation, but in fact there was such an unspoken affinity between them that it is not so difficult to understand how it occurred. To take a vow is a serious, life-changing event, not normally done without some preparation, for instance as for marriage, or the religious life. This vow did, in fact, in Mary's words, "change her life forever"<sup>44</sup>. She describes the day, 9<sup>th</sup> February 1934, when she and Massignon paid a visit to Damietta with its famous Franciscan church. Mary was praying there with great intensity, when suddenly she turned to him and said how sad she was that this town to which so many Syrian Christians had come, including her ancestors, and of whom none now remained –the town having become totally islamized. Massignon responded: "You must make a vow to give your life for them"<sup>45</sup>. She describes how she was then taken up into a state difficult to describe, but she made her vow "to live for them, to give myself for them, to be in their place before the throne of Jesus, and that for all her life and her eternity she would pray that they be enlightened"<sup>45</sup>. Massignon took her hand and made the same vow. She said: "We made this vow with great fervour... a state of illumination that I have never known since. On coming out of the church I felt completely transformed, no longer my former self... We offered ourselves for Muslims. Not that they should be converted, but that God's will be done for them and through them"<sup>45</sup>. As Keryell comments: "Nothing up till this time seemed to have predestined this great woman of upper class Egyptian society to such a mysterious vocation. It is only progressively that Mary seemed to pass from a simple, natural friendship with Muslims, to a real love, the love of substitution"<sup>46</sup>.

On 18<sup>th</sup> July 1934, Massignon received official Church approval for the path he was taking when Pius XI blessed his vow of *substitution*. Massignon returned yearly to Damietta to renew this vow with Mary, but it was she who gave it flesh among the Egyptian people. She was a very active, energetic person with many contacts, all of which was brought to bear as she gave concrete expression to Massignon's ideals in Egypt. It was she who founded the Badaliya group in Cairo and the adjoining Dar-es-Salam (House of Peace) centre, which she established in a deconsecrated Anglican church and presbytery. The church was adapted for the performance of the Byzantine rite in 1941, and the presbytery for the Dar-es-Salam centre. The church was called Our Lady of Peace and it was here that Massignon was ordained a priest in 1950. In collaboration with him and their many friends, Mary organised conferences on a variety of topics, both sacred and secular. The speakers she invited included Roger Arnaldez, Louis Gardet, and René Voillaume, and Massignon himself wrote regular letters to inspire the Badaliya that met in the former presbytery. This was the pattern of their life for almost twenty years after the vow she and Massignon took together, until one day Mary received a letter from him in 1951 which completely baffled her, and caused much suffering.

## The fast of silence

This letter initiated what is the most difficult part of their relationship to describe. Keryell, who knew both Mary and Massignon, approached it with a sacred respect, knowing that what he wrote hid as much as it revealed<sup>47</sup>. The same approach is taken here, for it is in this episode above all that it becomes clear that Mary was "in no way prepared to be associated with the strange vocation and mysterious destiny of the austere professor Louis Massignon"<sup>48</sup>. Here we are far from describing a platonic love, as certain people have thought and seen, says Keryell<sup>49</sup>. It is not surprising that problems arose in their relationship. It would seem

that Mary did attract some criticism on account of her closeness to Massignon, for after all she was attractive, single and wealthy, and he was a married man. With this in mind he once wrote to her: "What does this incomprehension matter... the more we are friends the less we will be understood, but He [God] will be our enclosure..."<sup>50</sup>

However, in the final few years it mattered greatly, for in a sense they were bound together by a vow which transcended marriage, but equally could clash with it. He wrote to his godson, the convert Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, a young Moroccan student who became a Franciscan friar in Paris: "The Pope... has blessed the offering of my life and my death for my Muslim brothers and sisters, as I offered it on 9 February at Damietta, where I explicitly included this other soul who made it with me"<sup>51</sup>. And as he wrote to Mary: "Pray that I succeed in giving to my own all that God desires I should give for their good. But of course my gift to Islam precedes it, and is before all else"<sup>52</sup>.

Mary was important to Massignon; Jacques Keryell has described her as "the extension of Massignon in Cairo; she gave flesh to his ideas, lived his faith"<sup>53</sup>. But on the other hand Mary was very dependent on Massignon in her spiritual life, especially through the exchange of letters. As she wrote to him soon after his ordination to the priesthood in 1950: "A new life is opening up for me, if I respond with fidelity to the interior call of solitude, and the presence of the interior Guest... And as I do not know how to meditate alone, it is in writing to you, and in my journal, that I put myself in his presence..."<sup>54</sup> Thus when Massignon sent her a letter in August 1951 saying he was about to make a *fast of silence* which he wished her to share with him, it came as a shock for which she was not prepared. It meant in practice that they would not see each other for several years and would exchange letters only very infrequently. This sudden silence from Massignon after such a long, intimate correspondence caused her great anguish. Nevertheless she responded, as she knew would be expected of her, with generosity and trust. By her own admission, she had been too long involved with exterior things and contact with people. She had known success in all her projects and had not entered sufficiently deeply into herself. She recognised now that she must have the courage to enter the *inner tent*, the dwelling place of God, which formerly, she admitted, she had sought only in a mechanical way. In her journal she writes: "My heart's sadness is that I do not know how to love, or to listen, listen to that interior voice... the call of Him whom I do not hear"<sup>55</sup>.

Is there anything from Massignon's perspective that might shed light on why he caused Mary this seemingly unnecessary suffering? Ultimately, it remains a mystery, but in fact Massignon used to confide in his godson Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, who was very friendly with his wife, Mme. Massignon, and fortunately the correspondence between Massignon and his godson has been collated and published by Françoise Jacquin in 2007. In July of 1951 Massignon wrote a lengthy letter to Abd-el-Jalil in which it was clear he was not entirely at peace<sup>56</sup>. It seems that his wife was not happy with his ordination to the priesthood. She worried that her husband was no longer so devoted to his family. Massignon expressed some anguish about his inner solitude, which although he thanked God for it every morning, he felt it to be more severe than if he had become a priest in the desert with de Foucauld<sup>57</sup>. Jacquin comments in a footnote that "the

44 KERYELL 86.

45 Íbid. 100-101.

46 Íbid. 102.

47 Cfr. íbid. 123-124.

48 Íbid. 124.

49 Cfr. íbid. 125.

50 Íbid. 134-135. Letter not dated.

51 BORRMANS 39-40.

52 Íbid. 39.

53 KERYELL 80.

54 Íbid. 326. Letter dated 31<sup>st</sup> Jan. 1950.

55 Íbid. 130.

56 Cfr. JACQUIN 217-218. Letter dated 27 July, 1951.

57 Cfr. íbid. 218.

spiritual intimacy between LM and MK could hardly be anything but painful to Mme. Massignon. (...) [And in fact a] temporary rupture was strongly recommended by Massignon's spiritual director, Father Zundel O.P.<sup>58</sup>. A mutual friend of Massignon and Mary, Louis Gardet, who became Frère André of the Little Brothers of Jesus, tried to help Mary through this difficult time. He had managed to speak to Massignon privately on her behalf, and he had assured Gardet that "he did not deny anything of their relationship"<sup>59</sup>. In fact, he had *spoken much* about her, and "wished her to know that the sacrifice he asked of her was for the greater love of God... and for their common vocation which took concrete form in the Badaliya and Dar-es-Salam"<sup>59</sup>. Massignon had said: "It was... to foster the spirit of self-forgetfulness he had observed in Charles de Foucauld. If the grain does not die, I am not yet dead... [continued Gardet:] He knows it is a great sacrifice he is asking of you; but he knows also that you will refuse Jesus nothing. (...) He did worry that what he was asking of you might be too much. But now he is confident. He is sure of your total gift of yourself"<sup>59</sup>.

## The final years

After a few years the *fast* was broken, but by this time Massignon did not have long to live. Mary wrote to him in late 1959: "You know about my long waiting in ardent serenity, confident that the God of Love, who has given us so much, will give us the happiness of seeing each other again, one more time, according to his will, for we are approaching the end of our lives. How much longer do we have? What will the end be like?"<sup>60</sup> In fact, for Massignon the end was not far off. He died on the Eve of All Saints, Oct 31<sup>st</sup> 1962. Speaking of the day of his death Mary writes in her journal: "...I did not know he had died... And on the evening of his death, of his passing, I saw him, in black, reassuring me, passing by like a shadow, or a passing star, and sadly I contemplated this vision"<sup>61</sup>. She could not sleep all night, and the next day instinctively went back to Damietta, "to receive his soul, there, where he had always wished to die"<sup>61</sup>. However every year in August she could not help remembering the year that she had received the letter requesting the *fast of silence*. Two years after Massignon's death she recalls in her journal being in a Franciscan church in Innsbruck, in August, where she said that she *saw* Abd-el-Jalil (who was still alive). She said: "He assures me that Louis did not abandon me, ever. He wished to suffer, and asked to be without me. It was harder for him than for me"<sup>62</sup>.

Thus ended, on earth at least, that strange and wonderful friendship. Mary was to outlive Massignon by seventeen years, not dying until she was ninety, in 1979. It would seem that after Massignon's death she continued with her charitable work and the work of the Dar-es-Salam Centre. In the final two years of her life, she prepared consciously for death by keeping silence, praying much, and listening tirelessly to recordings of the Byzantine liturgy in Arabic. On her ninetieth birthday, a mass was celebrated in her house by Fr. Georges Anawati O.P., a lifelong friend. She died later that year, on 28<sup>th</sup> June 1979<sup>63</sup>.

## Conclusion

This remarkable friendship between two very different people has left us a model in the Badaliya, of how to be in communion with Muslims in a spiritual union that does not seek to convert. Thanks to Mary's influence Massignon fulfilled his heart's desire of becoming a priest, so as better to practice in his own life, on behalf of Muslims, the *substitution* accomplished by Jesus on the cross for the human race as a whole.

58 GUDE 219.

59 KERYELL 126-127. Letter of 9 November 1951.

60 Ibid. 131.

61 Ibid. 334.

62 Ibid. 336.

63 Cfr. *ibid.* 80.

Finally, we have in Massignon and Mary a wonderful example of friendship, deep, spiritual and enduring, between two people who were not at all alike, but shared a deep commitment to Muslims and Islam. Christian Krokus has referred to the work of John Dadosky on the Church as friend, which recalls and develops Avery Dulles' well-known book, *Models of the Church*<sup>64</sup>, in which he discusses the Church as institution, sacrament, herald, and servant, all very rich themes, but they "do not envisage that the Church can become more herself by receiving from the Other"<sup>65</sup>. Dadosky continues: "The differences between friends complement and enrich each other, but friends can also challenge each other to continued growth"<sup>66</sup>. In the Church since Vatican II there has been a dramatic shift in the Christian attitude to Islam which in large part is due to the influence of Massignon's ideas. His friendship with Mary which reached out to include all Muslims, is a sign of this reality, which in turn is part of that greater, all-embracing reality, which Massignon loved to call *Sacred Hospitality*.

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64 Cfr. DULLES.

65 DADOSKY 307.

66 *Ibid.*, 316; KROKUS, *Louis Massignon: Vatican II and Beyond*, 440-441.