The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam by Louis Massignon: Herbert Mason
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movements also leaves a number of questions unanswered, such as why these movements “proliferated” in the aftermath of the Mongol invasions, and why this phenomenon occurred first in Syria–Egypt, two of the areas least affected by these invasions. Only at the end of the book does Karamustafa suggest the possibility of economic factors behind this phenomenon, but in his view, “[t]he question is highly intriguing, yet the absence of a critical mass of scholarly work on the economic history of Islamdom during the period in question makes it difficult if not impossible to answer” (p. 101). Existing scholarship, however, warrants at least an attempt to look into the matter.

Karamustafa states that the spread of institutional Sufism was, in the case of the Fertile Crescent, “set in motion” by the Seljuks (p. 86). One might infer from this the existence of a nearly two-century décalage between the spread of institutional Sufism and the “proliferation” of the “socially deviant” dervish groups. This is a simplistic answer to a more intricate question raised by a key passage in Ghazali’s (d. 1111) Ihya’ ‘ulum al-din, a work overlooked by the author and omitted in the bibliography. In this passage, Ghazali deplores that, in his time, Sufism (tasawwuf) has become obliterated altogether (inmahaqa bi’l-kulliyah wa batula) because the majority of its adherents are idle youth who roam like stray animals and who dislike learning a craft, preferring instead to wear rags and to engage in begging and mendicancy as a way of life (al-Ghazali, Ihya’ ‘ulum al-din [Cairo, 1939], 2:220–22). Here, the prominent 11th-century author deplores the fact that, almost two centuries before the Mongol invasions and right in the midst of the Seljukid period, Sufi ribâts and khângâhs (terms used by Ghazali) have been taken over by wandering and mendicant dervishes.

To conclude, I believe that informed readers will find God’s Unruly Friends interesting, despite its shortcomings. However, the quality of this work could have been enriched had the author made use of existing scholarship on the social and economic history of the medieval Middle East.


REVIEWED BY TODD LAWSON, Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Montreal

When Louis Massignon died almost thirty-five years ago, he left behind some very impressive “traces.” He is best known as the scholar of Hallaj, or the rescuer of Hallaj, who becomes in his treatment an Islamic reflection of Jesus. Massignon’s work raises questions about the name and nature of scholarship in general. On the one hand, his breathtaking erudition and sensitivity are lauded and admired universally; on the other, his “existential” presuppositions are frequently singled out as the major flaw in his oeuvre—because of which his writings may not be considered scholarly, scientific, objective. The effect of this on his contribution is incalculable. From this point of view, the works on Hallaj, rather than illuminating the subject, constitute something of a church wall inside which the subject is imprisoned.

The fact remains, however, that Massignon’s work has made Hallaj one of the five or six most recognizable Muslim names by the general Western audience, after Muhammad, Harun al-Rashid, maybe Ghazali, “Saladin,” and Omar Khayyam. It is therefore a good thing that Princeton University Press has brought out a work that will “render more accessible to the non-specialist reader the dramatic life and radical thought of this extraordinary 10th-century Muslim mystic” (p. xiii). The famous four-volume study was abridged by its English translator, a student and friend of Massignon himself, Professor Herbert Mason. But the result is really less an abridgement of the four volumes than a précis of volume one, with some intermittent material from volume two, and we are warned about this in Mason’s foreword.
Since this review concentrates on the work at hand, we will take for granted that people reading this journal are aware of Massignon’s truly monumental learning (and the fluent and skillful translation of it by Mason), and that they are also aware of how Massignon’s devotion to a single—perhaps marginal—figure produced one of the real classics of European Orientalism. In the process of “fleshing out” Hallaj, Massignon also gave us an intimate view of the center of the Islamic world in one of its most crucial periods and places—9th- and 10th-century Baghdad—and the formulation of the official Sunni creed against a background of many competing interpretations of Islam.

The drama and fervency of this certainly comes through even in the present abridgement. Whether ultimately it will be a satisfying experience for the general reader is another question. It was an editorial mistake to forgo a glossary and index and at least some basic bibliographical references and brief explanatory footnotes. There is also inconsistency in the dates: sometimes both Hijri and common-era dates are given; sometimes only one or the other is given, frequently without designating which system the number represents. Although this should pose no real problem for those familiar with the two calendars, I am taking seriously the above-quoted statement that this book is also aimed at a non-specialist readership, perhaps one interested in comparative religion and mysticism. There are also scores of Arabic technical words, and sometimes whole phrases are transliterated without accompanying translation. The following example (by no means unusual) from page 91 illustrates many of these criticisms:

Next, concerning the motive: “Kāna yadū ʿilā al-rīdā min ʿAl Muḥammad”: this expression puts Hallaj among those who, without naming any ʿAlid pretender (contrary to the orthodox Imamites), nevertheless made use of legitimist propaganda. It is used in Baladhuri for the sending of the Rawandite daʿi M-B-Khunays into Khurasan by Abu Riyah Maysara of Kufa, in the name of the ʿAbbasid pretender (wasi) M-b-ʿAli (d. 124): “fa-ʿamarahu an yadū ʿilā-rīdā min ʿAl Muḥammad, wāla yusammi ahadan.” And it reappears in the year 281, which directly concerns us, in the great qaṣida of ibn al-Muʿtazz (verse 211) to characterize the rallying of . . .

In addition to translations for the transliterated phrases—which will certainly weary the “non-specialist”—answers to the questions, What is an ʿAlid? What is Baladhuri? What is a Rawandite daʿi? and so on, would be useful. None of these reasonable “elementary” questions is answered in this book. The specialist will prefer using volume one of the four-volume set; others will have to wait for a proper introduction to Massignon and Hallaj.


REVIEWED BY JUAN EDUARDO CAMPO, Department of Religious Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara

Since 1985, some 1 million Egyptian Muslims have performed the Hajj to Mecca, thus fulfilling one of the obligatory ritual duties of their religion. Parker and Neal’s book documents the most distinctive aspect of this phenomenon as it is interpreted in the Egyptian cultural milieu: the colorful murals that the people paint on the walls of pilgrims’ houses in commemoration of their sacred journeys.

The authors are a photographer–writer team who have collaborated in the publication of a series of books on folk-art traditions in the Americas. During the 1980s, they made repeated visits to Egypt, where they scoured cities, towns, and villages in search of Hajj paintings and interviewed muralists to gather the materials upon which this book is based. The result is a beautifully executed pictorial volume, accompanied by clearly written text aimed at a general