

A Shared Muslim-Christian Pilgrimage:

A Beacon of Light for the Future

by Dorothy C. Buck

Fifty years ago, at the beginning of the French Algerian conflict, the well known Professor Louis Massignon, a scholar of Islam and the Arab world and a man devoted to Christ and the Catholic Church, brought Muslims and Christians together to participate in an ancient Breton pilgrimage. On the week-end of July 24th and 25th, 2004, the fiftieth anniversary was celebrated by hundreds of pilgrims gathered at the ancient chapel of the Seven Sleepers nestled in the tiny hamlet close to the village of Vieux-Marché.

Massignon's vision and the spirit of a shared Muslim and Christian witness to the desire and hope for peace and inter-religious reconciliation remains alive and well. The changes over the years have served to enhance the experience of the pilgrimage. In honor of this special 50th year the combined choral groups, the Madrigal of Brittany and the Loguivienne, opened the festivities Friday evening with a concert in the chapel singing diverse pieces from many cultures and religions. For the last few years, the Saturday morning and afternoon preceding the evening's opening ceremony, a seminar has been offered choosing significant themes for lecture-discussions. This year the theme, "To Live Together: from the Reality to the Hope" attracted an audience of 300 to discuss and reflect on the difficulties and the signs for hope.

Monsignor Henri Tessier, the Archbishop of Algiers, was both a speaker and

the presider for the pilgrimage and his sermons pointed to the hope intrinsic in this shared Muslim-Christian annual pilgrimage. The project for next year is to establish a sister pilgrimage dedicated to the Seven Saints at one of the sites of their devotion in Algeria held in solidarity with the Breton Feast the same week-end. Having been deeply moved by the assassination in 1996 of seven monks from the monastery at Tibhirine in southern Algeria, Mgr. Tessier, recognizing the spiritual correspondence, would like to associate their memory to that of the Seven Martyrs of Ephesus honored during this pilgrimage.

In 1963, just after the death of her father, Louis Massignon, Geneviève Massignon wrote a wonderful description of the pilgrimage in anticipation of its 10th anniversary. Geneviève was Louis Massignon's second child. She was born on April 27, 1921 and died at the age of 45 on June 9, 1966 three years after writing the article included here. Her research interest was Folklore and Mythology and like her father she leaves us an extensive archive of her research and many publications. The following is her tribute to her father's life-long efforts towards serene peace among the three Abrahamic religions.

THE VENERATION OF THE SEVEN SLEEPERS OF EPHESUS:

A Devotion Common to Muslims and Christians (1963)

by Geneviève Massignon Ph. D. (1921-1966)¹

1. The Importance of the Site in Ephesus

The name Ephesus evokes the ancient Greek city in Asia Minor where the cult of Artemis (Diane), which preceded Christianity, manifested itself by a temple classed among the seven marvels of the world. But it is also inseparable from Saint Paul who preached on the *agora* in the year 57 of the Christian era, or from Saint John, who lived there (where the Basilica containing his tomb has been found), and of the third Ecumenical Council when the Mother of Christ was proclaimed Theotokos (Mother of God) in 431 of the Christian era.

Placed under the protection of Saint John, the Virgin would have accompanied him to Ephesus during his apostolate. It is likely that he settled her outside the ancient city on a neighboring hill where it is believed that her house was discovered. It is known today by the name *Panaya Kapulu* (that is to say, the “Port of All Saints”).²

¹ Translation by author.

² As of 1999 the only thing that remains of the temple of Artemis is a reconstructed solitary column beside some stones that are still in place. The stones were used to build the Church of Saint John in Ephesus and some were used as far back as the 6th century in the construction of the basilica of Saint Sophia in Istanbul. Others were used for the cloister of the monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai. In 1914 the modern city of Selçuk was built at the site of an ancient Roman city. Ephesus became the name of the ancient ruins of the original city which is found some miles inland due to the build up of sand over time. (from Alain Le Roux 1999 Keltia Graphic Editions Gourin. Bretagne.)

In fact it is not on the edge of the shore, but well into the mountain that it is necessary to search for traces of the past. (The sea has receded from what was one of the biggest ports in antiquity). Not far from the building called *Panaya Kapulu* on the side of another hill, beside the tomb presumed to have been that of Mary Magdalene, one finds a sepulcher known by the name of the *Cave of the Seven Sleepers*.³

2. The Origins of the Devotion to the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus

In 1926, research by the Austrian Archeological Institute uncovered the ruins of the basilica of the Seven Sleepers (built above the cave) which permitted them to specify the date. It dates back to the middle of the 5th century. Archeology was able to confirm implicitly the epoch evoked by an ancient writing that we can thus summarize. Seven young people from Ephesus were buried alive in a cave for having refused to deny their faith in God during the persecutions ordered by the Emperor Décius; they woke up after a long sleep of several hundred years and died several hours later after having testified to their experience. They were seen collectively by the inhabitants who decided afterwards to build a sanctuary dedicated to them. The historian, Honigmann, established that this tradition was common to Melkite, Nestorian, and Jacobite Christians, and therefore precedes their division (Vth and VIth centuries). As for the liturgical names of the seven saints, they were already reported in 530 by a latin pilgrim from North Africa, Theodosius, in a Jacobite list in Nubia. In its liturgical calendar the Eastern

³ The hill was known as Mount Célius or Mount Pion in ancient times but is now called *Panayir dag*.

Church celebrates the Seven Sleepers twice: October 22nd (Common of prayers to the Martyrs), and August 4th (the traditional feast day), while the Latin Occident celebrates them on July 27th.

But, what is more remarkable, the example of these martyrs for the faith is venerated beyond the limits of Christianity. In fact, Sura XVIII of the Qur'an read every Friday in the Mosques (and thus preceding the death of Muhammed in 632) is entitled *al-Kahf*, that is to say, the Cave. This Sura exalts the abandonment to God of these seven young Ephesians buried alive, describing their witness to fidelity in the face of an impious demand, then their 'dormition' which it states was 309 years. Sura XVIII could be considered as the *Apocalypse of Islam*; not only does it magnify the attitude of the seven martyrs for their faith by their anticipated resurrection, but it also presents the announcement of the Last Judgement. ⁴ "In their fierce adoration of One divine Transcendence," writes the Islamic scholar Louis Massignon, "Muslims make exception for the Seven Sleepers and tolerate the building of sanctuaries to these martyrs because their temporary resurrection made them precursory witnesses of the Last Judgement, saints of the End Time".⁵ Shustari, one of the most interesting commentators on the Qur'an, said that, "All Saints lose their normal sleep and enter into the

⁴ Louis Massignon, *Les Sept Dormants, Apocalypse de l'Islam*, ap. Meelanges Peeters, tome II, pp. 245-260.

⁵ Louis Massignon, *La Maison de la Vierge et la résurrection des Sept Dormants à Ephèse*, ap. la France Catholique, 12 août 1955. Complete documentation see *Les Sept Dormants d'Ephèse en Islam et en Chrétienté*, by the same author ap. Revue des Etudes Islamiques, 8 issues appearing between 1955 and 1963.

sleep of the Seven Sleepers".

Parallel to the liturgical texts of the two great religions, popular devotion has not ceased to surround the Seven Sleepers, as much for Muslims as for Christians. At the beginning of the twentieth century the navy in the Turkish war always had them as protectors and their names engraved on the stern of the ships in Aden. Even further from Ephesus on the Comoro Islands, a Muslim archipelago in the Indian Ocean, every house is dedicated to the Seven Sleepers, where their names are inscribed on the trees in the paddy fields.

3. Locations of Devotion to the Seven Sleepers in Islam and Christianity.

From their original sanctuary in Ephesus, which has received pilgrims from very far away since the first centuries of this tradition, the devotion to the Seven Sleepers has shined throughout the Orient and the Occident. In Islamic lands it often localized in caves, sometimes cemeteries, and even in the Mosques, from Turkey (Ammuriyag Hadj Hamza: subterranean cave of an ancient Greek convent, and Tarsus; grotto), Syria (Damascus: the *Ahl al-Kahf* Mosque, with seven *qibla* in the crypt), Egypt (Cairo: cave of the Maghwari in Moqattam) all the way to North Africa where these sites are particularly numerous.

In fact, Tunisia honors them at Mount Gorra (cave), at Mides (*koubba*), El Oudiane (*koubba*), and Tozeur (cave); Algeria at Cap Matifou (cave), at Foug el toub (cave and megalithic tomb). Guidjel-Ikjan (pillars in the cemetery), N'gaous (tombs); and in Morocco at Sefrou (cave). It is not only to Muslim Spain ("rooms of the sleepers" at Gandia de Valencia; cave at Loja de Grenada), that they

have been venerated, but also to the other extreme of the Muslim world in Afghanistan (at Meymar: mosque and Upiyan: tomb), and in Chinese Turkestan (at Toyoq: grotto and mosque).

In Christianity, the diffusion of relics attributed to the Seven Sleepers seems to have created the dedication of many sanctuaries. We know that Saint Gregory of Tours (died in 597) was the first to make the life of the Seven Sleepers known in the Occident, leaving a Latin translation of the Syriac legend. Later, the Golden Legend contributed in the spreading of their example to the people.

In Germanic countries (the Rhineland, Luxembourg, Switzerland, Austria), devotion to them seems to be connected to the bringing of relics of the Seven Sleepers to Trève in 942, transferred from Rome. From there they were brought to Rotthof where a Basilica in the Rococo style replaced a Gothic chapel. These saints were invoked in Germany in order to cure certain illnesses and to forecast meteorological events.

In Rome a very ancient oratory, or chapel, of the Seven Sleepers, recently discovered near to the Via Appia is being turned into a museum.

In France the Marmoutier Abbey (near Tours) had a crypt dedicated to the Seven Sleepers. But the most ancient monument dedicated to them is definitely the *dolmen* (a prehistoric standing stone) that became the crypt-dolmen of the Chapel of the Seven Sleepers in Vieux-Marché next to Plouaret in Brittany. Not far from this Christianized dolmen where seven small statues representing the martyrs are venerated, one finds a natural spring that is also dedicated to them; the slab

where the water flows out of this spring is pierced with seven holes placed in a centered hexagon, a significant connection to the same devotion found in different religious populations on distinct continents: we can see this same configuration at the spring with seven veins in Guidjel, near Sétif in Algeria.

But while the Breton pilgrims come to make their devotions to a dolmen (transformed into a crypt), at Guidjel, in the Sidi Messaoud ben Driss cemetery, they point out seven stele dedicated to the Seven Sleepers; these stele are made of Roman pillars topped by domes, with *kânouns* (entrance ways) where visitors can burn incense.

In some cases the devotion to the Seven Sleepers has newly consecrated and styled a monument already honored in antiquity, dolmen (standing stones) or pillars. In Guidjel, two pilgrimages take place each year, the last Friday in July and the Friday following September 6th -- dates that are close to the feasts of the Seven Sleepers in the Byzantine calendar.

In Brittany, the annual pilgrimage takes place the Sunday following the feast of Mary Magdalene (July 22nd), the date inscribed in the dedication visible on the front of the Chapel -- built in 1703 above the dolmen. This connection between the devotion to Mary Magdalene and the one to the Seven Sleepers could even go back to the origins of their diffusion in the Occident since the tomb of the Seven Sleepers is next to that of Mary Magdalene in the vicinity of Ephesus.

The Breton pilgrimage is accompanied by a very beautiful 'hymn', the *Gwerz ar seiz sant* (Hymn of the Seven Saints); at the beginning of this *gwerz* the dolmen is

represented as the work of God Himself, “built as far back as the creation of the world” -- symbol of the universal Temple of believers -- then it explains that the life and death of the seven young Ephesians was exalted there; thus evoking the miracles connected to their invocation.

We know that the very ancient cult that built the ‘*menhirs*’ and ‘*dolmens*’ was sharply fought against by the Evangelizers. Also there is room to suppose that the dedication of the dolmen at Vieux Marché to the Seven Sleepers took place earlier than the edict forbidding access to these monuments to Christian believers. Gaidox cites some analogous cases for a crypt-dolmen in the Asturias (at Canga de Onis), and for a church-dolmen in Basque country (at Arrechinaga).

Professor Massignon believed that the veneration to the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus was able to reach the region of Vieux Marché via the small port of Yaudet (in Latin: Civitaten, in old Breton: Guéodet) near to Lannion, the port through which l’Armorique (this region of France) opened itself to exchanges with the Orient. We can also encounter other Eastern saints in this region, notably Saint Thècle in Ploubezre; and some sculptures of Eastern origin representing the Virgin lying down for the Nativity that can be found at Yaudet.

4. - A Ten Year Old Islamic-Christian Pilgrimage And Its Symbolic Value

It is in this Armorican framework, associating the Orient with the Occident in the same devotion, that the Islamist Louis Massignon thought of bringing Muslims and Christians together, joining themselves to the immemorial Breton ‘*pardon*’ (pilgrimage), that

passes on the glory of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus to the extremity of the Occident.

Every year since 1954 a Muslim delegation formed specifically of North African laborers coming from areas around Paris, joins with the crowds of traditional pilgrims from Brittany in order to go across the moors to the old sanctuary surrounded by chestnut trees. The evening before, preceded by a banner where one reads phrases of angelic greetings in Arabic letters -- common in the Qur’an and in the Hail Mary -- the Muslims joined in the procession leading to the *tantad* or fire of joy, a ceremony marking every ‘pardon’ or traditional pilgrimage in Brittany.

This Muslim-Christian event ends with a *diffa* offered by the Muslim delegation, where couscous is served with a lamb slaughtered according to the ritual of Abraham. Presided over for nine consecutive years by Professor Massignon from the Collège de France, recently deceased, the Muslim-Christian pilgrimage to the Seven Sleepers brought together hopes and sorrows in the prayer for a serene peace between peoples. This year again, this ceremony took place at Vieux-Marché the 27th and 28th of July, 1963, gathering together numerous Christians and Muslims desiring to continue this work of peace and spiritual reconciliation.

During painful periods of conflict, the Algerian friends of Professor Massignon returned, at the peril of their lives, to the spring at Guidjel near to Sétif (in Algeria) in order to join in the prayers of the pilgrims in Brittany. Thus the devotion itself to the Seven Saints of Ephesus joins together the hopes of believers in two religions, like the devotion to the Virgin at Panaya Kapulu near Ephesus, where every

year this sanctuary receives the homage of dozens of thousands of pilgrims, the majority of whom are Muslims.

This 50th year at the July 2004 pilgrimage, Mohammed Loueslati, the Muslim chaplain at the prison in Rennes, Brittany participated for the third consecutive year. He explained, “I have the right and the obligation as a Muslim to be present here. The wars and the conflicts have changed, but the urgency of this gathering survives, to testify to what we share in common, to write history together”.⁶

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⁶ Quote from La Croix Vendredi 23 juillet 2004. Religion by Martine de Sauto.