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## Louis Massignon: The Crucible of Compassion

by Mary Louise Gude

### Book Review -

University of Notre Dame Press  
Notre Dame, Indiana 46556 USA  
1996, 283 pages. Cost in USA: ca. \$25.00  
ISBN 0-268-01308-X (hardcover)

Commemorating the eightieth anniversary of the death of Charles de Foucauld, Jean Francois Six wrote an article on his legacy for L'Osservatore Romano (19 February 1997). At the birth of this legacy and through the first decades of its growth, the name of Louis Massignon (1883-1962) recurs.

It was Massignon who got the text of Foucauld's Directory published and he was one of the original 48 members of Foucauld's Union of the Brothers and Sisters of the Sacred Heart. It was Massignon who convinced Ren Bazin to write a biography of Brother Charles that came out in 1921, *La vie de Charles de Foucauld, explorateur en Maroc, mite du Sahara*. Bazin's biography and Louis Massignon's enterprising will gave birth to the first group of congregations inspired by Charles de Foucauld.

There is now (1996) a biography of Louis Massignon in English by Mary Louise Gude. She aptly subtitles it, *The Crucible of Compassion*. The jacket of her book notes that Massignon dominated the field of Islamic studies for over sixty years. The book is in nine chapters and chapter three details the relationship Massignon-Foucauld. I will make a few comments on the content of that third chapter.

All told, Massignon received seventy-nine letters from Foucauld during the period 1909-1916; those he wrote to Foucauld were destroyed by the latter. ... Early in the friendship Foucauld thought he had found in Massignon the companion he had so long desired to share his life among the poor in the Saharan desert, and he clung to this idea even as Massignon vacillated. (pg 63) In the end, Louis Massignon married and led the life of a family man/scholar while remaining devoted to Brother Charles. Foucauld's last letter to Massignon was on the day he was murdered, December 1, 1916. Although Massignon never fulfilled Charles de Foucauld's deepest wish for him, namely to join the hermit in the Sahara, their friendship influenced him profoundly until the end of his life. Foucauld, in Massignon's view, had been given him as an older brother, whose experience of rediscovering Christian faith through Islam was paralleled in the life of the younger man. (pg 85)

The Foucauldian spirituality that deeply influenced Massignon is explored by Gude at the end of chapter three of the biography she composed. For this review, I will touch only one aspect, quoting liberally from her work:



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The Islamic code of hospitality had enabled both Foucauld and Massignon in their explorations to penetrate the Muslim world. It had not only saved their lives but proved to be the touchstone of rediscovered faith. After their respective conversions, hospitality prefigured for them the stance of God himself toward human beings. The sacredness of the guest and his right of asylum guided Foucauld's activity among the poor of the Hoggar. By exercising the same hospitality and compassion he had once been shown, Foucauld wished to suggest divine compassion. From that example Massignon, the Christian whose faith had been restored through contact with Islam, discovered in all other human beings, beginning with the most abandoned, [his] brothers.

Foucauld's stance became the basis of what Massignon would term l'hospitalite, or the acceptance, the transfer to ourselves of the sufferings of others. ....It was a concept that evolved for Massignon throughout his life even as it nurtured him. He wrote in 1961, a year before his death: *This notion of sacred hospitality that I have deepened over many years, since 1908, when Foucauld supported me like an older brother, seems to me essential in the search for Truth among men, in our journeying and work here below, up until the very threshold of the beyond. (pgs 85-86)*