

THE EARTHLY CAREER OF AL-HALLAJ

by Patrick J. Ryan

On the 24th of Dhu-al-Qa'da in the Islamic year 309, the 26th of March in the Christian year 922, a man was executed for religious crimes in the city of Baghdad in Iraq. Baghdad at that time had been the seat of Muhammad's political successors, the caliphs, since the middle of the eighth century and was the capital of much of the Islamic community. As a political institution, the caliphate was *sunni*, modeled on the *sunna*, or path, of Muhammad—at least in theory. Its roots actually reached back to pre-Islamic Arab and Iranian traditions of governance. Critics of the legitimacy of the caliphs had been gathering force for about five decades before 922, especially among the *shi'a* party that surrounded Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law. These critics romanticized a shadow rulership of Ali and his descendants, the imams.

When the eleventh of those imams died in 873, devoted partisans of Ali's line maintained that the eleventh imam's minor son had been hidden away from his enemies but would return to rule the Islamic community when the time was ripe. In the next seven decades four succeeding deputies spoke on behalf of the hidden imam, building up a politically powerful countervailing force to the central government in Baghdad. Although *sunni* and *shi'i* politicians in Baghdad and its more-or-less dependent provinces differed with each other on many religious and political issues in the year 922, there was one issue on which they came to agree: the execution of that man in Baghdad.

Led out from the prison in which he had been kept for nearly nine years, the accused was taken to the esplanade in front of the police headquarters alongside the Tigris. After a lengthy scourging he was subjected to the Quranic punishment for religious and political sedition:

The only reward of those who make war upon God and His messenger and strive after corruption in the land will be that they will be killed or crucified, or have their hands and feet on alternate sides cut off, or will be expelled out of the land. Such will be their degradation in the world, and in the Hereafter theirs will be an awful doom...[Qur'an 5.33].

His hands and feet struck off, the criminal was hoisted up on a gibbet in full view of the crowds that had gathered

to witness this grisly spectacle. He spoke to them in his agony, apparently impenitent for his alleged sins. Finally, the hapless amputee was decapitated and his trunk thrown onto a fire; the ashes that remained when the flames died down were cast into the river. The dead man's head was displayed for two days on a bridge that spanned the Tigris. Afterwards taken on a tour through the restless Iranian province of Khurasan, it served as a warning to any who might be tempted to follow the deceased in challenging the established religious and political authorities.

Thus died Husayn ibn Mansur (857-922), an Arabic-speaking Iranian and Muslim mystic, better known by the nickname "al-Hallaj," the wool-carder. This nickname attached to him not only because he sometimes followed his father in that trade but also because those who came to experience his spiritual direction called him "the carder of consciences," the one who could disentangle the nappy fibers of the human soul in its tortuous encounters with God. How did it come about that a man of such notable spiritual proclivities was executed for making war upon God and His messenger, Muhammad?

ENCOUNTERING THE MYSTERY

As a youth of sixteen, al-Hallaj had entered into the mystical discipleship of Sahl al-Tustari, a leading *sufi* of the late ninth century. During two years of initiation al-Hallaj imbibed from Sahl what his master called "the secret of divine Lordship" (*sirr al-rububiyya*). This secret seems to have been the mystical assertion that the only personal reality worthy of attention was the inexhaustible personal Reality of God, the sovereign "I" who relativizes all other personal realities with whom one may enter into dialogue. Among those relativized personal realities are prophets (including Muhammad), scholars (including the legal specialists), and judges (including the *sunni* caliph or the *shi'i* imam). The sovereign "I" of God gradually took over the consciousness of al-Hallaj, leaving no room in his religious experience for the less-than-divine intermediaries whom lesser mortals made much of in their encounter with the Mystery. In al-Hallaj's lifelong devotion to the sovereign "I" of God—the divine Lordship—lay the grounds for his eventual condemnation as an outlaw.

Muslims succinctly summarize the central concerns of Islamic faith in a twofold testimonial: "No god but God; Muhammad is God's Messenger." Al-Hallaj dared to preach

Patrick J. Ryan, S.J., teaches in the program of Middle East Studies at Fordham University, New York.

in public the possibility of a human vocation to participate in divine Lordship, the possibility of union with the Master of this world and the next, while neglecting the masters of human affairs. His claim to be concerned with only the reality of God's "I" infuriated those political figures whose legitimacy depended on the caliphs as the legal successors to Muhammad or on the imams as his legitimate heirs. Al-Hallaj's contemporaries, and in particular the political masters of Baghdad, heard his preaching as a call to insurrection against the Islamic state. Influential *shi'i* powerbrokers and financial manipulators in the officially *sunni* caliphate took the lead in moving for the condemnation of al-Hallaj.

The charges against al-Hallaj finally were reducible to one: In his famous aphorism "Ana'l-Hagg" (prosaically, "I am Truth") he had blasphemously broken down the barrier between humanity and God. The theological force of this somewhat extraordinary sentence comes out more vividly in the roundabout rendering "My 'I' is God."

Observers of the contemporary Middle East, on reading the charges preferred against al-Hallaj in the tenth century, cannot but be reminded of some more recent condemnations in Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. Sometimes modern executioners as well, especially in Iran, have charged their victims with making war upon God and His messenger and striving after corruption in the land. Sometimes the accusations have centered on more workaday sins: adultery, theft, murder, misappropriation of funds.

The Baha'is of Khomeini's Iran, followers of a formerly Muslim religious leader who died in exile in Ottoman Palestine in 1892, had met comparative tolerance in the Iran of the late shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. That Baha'is look today to Haifa in Israel, the tomb of their founder, as their world center, combined with the fact that about

half the world's Baha'is claim United States citizenship by birth or naturalization, may well contribute to their persecution since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran in 1979. In the long run, however, these martyred Baha'is, for all their pacific unitarianism and vaguely gnostic doctrines, have met their deaths in Iran mainly because they have preferred the teachings of their founder, Baha'ullah, to the Word of God, the Qur'an, and the unique messengership of Muhammad. They too have, as it were, declared war upon God and His messenger.

A similar fate has befallen the members of a more genuinely Islamic religious movement in contemporary Pakistan, the Ahmadis. Originating in the late nineteenth century in what is now northern India, these devotees of the self-proclaimed Messiah Ghulam Ahmad, who died in 1908, made a serious mistake when they joined the Muslim exodus from secular India in 1947. For their claims to practice a more genuine Islam than that of non-Ahmadis they have repeatedly suffered mob violence and discrimination in Pakistan, most notably in the Punjab riots of 1953 and in the 1974 declaration by the government of Pakistan that they no longer would be classified as Muslim by the state. Being non-Muslim or ex-Muslim in the recent, comparatively liberal Bhutto era in Pakistan caused the Ahmadis considerable grief; such a status in the present era of General Zia ul-Haq constitutes something of an invitation to persecution or even oblivion. Ahmadi claims for their founder, although less dramatic than those of Baha'is for theirs, have brought them into disrepute for compromising the uniqueness of Muhammad's role as the "seal of the prophets"; implicitly, they have made war upon God's messenger, if not upon God himself.

THE MARTYR AND MASSIGNON

On the 1st day of the Islamic year 1400, the 20th day of November, 1969, a band of young, mostly Arab supporters of a mahdi—one who claims divine guidance for his leadership in the last days of history—took over the Great Mosque of Mecca in the early hours of the morning. This, according to the Saudi royal guardians of this most sacred space in the Islamic world, was literal war upon God and His messenger. Only after two weeks of mayhem and violence were they dislodged. Several hundred Saudi royal soldiers and followers of the mahdi—along with the mahdi himself—died in the process. The mahdi's brother-in-law and principal propagandist, along with sixty-two of his surviving co-conspirators, was executed by a firing squad on the 9th of January, 1980.

The central concerns of Islamic faith are starkly underlined by such events: the oneness of God, the uniqueness of His messenger. Those who once accepted that twofold kerygma and later repudiate it are deemed to have declared war upon God and His messenger; and against such malefactors the pious must undertake wholehearted struggle.

Perhaps the stark dualism of Quranic categories has its roots in the stark dualism of desert and oasis in seventh-century Arabia. Whatever its source or affinities—and Muslims would insist that there is no source outside the mind of God—there is no doubt that, in moments of crisis, that dualism speaks vividly, even imperatively, to major actors in the drama of contemporary history, especially in the Middle East.

To the present day the media on both sides of the Atlantic



Jacqueline Chwast

make no distinction among contemporary Muslims and label all Muslims whose activities arouse Western disapproval, "Islamic fundamentalists." In recent months the *New York Times*, has grouped into that pseudo-category the *shi'i* followers of the Ayatollah Khomeini, the *sunni* conservatives who have challenged the power of Hafiz al-Asad in Syria, and the rioting devotees of a Cameroonian migrant in Nigeria named Muhammad Marwa Maitatsine, who died in 1980 for the claim that he himself was the messenger of God named Muhammad. "Islamic fundamentalism" so loosely defined is about as useful a category as "conservative Protestantism" when it is employed to embrace Karl Barth, the Twelve Apostles of the Church of the Latter-Day Saints, and the Reverend Jim Jones.

In the tenth century, Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj had no defenders inside the Islamic world and very few even in the millennium since his execution, although there were some notable exceptions. The twentieth century, however, has made up for the neglect of his cause. Louis Massignon, professor of the sociology and sociography of Islam at the Collège de France from 1926 to 1954, spent most of his intellectual life, until his death in 1962, reconstructing the history of the martyr al-Hallaj and rehabilitating his reputation. Not only did Massignon piece together the fragmentary evidence for the earthly career of al-Hallaj, but he also wove into his scholarly tapestry the strands of memory associated with the martyred mystic in the writings, artistic productions, and spiritual heritage of the multiethnic Islamic community of later times.

When Massignon died, forty years after completing his two-volume *thèse principale* on al-Hallaj, he had interleaved that study with numerous additions and revisions in varying stages of completion. Massignon's physicist son and folklorist daughter supervised the editing of that expanded edition, which eventually appeared in French in three volumes in 1975. Even before that edition was published by Gallimard in Paris, an American Islamicist and poet, Professor Herbert Mason of Boston University, had begun the English version of *The Passion of al-Hallaj* under the sponsorship of the Bollingen Foundation. The publication in four volumes by Princeton University Press of Mason's English translation of Massignon's labyrinthine French text is a major event in the promotion of the understanding of Islamic faith in the English-speaking world. Scholars owe a great debt to Mason for his meticulous tracing of nearly every reference made by Massignon, some of which were left distressingly vague; the entire fourth volume of Mason's edition is made up of bibliography and indices of consummate detail. The first three volumes deal, respectively, with (1) the life of al-Hallaj, (2) his survival in the memory of subsequent generations of Muslims, and (3) the wide range of his doctrine. The four volumes together run to more than 1,900 pages and will most likely appeal only to specialists in the study of Islam—especially because Massignon made no concessions to human frailty in his insistence on massive detail. It might well prove worthwhile for the Bollingen Foundation to prevail upon Mason to produce a one-volume edition of this magnificent work for the nonspecialist.

"CERTAIN FIDELITIES"

What attracted Massignon to the defense of this tenth-century Muslim mystic against the charge that he had made

war upon God and His messenger? Born in 1883, the son of a proudly agnostic physician and sculptor father and a mother whose Catholicism was somewhat privatized, Louis Massignon grew up without much religious feeling. As an adolescent he developed, along with his fellow-lycéen, the future sinologist Henri Maspero, an interest in orientalism. Massignon's 1901 visit to Algeria began to bring into focus his interest in the Islamic world. Later, as a student in Paris, he came under the influence of the decadent novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans. Huysmans, whose novel *Là-Bas* has been characterized as perverse, underwent a spiritual change under the peculiar influence of a defrocked priest, satanist, and sexual deviate around the time that Massignon first met him. Although Massignon did not at first share Huysmans's religious feelings, a partial understanding of such concerns was implanted in him at that time, to bear fruit some years later. While pursuing research in the Sahara in 1904, Massignon met the extraordinary Charles de Foucauld, a repentant roué turned Christian hermit living among the poorest of the poor in North Africa. Both Huysmans, who died in 1907, and De Foucauld, eventually murdered by Sanusi warriors at his hermitage in 1916, left vigorous imprints on the young scholar's imagination.

In 1907 Massignon began to dedicate his academic energies to tracing the historical and literary remains of al-Hallaj. Huysmans, De Foucauld, and al-Hallaj resonated with each other at some deep level of his unconscious, calling forth compassion in its root sense: the willingness to share suffering.

Absorbed in these religious themes and as yet without his own clear religious commitment, Massignon found himself, in May, 1908, caught up in a situation of political intrigue. The Ottoman authorities in Iraq, representatives of the tottering sultan-caliph in Istanbul, arrested the young French scholar as a spy for the French government; for this transgression they imprisoned him, beat him, and threatened him with execution. He escaped from detention, during which he had contracted malaria, and apparently considered taking his own life. He was rescued from his predicament by his Iraqi Arab hosts in Baghdad, the Alusi family. Their typically Mediterranean-Middle Eastern sense of responsibility for the guest prompted them to take considerable risks with the Ottoman authorities in those last, nervous months before the Young Turk takeover in Istanbul.

Details of this sequence of events are not entirely clear in Mason's biographical foreword or in the other biographical writings by or about Massignon. In later years Massignon indicated—somewhat obliquely, for he disliked attention to himself—that he underwent an intense spiritual experience: a conversion to active Christian faith. In one autobiographic statement, not included in Mason's foreword, Massignon suggested that it was the compassion of others holier than he that had delivered him at that crucial moment from further wandering: "Certain fidelities started then to orient my life—along with some of my ancestors—Hallaj, Huysmans, Foucauld." Massignon was one of the few Catholics in anticlerical France in the first decade of this century who could attribute his revived Catholicism to the influence of Muslims!

In his last years, those during which France engaged in the horrible struggle to retain Algeria, Massignon outraged bourgeois Catholic patriots by his Gandhian pacifist protests against the colonial oppression of the Algerians. When

the neo-facist Organisation de l'Armée Secrète threatened the lives of all those anticolonialist forces in France who championed the Arab cause, Massignon was thought by some of his friends to be courting martyrdom. He offered no resistance to his physical attackers at the Centre Universitaire des Intellectuels Catholiques in 1958. He spent a night in jail in 1960 after participating in a demonstration against the detention of political prisoners.

Like al-Hallaj, who utilized the vocabulary of heretics and rebels without himself embracing their heresy or rebellion, Massignon at that time associated himself with Sartre and other heroes of the Left. He felt called to compassion for the Arabs of North Africa—*les damnés de la terre*, in Frantz Fanon's words. After his retirement from professional duties, Massignon dedicated much of his time to the concerns of migrant laborers in France, those imprisoned and those newly arrived from overseas. His compassion for the Arabs reciprocated the guest-friendship he had received from the Alusi family in Baghdad in 1908. "I hear an outcry for more than human justice that arises from Muslim believers—disadvantaged, colonized, despised," he once wrote. "Forty years ago it awakened the Christian in me."

CREATURE AND CREATOR

Since the eighteenth century in the central Arab world, and more recently in the non-Arab Muslim world (which far exceeds in size the center from which it took its beginnings), the traditions of Islamic mysticism have come upon hard times. A militant puritanism of one or another variety has been working to reform those devotional practices that cannot be traced back to the Qur'an and to the practice of Muhammad in the seventh century. Only in such remote corners of the Islamic world as Sindh in Pakistan, Java in Indonesia, Morocco in North Africa, and Senegal in West Africa can one glimpse today something of the medieval Muslim mystical confraternities, their elaborate devotional hierarchies and their ritual life. In spite of much that is genuinely excessive in the cult of living religious personalities (shaykhs, pirs, marabouts, etc.), there is in these confraternities a vibrant love of God that is untinged by legalism, hypocrisy, or cant and which gives living testimony to a burning Muslim monotheism. The non-Muslim world today sees too little of this Muslim piety and too much of the tin-hat military dictators who manipulate Islamic law for their own political ends, of the vengeful clerical dictators who substitute a new reign of terror for the old, of the two-faced millionaire princelings who enforce the strictest orthodoxy at home but who travel to London, Cannes, and Rome to savor the delights of sin.

At a time when the *sufi* traditions of love of God were being downplayed in a secularizing or puritanical Islamic world, Louis Massignon took it on himself to make al-Hallaj known once again. Al-Hallaj had perceived in the Quranic story of the angel Iblis, who called down upon himself God's wrath by his refusal to bow down before Adam, all those who insist that God keep His distance, remote and transcendent. Even Muhammad, the messenger of God's absolute otherness from the merely human, is faulted by al-Hallaj for his refusal or inability to enter into the intimate presence of God at the time of his heavenly ascension.

Breaking the *sufi* tradition of discretion in discussing

mystical perceptions that may, when publicized, scandalize the less astute, al-Hallaj considered himself called to do what neither Iblis nor Muhammad had done: declare the closeness of God to His creature and His creature to God. In explosively direct poetry, al-Hallaj did precisely that:

I have become Him Whom I love;
He Whom I love has become Me.
We are two Spirits poured into one Body:
To see Me is to see Him;
To see Him is to see Us.

Some union of creature and Creator relativizes the external structures of the Islamic community, whether *sunni* or *shi'i*; it even seems to throw into doubt the boundaries between Christianity, with its God made man, and Islam, with its rejection of that doctrine. Without actually becoming a Christian or intending in any way to abandon Islam, al-Hallaj spoke of his union with God in words that could only shock the guardians of religious distinctiveness, the custodians of Islamic law:

Yes, go tell my friends that I have set sail on the sea
and that my boat is smashed.
It is in the confession of the Cross that I will die;
I no longer care to go to Mecca (Batha) nor Medina!

Jesus as portrayed in the Qur'an is not crucified; for Massignon, al-Hallaj supplied the missing element of His passion and death. Massignon pursued the image of that crucified mystic of the tenth century through every highway and byway of the Islamic world. In the second volume of this Bollingen edition the reader can discover not only what popular preachers made of the story of al-Hallaj in later centuries but also how the most highly abstruse gnostics allegorized the facts of his execution—as in present-day Bangladesh, where al-Hallaj is remembered as Satya Pir, the Master of Truth:

The "*Satya Pir*" sung by Bengali poets should be considered one of his incarnations, the Hallajian identity of which can be established by a simple internal investigation. The "virgin mother," a former *hourai*, is the sister of Mansur Hallaj, the *hourai* who poured for him the intoxicating wine of "I am the Truth" (a Persian legend); it is she who becomes pregnant by him after having drunk water from the river in which his ashes had been thrown (a Yazidi and a Turkish legend).

Many *sunni* Muslims would prefer to forget these developments of the Islamic tradition, concentrating their attention only on the events of Muhammad's life and an idealized version of the career of his first four political successors. Their counterparts in *shi'i* circles might extend their idealized past until the disappearance of the twelfth imam in the late ninth century. Both *sunni* and *shi'i* political forces today are anxious to repress any voice in their respective communities that emphasizes the closeness of humanity and God quite apart from the structures of the Islamic state. Too much emphasis on the love of God for His creature and the creature's love of God is thought to compromise the importance of the politicians. It is the politicians, self-serving in every age and clime and across the boundaries of all traditions of faith, who condemn to death Baha'is, Ahmadis, Mahdists, and other dangerous types for making war upon God and His messenger.