

# THE PROPHETS OF DIALOGUE: MASSIGNON, MONCHANIN AND MERTON

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Jacques Jomier *op.*, a great contributor to interreligious dialogue in our own time.

IN HIS LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS, Paul speaks of Christ:

He who has descended is the same who has ascended above the heavens, to fill the universe. And it is he who through grace has appointed some apostles, others prophets, other evangelists, others pastors and teachers. (Eph 4:10-11).

This text reminds us that prophecy did not end with the coming of Jesus. The Church, as this and other passages testify, recognises prophets and seems to attribute to them a specific role. If in the Creed we acknowledge that the Holy Spirit 'has spoken through the prophets', perhaps we should also put the verb into the present, and say that he 'speaks' through the prophets.

We must then make a distinction between the prophets before Christ and those after him. The former can contribute to the formation of the revelation, while the latter interpret such revelation, bearing their personal witness to God and to Christ in the power of the Spirit.

Bearing this in mind, it is certainly justifiable to speak of prophets of dialogue, that is of persons who through their own personal experience, studies, and teaching, have contributed to making dialogue between the religions understood as a requirement of our time and a requirement of the faith.

If, as Paul VI mentioned after his pastoral visit to India, quoting St Augustine 'Also the Gentiles have their prophets', it would have been possible to choose persons from the various religions—for instance Mahatma Gandhi, whom Paul VI admired. I have, however, chosen on the contrary to limit myself to three Christians, in fact three Catholics, and consider their contributions to dialogue with Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists.

## LOUIS MASSIGNON (1883-1962) AND ISLAM

Louis Massignon, a well-known French Orientalist, was professor at the Collège de France from 1926 to 1954. Maybe more than any other individual, he prepared the way for the new attitude of the Church towards Islam expressed in the Conciliar declaration *Nostra Aetate*. Massignon was a Christian, baptised despite his father's opposition, who followed the preparatory course for Communion, but already at school abandoned his practice of religion. His spiritual journey began with a cultural and linguistic conversion. While travelling in North Africa to prepare for a diploma he was betrayed by an interpreter who did not translate his words faithfully. Massignon thereupon decided to study Arabic, and dedicated himself to this with all the strength of his 21 years. He went to Cairo to deepen his knowledge of Arabic, and there came across a verse of the Muslim mystic al-Hallaj which made a great impression on him:

Two rak'as (of prayer) are sufficient for love  
but first the ablutions made in blood.

He was to choose Hallaj as the subject for his doctoral thesis, hoping in this way to come to understand Islam from within.

In late 1907 he left for an archaeological mission in Mesopotamia. During a journey on the Tigris, the only European on a Turkish boat, he felt himself threatened on suspicion of being a spy. He tried to flee but was captured. He felt that he would be condemned to death, and tried to commit suicide. Ill with a high fever, he prayed to all who might

protect him. He felt a presence—God who is Love, who wishes to be loved for himself alone, and for ever. Massignon declared: "The Stranger visited me". Taken to Baghdad, at the hospital he was cared for by a Muslim family, the Alusi, and this experience of hospitality was to be fundamental for him. On his way back to France, in Aleppo he experienced strongly the presence of God the Father. At Baalbek he made his reconciliation with the Church, and on arriving in Paris he dedicated his life to God.

Massignon's conversion was not from one religion to another, but it was the rediscovery of his Christian faith, a rediscovery made in a Muslim milieu, "en terre d'Islam", which was to determine the direction of his life.

Louis Massignon was a friend of Charles de Foucauld, who saw in him a possible successor as a Christian presence in the Sahara desert. A scholar of Massignon's life has written:

Massignon always considered himself sent by de Foucauld to continue his work. But, although he did follow de Foucauld as regards his spiritual aspirations, the sanctification of Islam through continual intercession before God, in silence and prayer, nevertheless he took another path for his presence amongst Muslims. Massignon was to choose the transformation of a mindset. (cf. Harpigny p. 77)

Praying for Islam, helping marginalised Muslims, in the spirit of substitution, this was the spirituality of Massignon which he developed as a result of his studies on Hallaj.

As an illustration of this I have chosen, from Massignon's vast corpus of writings, a fairly short text which came out in 1949: *Les trois prières d'Abraham*. Massignon is meditating upon the text of Genesis, but using his own knowledge of Islam.

The first prayer, made at Mamre, is for Sodom. Abraham, having left his own country, has in accordance with God's

will received hospitality in the country of Canaan. As a result of his alliance with the inhabitants of Canaan, he fights on behalf of Sodom (Gen 14:8-24). Then, still due to hospitality received, he intercedes for Sodom (Gen 18:16-33). One could say that not having been able to liberate Sodom by means of armed force, he tries to find within the city those righteous persons who can justify its salvation. The promise of God to Abraham remains, and in prayer he has to bring this before God. Applied to Islam, this means that one must remind God of the presence in this religion of righteous people such as Hallaj.

The second prayer of Abraham, made at Beersheba, is for Ishmael, when he is forced to make a *hijra*, a migration, with his mother Hagar (Massignon notes the linguistic similarity). He will find water in the desert, but he will not find hospitality. He will be compelled to live as an exile. But Ishmael too had received from God a blessing of fruitfulness. Massignon saw in the expansion of Islam after Muhammad's *hijra* the realisation of God's plan for Ishmael. That is, he saw Islam as a mysterious answer to Abraham's prayer. He attributed to Islam a critical role in the plan of God: it is a living criticism against the Christians who do not live out in full the message of Christ. Massignon called Islam "the sword of divine transcendence". The role of Islam, a community (*umma*) centred upon Mecca (hence the importance of the *qibla*—the direction of prayer—and of the *hajj*—the pilgrimage), a community forming an authentic and homogeneous spiritual bloc held together by the faith in God which comes from Abraham, will receive its fulfilment when the excluded Hagarenes will again be welcomed. This moment of reconciliation is to be prepared by people living out, in the lands of Islam, the holiness of Christ,

living as strangers and welcomed as guests.

The third prayer is the offering of Isaac on Mount Moriah. Abraham lives to the utmost limit his covenant with God. He abandons everything, even the moral justification of his action: he is ready to sacrifice his son. But this son is restored to him. However, the interrupted sacrifice will have to be completed by his descendants. Thus the third prayer of Abraham has a priestly character.

The sacrifice is made in Jerusalem. And Massignon declared in a lecture given in Paris,

It is there that one must go to hear, beneath a downpour of profanation announcing the final judgement, the invitation from the Father whom we have in common, who calls all the hearts which hunger and thirst for justice, to make pilgrimage to the Holy City: an invitation repeated here, after returning from a third visit, made not without a great desire, as yet ungranted, to die there (OM p. 816).

His wish was not to be granted. He died in Paris in 1962, on the eve of the Second Vatican Council. The Council was to agree with Massignon in its recognition that the Muslims with us adore the same God, in the importance given to Abraham as a model of faith, in the respect owed to Muslims. It did not however accept his emphasis on Ishmael. St Paul states that our prophecy is imperfect, something which could well be applied to Massignon. He was a complex man, a man of prayer (praying the Angelus every morning for the Jews) and also of action, a thinker and an activist (as exemplified by his interventions on behalf of the North Africans living in France), an ordained priest yet exercising his orders in secret, a man of great intuitions which were not always well understood and not easily systematised. Yet Christian studies of Islam are greatly indebted to him.

## JULES MONCHANIN (1895-1957) AND HINDUISM

On his way to India in 1939, on board ship in the Red Sea, Jules Monchanin reread Massignon's work on Hallaj. Ordained a priest in Lyon in 1922, he was a man of considerable culture, although due to delicate health he did not carry on his studies to the doctorate; he nevertheless dedicated himself to an intellectual apostolate. He collaborated with Abbé Couturier in ecumenism. In Paris he led a Jewish-Christian group, and was in contact with Jacques Maritain and the Jew Walter Riese and Madam Belenson. In the 'Thomas More Circle' he entered into dialogue with Marxists. Above all, however, he was attracted by India, an intellectual attraction in the first place, which did not immediately take the form of a specific vocation. He gave himself to the study of Sanskrit and Indology. Gradually, through his own reading and his contact with Indian students, and the advice he was called to give to those wishing to be missionaries, the idea grew of dedicating himself to the Church in India. He received permission from his bishop, and was then accepted by an Indian bishop. For ten years he was curate and parish priest in various villages in the diocese of Tiruchirapalli. Then in 1950, with another Frenchman, Dom Henri Le Saux, he was able to realise his dream by founding at Kulitalai (Shantivanam) the ashram of Saccidananda (the Most Holy Trinity). He remained there for seven years until he was compelled by illness to return to Paris in 1957.

Monchanin held lofty ideals in going to India. 'With my Indian brother priests, always in the most humble place among them, my aspiration is to share in the same conditions of life. I wish, to whatever extent is possible, to become Indian, to feel and suffer as they do,

to think in the traditional categories of their civilisation, to pray with them and work to help the Church take root in India' (ES 15). In short, he gave himself to a work of reparation. He wished, in his own person, to make amends for the faults of the white people who had undervalued the Indians and had wished to impose their way of thinking on them.

'I must be hidden in this Indian land' (somewhat like Father de Foucauld in the land of the Sahara) 'to become holy and to make this earth bear fruit.' (ES 25).

For him,

'It is Hinduism that must be converted, by taking upon oneself, by way of a mystical substitution (a sea of suffering!) whatever has been introduced there by the spirit of evil and men's rejection.' (ES 30).

We are here close to the spiritual vision of Massignon. Monchanin's ideal also contains a theological dimension. Before leaving for India he went to see a priest friend, who confirmed his way of thinking. Monchanin writes: 'He believes that it is in coming up against India that I shall be able to renew theology, rather than by trying to deepen theological problems in themselves' (ES 22). He dreamt of an institute of study and research which would provide a profound knowledge of the languages, the philosophy, and the religions of India. In his opinion India needed to be thought of anew in the light of Christianity, and Christianity in the light of India (cf ES 98).

There is also a strong spiritual and contemplative dimension to his thinking. He wrote:

'To receive the Christian message, India will have need of a costly incarnation and at any rate of an extreme spiritualisation demanding, more than elsewhere, asceticism - and more than elsewhere a contemplation of that which is essentially spiritual ... the Trinity.' (ES 42).

He expressed a desire:

'that there should take birth from my life, from my death, a trinitarian contemplative life, which could subsume, purify and transfigure the ancient thought, art, and experience of India.' (ES 29)

A Church without a contemplative basis is incomplete. That is true everywhere, but especially in India where there is such a great spiritual thirst. According to Monchanin, the Logos and the Holy Spirit are at work in the depth of the Indian soul. But he saw the Indian way to salvation as being damaged by errors and needing to meet with Christianity in order to purify itself.

Monchanin was thus open to Indian values. Thinking of his future ashram he said: 'I shall seek to have around me Indian things, to create an Indian atmosphere.' Moreover he wished to learn from the *sannyasi*:

'I wish to spend some days with Hindu spiritual men, being there as a Christian but also to be instructed in whatever in this spirituality can be separated from Hinduism' (ES 31).

Here recognised that his openness towards Hinduism, although moderate, would be misunderstood: 'It has been too often said to Indian Catholics that Hinduism is an invention of Satan. Thus an attitude of understanding and sympathy causes astonishment.'

With the permission of the bishop he was finally able to found his ashram. However, cooperation with Dom Le Saux (Abishiktananda) was never going to be easy. There was too great a diversity of character, and also too much difference in their attitudes towards Hinduism. Le Saux (while remaining a Christian monk) became almost a Christian *sannyasi* of *advaita* (non-duality), while Monchanin could not accept such a compromise. Le Saux gave priority to experience, to what lies beyond all thought, while for Monchanin *advaita* was incompatible with faith in a Trinitarian God. Despite all this, the ashram of Shantivanam

has continued, even after the death of Monchanin, first under Le Saux, then under the direction of Dom Bede Griffiths, and now with Camaldolese monks.

Can we consider Jules Monchanin a prophet of dialogue? His life in India did not contain much actual dialogue. In the villages he did not find anyone ready for dialogue. In the ashram he was ready to welcome Hindu spiritual men, but few came. But in his reflection there was a continual dialogue between Hinduism and Christianity. He did not condemn Hinduism, he was open to its values. He can be considered a pioneer in opening the Church to the spiritual contribution of India. Thus he helped prepare the way for the Second Vatican Council, which briefly but precisely described Hinduism:

Thus, in Hinduism men explore the divine mystery and express it both in the limitless riches of myth and the accurately defined insights of philosophy. They seek the release from the trials of the present life by ascetical practices, profound meditation and recourse to God in confidence and love (NA 2).

#### THOMAS MERTON (1915-1968) AND BUDDHISM

The third of our prophets, Thomas Merton, after eventful early years spent in the US and in Europe, converted to Catholicism and became a Trappist monk. Enclosed in the monastery of Gethsemani, Kentucky, he became paradoxically well-known through his writings, in the first place his autobiography *Seven Storey Mountain* (published in England as *Elected Silence*), and then his essays on spirituality.

A contemplative, he was not withdrawn from the world. Thus in the last years of

his life, moved by a 'passion for peace' he was involved in activity against war and in particular against the possibility of nuclear war. This was an unexpected but almost natural progression. Finding in solitude the God who is Love, the hidden foundation of all that exists, he opened his heart to the troubles of the world. He wrote:

A certain openness to the world and a genuine participation in its sufferings helps to preserve the sincerity of the duty of contemplation (MZM 175).

His was a compassion born in solitude, like the *karuna* of the Buddha born from illumination (cf Shannon, p. 3).

The reference to Buddha is not a casual one. Merton saw a real possibility of contact at a profound level between the contemplative and monastic traditions of the west and the various contemplative traditions of the east. He studied Buddhism, and in particular Zen. He was in contact with experts in Zen, for instance D.T. Suzuki. He published a collection of articles on *Zen Mystics and Masters*. He travelled to Asia to deepen his knowledge, and at Bangkok, where he had gone to take part in a monastic meeting on interreligious dialogue, he died.

Merton's interest in Buddhism preceded the Second Vatican Council, and was strengthened by it. He worked in the spirit of the Council and wished to contribute to spreading this spirit more widely. He explains that he has attempted to present religious traditions in an objective way but, going beyond this, he has tried to share, at least to some extent, in the values and the experiences that they enshrine.

Merton characterises as a "protestant" reaction diffidence and repugnance towards the mysticism of other religions. He also criticises Catholic "activists" who disregard the contemplative dimension. He writes,

with some exaggeration,

all the types of mysticism except those which are contained within the ambit of the Roman Church are frequently attributed by Catholics to the direct or in direct intervention of Satan (MZM 177).

He rebelled against such positions. If we recognise, as we should, that God is not limited with regard to his gifts, we should admit the possibility of supernatural mystical grace given to believers of other religious traditions. Recognising the great value of the monastic life in Buddhism, he was the prime mover of a dialogue which was not limited to a discussion of concepts. He explains his thinking in this way:

While at the level of philosophical and doctrinal formulations serious obstacles can be encountered, it is often possible to arrive at a truly clear, simple and satisfying understanding through comparing accounts of contemplative life, its various disciplines, its exaggerations, its rewards (MZM 180).

For him communication should become communion, a sharing in an authentic experience at pre-verbal and post-verbal levels. The pre-verbal level consists in a free and open attitude which is favourable to the encounter. The assimilation of one's own tradition from within provides the ability to meet a person from another religious tradition and to find common ground. The post-verbal level coincides with the meeting in silence after the spoken exchange which will have prepared the way for a new common experience.

Merton attributed a special value to dialogue on the "ultimate ground" of faith. He considered such a communication not only possible and to be desired, but as having great importance for human destiny. But he set out two conditions. First, to undertake dialogue "in an Asian way", that is, without rushing, with great patience, without looking for immediate results. Secondly,

faithfulness to one's own tradition, avoiding any syncretism which might deprive dialogue of its true contents. For the Christian, Merton wrote in strong terms:

Christian contemplation is based not on a vague interior appreciation of the mystery of man's spiritual being, but on the Cross of Christ which is the mystery of Kenosis, the emptying, the self-denial of the Son of God... In this mystery we find the full Christian expression of the dialectic between fullness and vacuity, *todo y nada*, emptiness and infinity, which appears at the centre of all the major traditional forms of contemplative wisdom (MZM 182).

Faithfulness and openness, silence and word, individual contemplation and community discipline, are some of the apparent opposites which Merton tried to keep united. He has made a very valuable contribution, given an impetus, perhaps a decisive one, to monastic interreligious dialogue which has developed and become structured over the last twenty or more years.

#### CONCLUSION

Massignon, Monchanin, and Merton. Three men with different experiences, but holding a similar position. All three were inspired by a desire for a greater openness of the Church towards other religions. They advocated this not for ambiguous humanistic reasons, but out of faithfulness to the true nature of the Church, "a sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men" (LG 1). The second Vatican Council, and the post-conciliar documents, have shown them to be right. Pioneer then certainly, but prophets of dialogue? I would say that what William Shannon wrote about Thomas Merton is also valid for Louis Massignon and Jules Monchanin:

Merton believed that he was called to be a prophet, despite his lack of preparation for such a



role. He had a clear perception of the limits of the prophetic vocation. The prophet is not necessarily one who has the correct response to everything; he is one who knows, at a precise moment in history, the true problems which humanity has to face, the goals to be sought, the real questions to be put" (Shannon p.3).

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