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Introduction: Against a Fateful Division of Labor in Scholarship

A dichotomy and dissymmetry has long been accepted in scholarship on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Studies of the political and theopolitical question of the Orient in these centuries have made clear how it is imbricated with the political and intellectual transformations in the West in the same period. It has become a well-established methodological norm that the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Levant cannot be studied independently from European and American forms of expansionism (colonial empires, global markets, knowledge, civil and military technology, political organization). In sharp contrast, another methodological norm has established itself. The crises accompanying the liberal transformations in Europe from the French Revolution to the Cold War and decolonization era are internal pathologies of the West that can be studied separately from the Levant, or at least from the political and theopolitical question of the Orient. If the Orient features in the scholarship on the crises of liberalism in twentieth-century Europe, it is then only as a battleground for rivalries between British and French imperialism, and later during the American and Soviet Cold War—but not as a cultural and religious area whose study could contribute to a genuine understanding of the crises of liberalism. Scholars of the twentieth century rarely study the upheavals of the 1930s alongside the failure of liberal conceptions and reforms in the broad sphere of British and French imperial politics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In this essay, I would like to go against this fateful division of labor in intellectual history. I intend to demonstrate that a dialogical study of the Oriental and Western crises of liberalism is possible and can contribute to their understanding. For this purpose, the following pages will establish an unusual dialogue between Eastern and Western intellectual sources, notwithstanding the dissymmetry of status attributed to these sources. The dissymmetry is linked to the fact that Western intellectual sources are often identified with canonical thinkers and intellectuals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In contrast, Oriental intellectual sources are penned by lesser-known figures, yet they contain a unique perspective on and framing of the crisis of liberalism. It is

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time to acknowledge the sources in the Middle East (during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) as part of our philosophical contemporaneity. In this historical task, Jewish studies can play a new global intellectual role. It can use its vast Oriental and Western sources beyond the traditional elucidation of Jewish cultural, religious, and national heritage, toward a new articulation of East and West, North and South, modernity and tradition. The following pages are a first step in that new direction.

The present essay proposes an inter-regional and inter-religious understanding of the crisis of liberalism. In its first part, it paints with broad brush the migration of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European liberal transformations to the rapidly changing Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century. In the second part, the essay focuses on Paris's interwar intellectual scene, where this expansion of liberalism is reflected upon critically from the perspective of the European crisis of the 1930s, but also from a deeper Jewish, Islamic, and Christian inspiration. Moving from the East to the West, the essay reconstructs step by step a growing convergence that established itself between the theopolitical question of the late Ottoman Empire and important intellectual trends in the interwar period in Paris. For this purpose, it uses as a guiding thread a Jewish intellectual episode: Leo Strauss's rediscovery of a Jewish–Islamic philosophical model successfully developed during the Middle Ages. The reconstruction of this episode and its intellectual background in the 1930s will illuminate an overlooked interconnection with similar questioning in the late and post-Ottoman Levant. It will also shed new light on parallel intellectual projects in Paris like Louis Massignon's development of a Catholic–Islamic mystical model and Étienne Gilson's rediscovery of Christian medieval philosophy with its Islamic and Jewish components.

Leo Strauss (1899–1973) was a young German Jewish philosopher exiled in Paris around 1933. Louis Massignon (1883–1962) was France's leading historian of Islam and MENA in the first half of the twentieth century, and Étienne Gilson (1884–1978) a celebrated French historian of Christian medieval philosophy. All three met in person in Paris in the years 1932–1933.[1] As will be demonstrated, their philosophical, religious and political projects met too, or at least intersected. They intersected also with the theopolitical concerns of the Orient for reasons linked to their specific area of expertise—Christian, Islamic, and Jewish thought

1 For an overview of these three thinkers, see Philipp von Wussow, *Leo Strauss and the Theopolitics of Culture* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2020); Florian Michel, *Étienne Gilson : une biographie intellectuelle et politique* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2018); Manoël Pénicaud, *Louis Massignon : le catholique musulman* (Montrouge: Bayard, 2020). For evidence about this encounter, see Leo Strauss, Heinrich Meier, and Wiebke Meier, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3 (Stuttgart: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 1996), 353, 408, 427–28, 431, 435, 438, 457, 608, 609, 611, 630.

—but also to their shared interest in medieval intellectual history and in a critical approach to the historical shift of modernity. This moment of convergence, nonetheless, remained limited and soon fell into oblivion. The following pages exhume this forgotten episode, for it entails a unique potential for a dialogical and critical understanding of the crisis of liberalism in the West and the Levant.

The Political Question of the Orient

> The National Assembly, considering that the conditions necessary to be a French citizen and to become an active citizen, are fixed by the Constitution, and that any man who, meeting the said conditions, takes the civic oath, and undertakes to fulfill all the duties that the Constitution imposes, is entitled to all the advantages it provides, revokes all adjournments, reservations and exceptions inserted in previous decrees relative to Jewish individuals, who will take the civic oath, which shall be regarded as a waiver of all privileges and exceptions previously introduced in their favor. (Decree concerning the Jews who will take the civic oath, 27 and 28 September 1791[2])

The famous French revolutionary decree of 1791 abolished Jewish corporations and their privileges inherited from the Ancien Régime agreements while granting "to Jewish individuals, who will take the civic oath" "all the advantages [the Constitution] provides". This decree, this shift of legal frame, was the logical consequence of the general abolition of feudal privileges in 1789. Yet it was revoked and suspended for two years concerning the Jews, before eventually being approved by a vote. Historians of Jewish emancipation studied the impact in France and in Europe of the French revolutionary decree or other charters of rights, often adopting a teleological approach and examining how much time it took for the different states to emancipate their Jews. As a consequence, they tended to neglect the peculiar impact of Western European Jewish emancipation in MENA during the nineteenth century.[3] Indeed, with the conquest of Algeria in 1830 and France's and England's growing influence in the Maghreb and Levant after the loss of their American colonies, the question of civic emancipation of religious minorities in MENA became a burning problem.

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2 Jacques Guillaume Thouret, "Décret concernant les juifs qui prêteront le serment civique, lors de la séance du 27 septembre 1791," in *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 – Première série (1787–1799) Tome XXXI – Du 17 au 30 septembre 1791* (Paris: Librairie Administrative P. Dupont, 1888): 372–73.

3 Aron Rodrigue, "From Millet to Minority: Turkish Jewry," in *Paths of Emancipation: Jews, States, and Citizenship*, eds. Pierre Birnbaum and Ira Katznelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995): 238–61.

In the nineteenth century, the territories of the Ottoman Empire entered a period of multifaceted political, cultural, and economic reconfigurations. Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya were conquered, and submitted to European modern colonial rule. Greece, Romania, and other territories of the Balkans and Eastern Europe were becoming independent or parts of other states. The Egypt of Mehmed Ali separated from Istanbul and carved for itself a semi-independent kingdom in Egypt, Soudan (Sudan), and Syria, threatening even militarily the central imperial power in Istanbul, and then finally falling under British rule by the end of the nineteenth century. The Wahhabi Saudi dynasty forged in the Arabic Peninsula during the eighteenth century and the difficult reshaping of the Qajar Iran under Russian and British influence also belong to this large picture.

Facing this multifaceted challenge of the Ottoman Empire vis-à-vis its glorious past and Islamic ideals, Sultan Abdulmecid I and leading bureaucrats engaged in a series of reforms (Tanzimat) in the mid-nineteenth century. "On November 3, 1839, Foreign Minister Mustafa Reşid Pasha read an imperial decree before Sultan Abdulmecid and an assembled audience of state dignitaries, religious leaders, prominent bureaucrats, foreign diplomats, and nobles."[4] The text read by Reşid Pasha illustrates the ambiguities of the reforms. On the one hand, the incipit opens with a traditional understanding and narrative of decline:

> As high and low know, since the first days of our exalted state [*Devlet-i Âlî*'], the Ottoman sovereignty [*saltanat-ı seniyye*] was powerful and its people had successfully flourished and reached prosperity while they were observing thoroughly the precepts of the venerable Koran and the laws of sharia. Yet, within the last one hundred and fifty years, previous power and prosperity turned into weakness and poverty due to a succession of disasters and disobeying sacred sharia and useful laws based on diverse reasons. It is a crystal-clear fact that states which are not administrated by religious law cannot last for a long time.[5]

On the other hand, this conventional complaint about the loss of religious and moral observance is followed by an unusual reformist project and narrative of improvement and growth:

> When we take the geographical position of the Ottoman provinces, their fertile lands, abilities and capacities of the people into consideration, it is clear that we will reach the desired result within five to ten years with the help of divine providence. Legislating new laws is a necessity to administrate the Ottoman Empire and the provinces according to a well-designed legal

4 M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 72. See also Edhem Eldem, "L'édit des Tanzimat (1839): Une relecture," *Turcica* 52 (2021): 201–307.

5 Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi [BOA], MFB/48. My translation.

> frame, relying on the help of the Almighty Creator [*hazret-i bârî*],[6] and receiving intercession from the ethereality of the Holy Prophet.[7]

Security of the person and his orher property as well as rationalization of the tax system and of army conscription were the efficacious means of "a good administration" (*tedâbir-i müessire-i hüsn-i idâre*) which were supposed to close the gap with Western empires and restore the past splendor of the Ottoman Empire. A new regime of more direct relationships between the Ottoman Sultan and his subjects along the principle of the rule of law was expected to emerge from the difficult implementation of these declarations. The 1839 edict was thus presenting two faces: religious amendment and modern administrative reforms, confusedly suggesting that the moral and religious grandeur of the past could be achieved by new administrative means.

Such an evolution implied progressively redefining the different subjects of the Ottoman Empire, traditionally determined by their belonging to a confessional community, as more equal Ottoman subjects before a more universal law. Yet as evidenced in the 1856 decree concerning the civic equality of the different confessional communities in the empire, the line taken by the Sultan and his administration was again confusing. On the one hand, the Sultan confirmed the privileges granted to the protected *millets* or confessional communities: "We declare that all the privileges and spiritual immunities granted by my sublime ancestors to the Christian and other non-Muslim communities belonging to the constituents of my people who live in my imperial provinces will last until the hereafter. They are eternal."[8]

On the other hand, the Sultan tried to affirm a new principle of legal equality between Muslims and non-Muslims:

> The guarantees promised on our part by the *Hatt-ı Hümayun of Gülhane* [1839 declaration], and in conformity with my favourable regulation, to all the magnificent subjects of mine, without distinction of religion and sect, for the security of their persons and property and the preservation of their chastity are today confirmed and consolidated, and efficacious measures shall be taken in order that they may have their full and entire effect.[9]

The attempt at civil emancipation of Christian and Jewish Ottoman subjects did not take the French revolutionary path, replacing the Ancien Régime confessional

6 Bârî is one of the ninety-nine names of Allah in Islam.
7 BOA, MFB/48. My translation.
8 BOA, MMS/6–245.29–06–1272. My translation.
9 BOA, MMS/6–245.29–06–1272. My translation.

agreements with a civic oath to the Constitution. It paradoxically both confirmed the ancient confessional system and transformed it toward a more liberal regime where "the sacraments of all religions are and shall be professed without limitations" and "no subject of my Empire shall be hindered in the exercise of the religion that he professes."[10] Reform was done not by replacing but by juxtaposing traditional and modern sets of rights. This paradox can partially be explained by the historical background. The 1856 declaration came after the Crimean War (1853–1856) in which the English and French empires took side with the Ottomans against Russia. Their support was conditioned upon Ottoman acceptance of liberal reforms concerning religious minorities, and concerning the right for foreigners to "dispose of land in [the Sultan's] dominions."[11] The reforms did not evolve out of an internal revision of the Ottoman system, but out of growing Western interventionism superimposed on it.

This complex attempt at reform and emancipation had even more complex results. On the one hand, it facilitated the emergence of a Christian, and to a lesser degree Jewish, economic and cultural elite, whose most visible representatives were Armenians, Syrian-Lebanese Christians, and Greeks in a series of port cities from Salonica to Alexandria. These elites were integrated into the global economic market more quickly than the Muslim population and often became indirect agents of English and French imperialism, dissociating themselves further from Muslims. Thus, for instance, in the nineteenth century, Beirut became a large Christian city, a commercial hub in constant exchange with Europe and the Americas, as well as a seminal cultural center in which Protestant and Catholic religious agents spurred the rebirth of the Arabic language and Arabic literature, culture, and nationalism.[12] George Antonius (1891–1942), in his 1938 magnum opus *The Arab Awakening*, opens his national narrative with a striking distinction between "a false start" of Arab nationalism in Mehmed Ali's new Egypt and "the start" in Christian Lebanon under the influence of Christian missionaries and Lebanese Christian intellectuals.[13] This problematic distinction reflected the cultural ascend-

10 BOA, MMS/6–245.29–06–1272. My translation.

11 BOA, MMS/6–245.29–06–1272. My translation.

12 For an overview, see Fruma Zachs, *The Making of Syrian Identity: Intellectuals and Merchants in Nineteenth Century Beirut* (Leiden: Brill, 2005). Concerning the presence of Persian/Iranian intellectuals in Beirut and the significance of this town at the turn of the twentieth century for those intellectuals, see H.E. Chehabi, Peyman Jafari, and Maral Jefroudi, *Iran in the Middle East: Transnational Encounters and Social History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 120–43.

13 George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* (Milton Keynes: Lightning Source, 2001). See also *Martin S. Kramer, Arab Awakening & Islamic Revival: The Politics of Ideas in the Middle East (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996), 111–23.*

ency of Christians in the late Ottoman Empire, and its role in reshaping the sociopolitical configuration of the Levant.

On the other hand, this ascension of Christian and Jewish elites within the Ottoman Empire together with the growing imperial influence of Britain and France sparked a series of harsh reactions from Muslim subjects and leaders, leading to the genocide of the Armenians, which enfolded from the 1890s until the aftermath of World War I.[14] In his chapter on "the Hamidian despotism," George Antonius perceives clearly the shift of the Sultan from the Tanzimat reformist project to "an attempt [...] to strengthen his authority [...] by a greater display of his prerogatives as caliph of Islam."[15] In parallel, he is perfectly able to decipher the same transformation in the national Arab awakening. "One of the lasting contributions which the development of Western education in Syria [including Lebanon] made to the Arab national movement was that it helped to transfer the leadership from Christians to Moslem hands."[16] The Western influence on the Christians and Jews of the Levant created a growing dissociation with the Muslim majority in Turkish and Arab territories, which manifested itself in a series of phenomena: a growing cultural and linguistic divide between Christian and Jewish minorities and the Muslim majority, Abdul Hamid II's Muslim shift, the Armenian genocide, and Zionism and its growing rejection by Muslims and Christians. Interestingly, Antonius did not mention the Armenians' fate in his fresco of Arab national awakening; in sharp contrast, he closed his narrative with the Arab–Zionist divide: "But, the logic of facts is inexorable. It shows that no room can be made in Palestine for a second nation [the Jews] except by dislodging or exterminating the nation in possession [the Arabs in Palestine]."[17]

These final words of Antonius make clear the central political question of the Orient. The transformation of the Ottoman-Islamic concept of ethnic-religious communities into a national and civic notion of a multi-religious society evolved in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century into a growing divide and confrontation between ethnic-religious groups—a confrontation both fostering and challenging the growing Western imperial grip on MENA, with no political framework, ancient or new, capable of harmonizing it. Emblematic of this missing political framework is the tipping of the late Ottoman Empire's or Mehmet Ali's liberal reforms into a severe economic crisis followed by increased British and French col-

14 For a recent survey of the Armenian genocide, see Benny Morris and Dror Zeevi, *The Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of Its Christian Minorities, 1894–1924* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

15 Antonius, *Arab Awakening*, 69.

16 Antonius, 93.

17 Antonius, 412.

onial interventionism. This process deepened the ethnic-religious divide between Muslims and Christians in Syria-Lebanon, Egypt, and Turkey, and between Jews and Palestinians in Palestine. The civic conversion envisioned in the French revolutionary decree of 1791 both happened and failed in the Levant, partly because it could rely not on a religiously homogeneous society like French society, but on an imperial mosaic of religious-ethnic communities. In view of the national, imperial, and religious conflicts which emerged in Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in parallel, it remains a question why most historians and political philosophers studied separately the crisis of liberalism in Europe and in MENA. The following pages are an attempt to study dialogically the crisis of liberalism in both Europe and the Levant. Before demonstrating the role that Jewish studies can play in this dialogue, central aspects of Oriental intellectual answers to the question of the Orient have to be explained.

The Theopolitical Question of the Orient

> News of the spell of atrocities and abominations committed this summer by the troublemakers in our midst has reached the corners of the Earth. All over the civilized world, it has drawn pity and gloom, on one hand, and anger and wrath, on the other. Yet, we witness charity pour in from all sides to help the needy. Armies from every land are also heading our way to protect the weak and to punish the guilty and the aggressor. (Beirut, September 29, 1860)[18]

In the immediate aftermath of the terrible confessional civil war between Druze and Christians in Lebanon in May–June 1860, one of the leading Christian intellectuals of the Arabic Renaissance in Beirut, Buṭrus al-Bustani (1819–1883), took the opportunity to address all Syrians with a new publication, similar to a newspaper, or rather a recurrent pamphlet. It was called *Nafir Surya* (*The Clarion of Syria*), playing with the ambiguity of the word "*nafir*," which can announce the Day of Judgment (*yawm al-nafir*) or call for a new sense of belonging to Syria.[19] In the opening sentences of the first issue quoted above, he succinctly resumes the imbrication of the local civil war, its diffusion as news within the Christian West arousing identification with the plight of Christians in Lebanon, and the intervention of the Ottoman Empire together with the British and French empires. Here, as occurred after the Crimean War, the solution of late Ottoman tensions involved an increased colonial grip on the Levant, combined with an increased confessionaliza-

18 Buṭrus al-Bustani et al., *The Clarion of Syria: A Patriot's Call Against the Civil War of 1860*, trans. Jens Hanssen and Hicham Safieddine (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 65.
19 Al-Bustani et al., 45–46.

tion of the Syria-Lebanon political system. Al-Bustani did not suffice himself with this joined imperial attempt at restoring peace in Lebanon.[20] He addressed the civil war from a local Oriental perspective. First, he forged a concept in Arabic to name it: "The worst thing under the firmament is war, and the most horrendous among them are civil wars [*al-hurub al-ahliyya*], which break out between the commoners of a single country."[21] *Al-harb al-ahli*, the domestic war, dismembers the members of one country, *ahlei bilaad wahidah.* Conceptualizing the civil war in Lebanon not as a confrontation of rival religious-ethnic groups but as a domestic conflict within a novel enlarged notion of kinship, al-Bustani developed a new notion of Syrian national identity, *al-watania*, thus hoping to embed confessional belonging in a larger territorial and historical one.

> Syria, which is known as Barr al-Sham and Arabistan, is our homeland with all its diverse plains, coastlines, mountains, and barren lands. The inhabitants of Syria, regardless of their religious beliefs, their physical features, their ethnicities, and their general diversity, are all our compatriots. For the homeland resembles a chain of many rings. One end of the chain represents our place of residence, birthplace, or ancestral home. At the other end lies our country and everyone in it. The center and magnet of these two poles are our heart. The homeland holds strong sway over its children. It draws and holds them within its embrace, however loose this embrace might be. It also captures their hearts and pulls them closer to their homeland so that they may return even when their lives are more comfortable abroad.[22]

The conceptual attempt of al-Bustani can be best learned from a problematic choice of his translators, Jens Hanssen and Hicham Safieddine. The first two sentences are composed according to a perfect parallelism. First, Syria is our homeland, *watanana.* Second, the inhabitants of Syria are the sons of our homeland. In the middle of these two parallel affirmations, which make clear how al-Bustani widens the traditional notion of family or religious community, he inserts each time the same qualification: *ala ihtilaf.* The translators first translate the expression as "with all its diverse plains, coastlines, mountains, and barren lands." However, in the next sentence they translate the same expression in the following way: "regardless of their religious beliefs, their physical features, their ethnicities, and their general diversity." In the first sentence, the name Syria applies to one territorial entity, "our homeland," *watanana*, although it contains or includes a great geographical diversity. In the second sentence, the inhabitants of this one geo-

20 For a survey, see Kamal S. Salibi, *The Modern History of Lebanon* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1965), 106–19.

21 Al-Bustani et al., *Clarion of Syria*, 80.

22 Al-Bustani et al., 76.

graphical entity are all sons of the homeland, thus forming one large kinship, although it contains great diversity in religions (*mazhab*), in physical appearance (*haiya*), in races (*ajnas*), and even in ethnic groupings (*tushuub*). The translators rightly felt a difference between the geographical diversity enclosed in the one homeland, and the religious, physical, racial, and ethnic diversity enclosed in the national kinship. Therefore, they felt compelled to translate *ala ihtilaf* with the preposition "regardless of," since they judged that including such a diversity was only possible by transcending the divisions, especially in the immediate aftermath of the civil war. By using the term "regardless of" and the logic of transcending diversity, they adopted a philosophical attitude which characterizes Western European state building, the emerging of the strong state, the Leviathan, as a point of reference and support for leaving behind the religious wars that plagued early modern Western Europe. Yet this strong state is exactly what is missing in the nineteenth-century Middle East and, therefore, the transcending move was not a real possibility. The Tanzimat's or Mehmed Ali's reforms were aimed at creating such a strong state apparatus, yet failed and were gradually replaced by colonial interventionism. As a consequence, the correct translation is "with all their religious beliefs, their physical features, their ethnicities, and their general diversity." Al-Bustani did not conceive his concept of national belonging beyond the confessional-ethnic communities, but within them, using a geographical model, according to which the different geographical zones of Syria belonged inherently together, forming an organic entity without having to transcend toward the superior entity of the state. This organic entity, the expanded kinship of all Syrians with all their differences, was conceived as relying on a common history, on a common language and civilization, and on moral-religious interaction and commitment. Syrians' and more broadly Arabs' attempts to give a concrete political and cultural shape to al-Bustani's concept of *watania*, in times of Ottoman imperial reconfiguration and British and French imperial interventionism, constituted the central theopolitical question of the Middle East.

The theopolitical problem of the concept and project of *watania* crafted by al-Bustani and other Arab or Turkish nationalists in the late Ottoman Empire can be extracted from an article entitled "Al-Waṭanīya" and published in the first issue of the Lebanese journal *Al-Mašriq* in 1898. In this article, a Christian Lebanese scholar and theologian, and leading figure of Beirut St. Joseph University, Father Louis Cheikho, takes issue with an earlier article, probably by Halil Ganem, in *La Jeune Turquie, Turkia Al-Fatat* to engage in a critical discussion of the newly elaborated concept of *watania.*[23] The definition of nationalism to which Cheikho responds is

23 For an overview of Louis Cheikho's life and work, see Robert Bell Campbell, *The Arabic Journal*

the following: nationalism "exists whenever there is an agreement of interests and religion plays absolutely no role in nationalism among the free and enlightened nations."[24] The definition insists on a new argument: "the agreement upon interest is what makes nationalism." No longer the geographic model of al-Bustani, but the constructivist model of association inherited from the West.[25] As in the case of the Tanzimat reforms, the evolution of the concept of *watania* involved an increased submission to European models. Cheikho refutes this definition with a theological argument:

> If he claims that reason proves this principle, we would reply that the judgment of reason proves the opposite [...] The human being has a creator and he is the most elevated and most glorious being. The creature, primarily, has to perform duties of worship and service for God, the cause of his existence, whether he has a homeland or not. Al-Ghazali said in the beginning of his book 'You lad': 'God created you to pursue His service, you shall worship Him, glorify Him, and prostrate unto Him in the morning and evening', and Labid[26] said: Isn't it that Everything except God is vain?[27] Therefore, the intellect proves the importance of religion over nationalism.[28]

This rational refutation reveals the cosmological and ontological gap between the Western notion of agreed interest relying on a strong immanent notion of autonomy of nature and human society, and Cheikho's affirmation of medieval cosmology and theology of creation. Cheikho's reclaiming of two famous medieval Middle Eastern religious figures (Al-Ghazali and Labid) positions his creationist stance in the spiritual and geographical Orient. The second refutation of the modern notion of nationalism relies on an historical argument:

Al-Mashriq: Its Beginnings and First Twenty-Five Years Under the Editorship of Père Louis Cheikho, S.J. (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1972), 18–60. On Halil Ganem, see Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 264–65.

24 Louis Cheikho, "Al-Waṭanīya," *Al-Mašriq* 1 (1898): 20–21 [Arabic]. My translation.

25 For an exposition of this new understanding of nationalism, see Jurji Zaidan, "Community of Interest," in *Jurji Zaidan and the Foundations of Arab Nationalism: A Study*, ed. Thomas Philipp, trans. Hilary Kilpatrick and Paul Starkey (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014): 330–37.

26 Abu Aqil Labid ibn Rabi'ah (*c.*560–*c.*661) was an Arabian poet. He accepted Islam after his visit to the Medina seeking a remedy for his uncle from Mohammed. One of his poems is contained in the Mu'allaqat.

27 This verse is part of Abu Aqil Labid ibn Rabi'ah's famous poem where he vowed to feed people whenever the east wind began to blow, and to continue doing so until it stopped. This verse is also mentioned in Sahih al-Bukhari and Islam as part of the Hadith: "the most truthful statement a poet has ever made is the saying of Labid: Everything besides God is vain" (Riyad as-Salihin, Introduction, Hadith 489).

28 Cheikho, "Al-Waṭanīya," 21–22 [Arabic]. My translation.

> Is he ignorant, may God correct him, that the histories of all nations clearly contradict his claim and attest to its error? I mean among the pagan nations, among the tribes wandering in the darkness of ignorance and savagery as well as among the peoples who possess civilization. All of them, without exception, favor their religion over their terrestrial life. No one can deny that the nation is part of the 'terrestrial life'.[29] [...] Therefore, the claim of the author stating that peoples favor the love for their nations over their religion has to be rejected. The correct proposition is that the highest rank pertains to religion and the love of the nation comes only afterwards.[30]

Cheikho's historical and theological understanding of human history clarifies that nationalism, meaning "the duties [men] have to fulfill to Caesar," has to be interpreted within the religious division of this world and the world to come. Therefore, nationalism is a form of materialist or terrestrial arrangement, in sharp contrast and inferior to the spiritual norms and value of religion. If we take into consideration the historical and cultural fact that Western modern scientific cosmology and liberal political philosophy were not the cosmological and social conceptions of great parts of the Middle Eastern elites in the nineteenth century, then nationalism, in its more constructivist form, could be perceived as inversion of the right order between terrestrial and spiritual, this world and eternity. An inversion coming from outside which had to be resisted or kept within reasonable religious borders. Cheikho's critique brings to the fore the theopolitical danger encapsulated in the concept and project of *watania.* Doubting the capacity of national feeling to bring late Ottoman subjects to recognize a common good only on the basis of a common interest, Cheikho argues that

> religion alone, along with the reward and punishment it gives to man for his good and bad deeds, can revive his spirit and inspire him to favor the welfare of his nation over his personal interests. That is the reason one says that the love of the nation is rooted in faith because religion is the source of the love of the nation.[31]

For Cheikho, prioritizing nationalism over religious duty and community would eventually ruin the moral and legal religious basis on which Middle Eastern national conscience had hitherto rested, detaching it from its theological and cosmological framework. Confronting al-Bustani with Cheikho has illuminated a central aspect of the theopolitical question of the Orient. The envisioned transformation of an ethnic-religious notion of belonging into a new national one could not rely on a

29 The word "دنيا" has a religious connotation meaning that this world or life is part of the lower place, as opposed to "الاخرة" or "the after-life," which is considered the higher world.

30 Cheikho, "Al-Waṭanīya," 22 [Arabic]. My translation.

31 Cheikho, 23. My translation.

strong state or on solid imperial institutions being achieved. This absence eventually increased external colonial interventionism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with a bearing upon the content of the Tanzimat reforms as well as the Arab or Turkish notion of nationalism. Finally, the shift from a religious to a civic or national notion of belonging happened only partially while spreading a sense of external threat vis-à-vis the religious and ontological foundations of Ottoman society.

A New Role for Jewish Studies

Having illuminated the political and theopolitical question of the Orient in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the second half of this essay intends to complete this dialogical study of liberalism in Eastern and Western contexts by focusing on a fascinating episode in modern Jewish intellectual history: the years 1932 and 1933, which Leo Strauss spent in Paris at the beginning of his exile from Nazi Germany and his interaction with the Parisian interwar intellectual scene around his reappraisal of the Jewish–Islamic philosophical model as well as Hobbes' political thought. As mentioned earlier, this Jewish intellectual episode will demonstrate the new global role that Jewish studies can endorse in providing historical and literary sources for a new articulation of the East and the West. Using as a guiding thread a Jewish intellectual episode, Strauss's exile years in Paris, the following pages depict a moment of convergence between the theopolitical question of the late Ottoman Empire, described earlier, and important intellectual trends in Paris that will now be presented. The interconnection of Leo Strauss's early intellectual evolution in the 1930s with Étienne Gilson's and Louis Massignon's more mature research project will illuminate an overlooked interconnection with similar questioning in late and post-Ottoman Levant.

Leo Strauss's Shift of Alliance

An interesting symptom of the crisis of liberalism can be detected in the shift of alliance apparent in the early works of Strauss in the 1930s—a period in which he left Germany for France, before heading to England and, finally, to the United States.[32] This shift of alliance can be described as a shift from German Jews' imag-

32 See Eugene R. Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2006), 54–80.

ined association with the Protestant cultural elite to Strauss's imagined Jewish–Islamic association during the medieval period. It is also a shift from Kantian to Hobbesian philosophy.

Strauss's shift of alliance can be traced in his early works through his transformation of a central conceptual motif in Hermann Cohen's thought.[33] The motif in question is that of rapprochement or affinity; in German, *Annäherung* or *Verwandschaft.* In Cohen's famous 1915 war essay *Deutschtum und Judentum*, this motif refers to a certain affinity between Judaism and central concepts of the Lutheran Reformation. In section 20 of his essay, Cohen expresses this affinity with two formulae: *die Verwandschaft von Juden mit Grundbegriffe der Reformation* and *die Annäherung an den Prophetismus*,[34] referring to the proximity of Jews to central concepts of the Lutheran Reformation or the rapprochement of German Protestantism to Jewish prophetism. Cohen delineates in this section a dialectic movement of rapprochement. First, Luther's Reformation rediscovered a series of central features of Biblical Judaism: justification (*Rechtfertigung*), moralization of human vocation (*Versittlichung aller menschlichen Beruf*) and general priesthood (*allgemeneines Priestertum*). Second, this rediscovery engendered misunderstanding and tension between Luther and early modern Jews. Each side saw the proximity of the other, yet the dominant structuring of society by Christian religion did not allow the rapprochement of Judaism (which had already undergone a reform in the Middle Ages under Islamic philosophical influences) and German Lutheran Reformation. Third, when, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Reformation became primarily a religious background for the development of German culture and science, the Jewish–Protestant rapprochement could finally happen, bringing with it a new Judaism (*neues Judentum*) elaborated by German Jews who were active in German science and culture.

Yet, twentieth-century history took a far less positive path than that envisioned in Cohen's idealistic narrative. In 1933, eighteen years after Cohen's powerful formulation of the German Jewish–Protestant alliance, World War I was lost, the Weimar Republic collapsed, and the Nazis seized power. At that time, Leo Strauss was a Rockefeller research fellow in Paris with no way back home. In a letter dated May 1933 and addressed to Karl Löwith, Strauss articulates his accept-

33 On Strauss's complex relationship to Herman Cohen, see Wussow, *Leo Strauss*, 31–39; Leora Batnitzky, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 94–114; Leo Strauss and Michael Zank, *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings, 1921–1932* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 3–49.

34 Hermann Cohen and Hartwig Wiedebach, *Kleinere Schriften V, 1913–1915* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1997), 486–497.

ance of his exile from Germany. He also adds a swift but cogent expression of his intellectual and political shift of alliance:

> I see no acceptable possibility to live under the swastika [*dem Hakenkreuz*], i. e., under a symbol that says nothing else to me except: 'You and your kind, you are subhuman φυσει and therefore true pariahs.' There exists here only *one* solution. We must repeatedly say to ourselves, we 'men of science'—for so people like us called ourselves during the Arab Middle Ages—*non habemus locum manentem, sed quaerimus* [we have no place to stay, but only seek].[35]

Confronted with his exclusion as a Jew by the Nazis, Strauss accelerates an existential quest, replacing Cohen's failed Jewish–Protestant alliance with a scholarly model retrieved from the past and from the Orient: the medieval Jewish–Arabic or Jewish–Islamic alliance. It seemed in 1933 more appealing to Strauss than "the ridiculous and pitiful appeal to the *droits imprescriptables de l'homme*," as he writes in the same letter.[36] Far from forcing him to embrace liberalism, Strauss's 1933 exile from Germany led him to seek a stable philosophical and historical axis in the attitude of Arab "men of science," an attitude shared by Jewish philosophers in the medieval Islamic era, but unfortunately abandoned in the modern European period. This imaginative and intellectual shift of alliance (prepared by his earlier renewed interest in Maimonides)[37] enabled Strauss to face the nearing catastrophe for German Jewry from an old-new position, renewing the present signification of Jewish and Islamic philosophy, as clearly expressed in his 1935 book *Philosophie und Gesetz:* "if one considers that the modern Enlightenment, as opposed to the medieval, generally *publicizes* its teachings, one will not object to the assertion that the medieval Enlightenment was essentially esoteric, while the modern Enlightenment was essentially exoteric."[38]

Strauss learned from the collapse of German political institutions linked to the *Aufklärung* the political value of esoteric medieval Oriental enlightenment. Inverting Cohen's historical narrative, Strauss was particularly prone to decipher, in the

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35 William H.F. Altman, *The German Stranger: Leo Strauss and National Socialism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 221. For the original, see Strauss, Meier, and Meier, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 625 (original emphasis).

36 Strauss, Meier, and Meier, vol. 3, 625.

37 For a description of Strauss's evolution toward *Philosophie und Gesetz*, see Wussow, *Leo Strauss*, 32.

38 Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors*, SUNY Series in the Jewish Writings of Strauss (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 103. For the original, see Strauss, Meier, and Meier, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, 89.

Jewish–Protestant alliance crafted in the age of enlightenment and nineteenth-century positive science, not a historical rapprochement impossible in earlier times when religion ruled, but, on the contrary, the deterioration of an earlier and more successful model—the Jewish–Islamic political model, which articulated in the Islamic world accepted religious norms and the classical philosophical drive toward perfection. Such erosion could only lead, according to Strauss's newly invented historical vision, from the more stable medieval Enlightenment to the short-lived modern Enlightenment.

In his 1936 *Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft in ihrer Genesis*, Strauss added a deliberate preference for Hobbes's political philosophy over that of German thinkers like Kant to his turning upside down of the history of medieval and modern *Aufklärung*. In his monograph, he presents Hobbes's political philosophy "as the first peculiarly modern attempt to give a coherent and exhaustive answer to the question of man's right life which is at the same time the question of the right order of society."[39] He explains the reason for his choice as follows:

> Thus not the naturalistic antithesis of morally indifferent animal appetite (or of morally indifferent human striving after power) on the one hand, and morally indifferent striving after self-preservation on the other, but the moral and humanist antithesis of fundamentally unjust vanity and fundamentally just fear of violent death is the basis of Hobbes's political philosophy. It will be objected that this moral antithesis is to be found in Hobbes's political philosophy only because Hobbes had not yet completely freed himself from the influence of the Christian Biblical tradition. For what is the antithesis between vanity and fear of violent death, if not the 'secularized' form of the traditional antithesis between spiritual pride and fear of God (or humility), a secularized form which results from the Almighty God having been replaced by the over-mighty enemies and then by the over-mighty State, 'the Mortall God'? [...] Had Hobbes waived it, had he developed a naturalistic political philosophy, he would have renounced the possibility of distinguishing between 'the offensiveness of a man's nature' and 'the right of every man to everything'. He would have had to recognize man's natural appetite, all his passions, and particularly vanity, as justified by nature in the same degree as is reason. In other words, political philosophy deprived of its moral foundation is, indeed, Spinoza's political philosophy, but it is not Hobbes's political philosophy. Spinoza, indeed, and not Hobbes, made might equivalent to right. Naturalistic political philosophy necessarily leads to the annulment of the conception of justice as such.[40]

Hobbes succeeded in reformulating the question of man's right life by recasting the traditional antithesis between spiritual pride and fear of God in the more secular form of an antithesis between vanity and the fear of violent death. Thus, he

39 Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 1.

40 Strauss, *Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 27–28.

escaped the danger of a completely naturalistic political philosophy, which equates, as in the work of Spinoza and his heirs, might with right. By choosing Hobbes over Spinoza, Strauss was not only adding a British flavor to the Jewish–Islamic model recently developed in *Philosophie und Gesetz*, but also pointing out the Achilles' heel of modern Enlightenment thought: its failure to conceptualize a *summum bonum* (or *malum*) for human passions, and to articulate such a concept in the political and social realms. The early modern shift from Christian kingdoms to modern states was constructed on a paradoxical affirmation of the state's pervasive intervention and administration, while progressively renouncing its role in the pursuit of religious goals. Modern state building went along with its metaphysical flattening, resulting (in Strauss's view) in a certain incapacity to define a new *summum bonum* or *malum* regarding growing political and economic expansion. This incapacity defined nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century politics for Strauss, and led to the catastrophe of 1933. Hobbes, and, perhaps the British monarchy and empire with him, appeared to the exiled Strauss as a moment of equilibrium between the medieval theopolitical tradition and the rise of the modern state and modern Enlightenment.

To summarize my claim of a shift of alliance, we can say that the dramatic changes of the 1930s (together with his personal intellectual evolution) triggered for Strauss a dual nostalgia or return to the medieval Jewish–Islamic model and to the pre-Enlightenment Hobbesian moment, instead of the Jewish, Protestant, and Kantian model. This replacement is particularly visible in a 1936 French article, "Quelques remarques sur la science politique de Maïmonide et de Fârâbi":

> The medieval character of the politics of Maimonides and the *falasifa* is not contradicted by the fact that it is nothing other than a modification, however considerable, of an ancient conception. For there is a profound agreement between Jewish and Muslim thought on the one hand and ancient thought on the other: it is not the Bible and the Koran, but perhaps the New Testament, and certainly the Reformation and modern philosophy, which brought about the break with ancient thought.[41]

Strauss's "profound agreement between Jewish and Muslim thought" replaces Cohen's earlier "proximity of Jews to central concepts of the Lutheran Reformation," while adding to this Oriental repositioning of Jewish philosophy a critique and disillusionment vis-à-vis "Reformation and modern philosophy, which brought about the break with ancient thought." This shift of alliance and critique of religious and philosophical modernity in response to the collapse of Jewish and European en-

41 Leo Strauss and Robert Bartlett, "Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi," *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (January 1990): 4–5.

lightenment opened confusedly an opportunity to think the crisis of liberalism in Europe and in MENA together. It interconnected with similar questioning in the Levant, exemplified by the earlier quoted text from Cheikho, concerning the dangers of a limitation of individual and collective commitment to political authority to a mere civic and national rationality, abandoning deeply rooted religious and moral discourse and practice. Interestingly, it is exactly to this Jewish–Islamic Oriental tradition that Leo Strauss recurred when faced in Germany with the harsh consequences of modern paradoxical state building.

Intellectual Affinities

Having highlighted a salient aspect of Strauss's reaction to the crisis of the 1930s and its connection to theopolitical question of the Orient, I would like to explore its intellectual ramifications with other contemporary intellectual projects in Paris. These ramifications can be partly reconstructed from a letter that Strauss addressed to his friend Karl Löwith (1897–1973) in November 1932 upon his arrival in Paris. In this long letter, he writes:

> I met two extraordinary men, both—obviously— not philosophers. 1. The geographer André Siegfried […] 2. The Arabic scholar Louis Massignon, a burning soul, incredibly learned, gifted with a remarkable capacity to penetrate in the heart of the questions.
>
> [Étienne] Gilson is not here: he is giving a series of lectures in Canada. [Alexandre] Koyré is a jolly fellow.[42]

This letter provides much information about the intellectual circles in which Strauss was moving. André Siegfried (1875–1959), Louis Massignon, and Étienne Gilson were three professors at the Collège de France, the highest academic institution in France. Alexandre Koyré (1892–1964) was one of Gilson's most brilliant students.[43] In this essay, I would like to focus especially on two great French intellectual figures mentioned in the letter: Étienne Gilson and Louis Massignon. In the following pages, I shall expose the intellectual affinities of Strauss's intellectual shift with Gilson's recovery of Christian medieval philosophy, and with Massignon's elaboration of a Christian–Islamic model. Not only have these affinities have been generally overlooked by the specialized scholarship on these thinkers, but they constitute important pieces for a dialogical reconstruction of the intellec-

42 Strauss, Meier, and Meier, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 608. My translation.

43 For more information on the relationship between Gilson and Koyrée, see Michel, *Étienne Gilson*, 13, 20–21, 27, 38, 40, 69, 72, 77–78, 105, 143, 212, 300, 415–416, 427, 445.

tual crisis of the 1930s in Europe and the Levant. This crisis pertained to a moment in which Western Europe tried to foster and monitor liberal state building in MENA via a colonial system of mandates (or bilateral agreements with Egypt, the Saudi Kingdom, and Iraq), while being challenged internally by anti-liberal trends, fascism, Nazism, and Stalinist communism most notably.

Étienne Gilson's Christian Medieval Model

In an unpublished letter to Gilson dated May 1933, Strauss refers to an earlier meeting with the great professor and scholar in medieval philosophy. During the encounter, he writes, "I had the opportunity to explain [to] you [meaning Gilson] my ideas on the political science of Hobbes and its historical origins." Strauss continues by acknowledging that "the objections you raised helped me a lot."[44] The young Jewish German philosopher hoped to compensate for his limited ability to defend his position in French by sending Gilson his first book in German, *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft.* In the letter, he refers to two passages in the book in which he defended his views on Hobbes.[45] In these two passages, Strauss insists on the different attitudes of Hobbes and Spinoza vis-à-vis the basic modern political attitude, the conservation of oneself (*Selbsterhaltung*), which came to replace the Christian medieval search for the *summum bonum.* For Strauss, Spinoza's political philosophy equates right with might, and is therefore constrained by the dichotomy of a mob driven by affects opposed to a philosopher immersed in theory or contemplation, resulting in the failure to find a common good that transcends might and affect. In sharp contrast, Hobbes succeeds in founding a modern state in the rational and moral decision of the individual and the collective to protect themselves from civil war.

> True, both philosophers [Hobbes and Spinoza] see self-preservation as the essence of man, but they mean very different things by the same term. Self-preservation, truly understood according to Spinoza, compels to theory; according to Hobbes, it compels to assuring the future, to peace and to state. Therefore, the essential content of Hobbes' moral philosophy is the peaceable attitude. For this reason, his theory of natural law and his moral philosophy are

44 Letter of Leo Strauss to Étienne Gilson, May 11, 1933, St Michael College Archives (Toronto), Gilson Collection. See Michel, *Étienne Gilson*, 26. I deeply thank Prof. Michel for having transmitted a copy of the letter.

45 In the letter, Strauss mentions pages 66 and 222 in the first German edition of his book *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft. Untersuchungen zu Spinozas theologisch-politischem Traktat* (1930). See Strauss, Meier, and Meier, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, 130–31, 288.

> essentially the same. Similarly, from Spinoza's ultimate assumption it follows that there is no immediate bond of union between his moral theory and his theory of natural right: he must refrain from enjoining the precipitous path to his goal in life on the common run of men, or even considering it as open to them.[46]

This was what Strauss wanted to add to his earlier conversation with Gilson. Nonetheless, it is strange to read that the conversation between Strauss and Gilson revolved around Hobbes, while Strauss was developing at this time his own philosophical reappraisal of Jewish–Islamic medieval philosophy.[47] This project was apparently much more connected to Gilson's monumental endeavor to unearth Christian medieval philosophy as a model for a contemporary Christian philosophy. In *Christianisme et philosophie*, published in 1936, Gilson delineates the larger rationale of his project thus:

> To be an effective apologist, one must first be a theologian; I would even say, as much as possible, an excellent theologian. The thing is rarer than you think: there will be scandalized by it only those who speak of theology only by hearsay or are content to recite its formulas without having taken the time to deepen its meaning. But if one wants to do apologetics through science, it is not enough even to be an excellent theologian, one must also be an excellent scholar […] The same is true of philosophy; it is deluding oneself to believe that one is serving God by learning a certain number of formulas which say what one knows must be said, without understanding why what they say is true.[48]

Gilson understood his monumental program of research in medieval philosophy as a complete renewal of Catholic apologetics and theology on a scientific and historical ground—whereas contemporary nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Catholicism had degenerated to a mechanical and anti-modern set of doctrines. Diving into the history of medieval philosophy would allow Gilson to rediscover the historical possibility of a Christian philosophy, which he defines as follows in his 1932 *L'esprit de la philosophie médiévale:*

> This effort of believed truth to transform itself into known truth (*cet effort de la vérité crue pour se transformer en vérité sue*), is truly the life of Christian wisdom, and the body of rational truths resulting from the effort is Christian philosophy itself. Thus the content of Chris-

46 Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. Elsa M. Sinclair (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1965), 229–30.

47 For a broad description of Strauss's engagement with Arabic Muslim philosophy, see Georges Tamer, *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne: das Verhaltnis von Leo Strauss zu Alfarabi, Avicenna, und Averroes* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

48 Étienne Gilson, *Christianisme et philosophie* (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1949), 155.

> tian philosophy is that body of rational truths discovered, explored or simply safeguarded, thanks to the help that reason receives from revelation.[49]

This passage may explain why Strauss was not interested in discussing his own understanding of Islamic and Jewish medieval philosophy with Gilson. While Gilson's research in medieval philosophy arose from a quest for a new Christian philosophy, Strauss's research was not designed to develop a Jewish philosophy, in the sense that Gilson attributed to a religious philosophy:

> Thus I call Christian, every philosophy which, although keeping the orders formally distinct, nevertheless considers the Christian revelation as an indispensable auxiliary to reason. For whoever understands it thus, the concept does not correspond to any simple essence susceptible of abstract definition; but corresponds much rather to a concrete historical reality as something calling for description. It is but one of the species of the genus philosophy.[50]

For Gilson, this Christian understanding of medieval philosophy was supposed to be widened by research on Muslim and Jewish medieval philosophy as well as on the transfer of philosophical tradition and knowledge from the Islamic East to the Christian West. "Christian thought, Jewish thought, and Muslim thought acted and reacted on each other as we know and it would not be at all satisfactory to study them as so many closed and isolated systems."[51] Yet, Strauss was not attracted by a joined elaboration of a Christian, Jewish, and Muslim philosophy. He was rediscovering the political esoteric setting of Jewish and Islamic philosophical medieval practice and developing an understanding of it as a counter-model to the present failure of enlightenment.

In his book *Philosophie und Gesetz*, Strauss defends the thesis that "Plato's approximation to the revelation furnishes the medieval thinkers with the *starting-point* from which they could understand the revelation philosophically."[52] With this formulation, he refers to the political medieval articulation of an Islamic or Jewish general "recognition of the authority of revelation" with its elitist philosophical elaboration. Strauss believed he had discovered in the Jewish–Islamic setting of the divine Law a more stable political setting for philosophy than in the instable liberal states of the twentieth century. The medieval philosophical model in question lasted *grosso modo* from the eighth century to the conquests and expulsions of the late fifteenth century, from the heydays in Bagdad and Al-Andalus to

49 Étienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* (New York, NY: C. Scribner, 1940), 34–35.
50 Gilson, *Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, 37.
51 Gilson, *Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, 1.
52 Leo Strauss and Eve Adler, *Philosophy and Law: Essays Toward the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1995), 76 (original emphasis).

1492. In sharp contrast, liberal states in the 1930s appeared as more ephemeral experiments. The reason for the longevity of the medieval Jewish–Islamic model was for Strauss the continuous collective acceptance of an esoteric philosophical interpretation of the *Shariah* or *Halakha* which was both integrated and concealed within common religious commitment. Both common religious practice and philosophical esoteric interpretation relied on a shared notion of supreme good, be it the God of the biblical or Koranic revelation or the Platonic Idea of good or the Aristotelian cosmological god. The ambivalence of the supreme good in the medieval Islamic and Jewish setting was particularly successful for Strauss, since it fostered a general recognition of authority, while allowing a dual interpretation of it: a religious-monarchic one on the one hand, and a purely philosophical one on the other. This ambiguity of the supreme good is what the modern state in its liberal justification suppressed, thereby putting philosophy at the risk of exoteric enlightenment, with no protected private or esoteric sphere for philosophical practice.

As for Christian medieval philosophy, Strauss, in contrast to Gilson, saw in it a danger, rather than an opportunity, for philosophy. In his 1937 article "On Abravanel's philosophical tendency and political teaching," Strauss even denigrates Don Isaac Abravanel's intellectual contribution for "following the Christian teachings of the Middle Ages." Indeed, for Strauss Abravanel "had preferred Christian scholasticism to the philosophy of the Jewish rationalists … He had [thus] undermined Maimonides' political philosophy of the law."[53] Strauss was in quest of a countermodel to the Jewish–Protestant alliance; therefore, he could not respond positively to the research program of Gilson by adding a Jewish medieval philosophy to Gilson's Christian medieval philosophy. The two projects could not meet, since Gilson was looking for a Christian answer to the crisis of liberalism, whereas Strauss believed not in a religious solution but in a political one. The medieval model offered the possibility to articulate a Christian, Jewish, and Muslim answer to the crisis of the 1930s, in Europe and in the Middle East. It could have offered a new understanding of the transition from the medieval to the modern condition. A joint Christian, Jewish, and Muslim effort could have led scholars to rediscover in the medieval or early modern heritage religious, social, and political models, which could have helped prevent the catastrophe of the 1930s and 1940s in Europe and in the Middle East, a catastrophe anticipated partially by Cheikho and produced in great part by the complex social and political dynamics launched by nationalism. But Strauss preferred to speak of Hobbes with the great medieval scholar, each one sticking to his Christian or Jewish interpretation of the traumatic transi-

53 Strauss, Meier, and Meier, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, 224.

tion to modernity. And so the occasion of a multi-religious articulation of the medieval paradigm was lost.

Louis Massignon's Catholic–Islamic Model

The confrontation of Gilson's medieval project with Strauss's left us with the sense of a missed opportunity. Comparing Strauss's Jewish–Islamic model with Louis Massignon's Catholic–Islamic one unveils similar problems. Louis Massignon shared many of Gilson's aspirations to rejuvenate Catholicism. Leading Catholic intellectuals, like Maritain, felt the need to renovate, if not save, Catholicism from both inner degeneration and external challenges by rediscovering an appealing meaning for Catholicism. In contrast to the great medieval historian, Massignon did not dig into the Christian medieval past, but rediscovered the possibility of Christianity through physical and spiritual encounters with Islam, with Muslims, and with the Orient and the Maghreb in the first decades of the twentieth century. The psychological and spiritual dynamics of these encounters are masterfully summed up in an article by Massignon in which he defines his notion of the Catholic–Islamic encounter, discussing one of his spiritual masters. Charles de Foucauld (1858–1916) was a French colonial explorer who went through a deep process of conversion in the Levant and the Maghreb. Describing Foucauld's encounter with the disciple of a Muslim mystic, Massignon explains: "Before the spiritual reflection of Cheïkh Baye, deep in the soul of his disciple, Mouss ag Amastance, the wild mystic that was Foucauld, felt a force of the same metal [nature] that it was a question of outclassing in spiritual perfection."[54]

Encountering vivid faith and a religious spirit in a Muslim provoked in Charles de Foucauld, and later in Louis Massignon, a dual psychological movement of identification and emulation. Through this, the religious authenticity of the colonized becomes an object of nostalgia for the colonizer, launching in the colonizer a revival of his own ancient Catholic faith, which is then nourished time and again by each physical and spiritual encounter with the Orient and Islam. This movement of identification-emulation with the Muslim was, for Charles de Foucauld and Louis Massignon, but also for Strauss, a way to confront and redress the cultural and religious challenges of Modern Europe, and to a lesser extent of MENA. Indeed, Massignon and Strauss perceived in Islamic philosophy or mysticism an important answer to contemporary concerns: how to respond philosophically or re-

54 Louis Massignon, Christian Jambet, François Angelier, François L'Yvonnet, and Souâd Ayada, *Écrits mémorables* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2009), vol. 1, 111.

ligiously to the failures of liberalism. Recovering an earlier philosophical tradition or religious Semitic mystic continuum out of Islamic sources was the road taken by both scholars, a choice meaningful in both European and Oriental contexts.

On a scholarly level, this attitude of identification-emulation led Massignon to a gigantic *oeuvre* dealing with Islamology, the history and geography of MENA, and Arabic and Semitic linguistics, which revolved around his fascination with early Islamic mysticism, and, especially, with the heretic mystic al-Hallaj (858–922). An early article by Massignon demonstrates how the study of Islamic mystics could spur a new understanding of Christianity. In 1914, Massignon published in *Der Islam* an article about the famous heretic saying of al-Hallaj, "*ana al-haqq*" ("I am the truth").

In the first lines of the article, Massignon quotes this saying, adding: "a strange formula, certainly—in which vibrates like an echo of certain *logia* of Jesus [*formule singulière, certes—où vibre comme un écho de certains logia de Jésus*]."[55] Al-Hallaj's heretic saying is an echo of Jesus' words. This affirmation exemplifies how Massignon moves from the level of the personal encounter with Muslims to that of a spiritual or intellectual encounter with Islam. This can be read in the following passage:

> The Hallaghian vocabulary expressly designates in al-Haqq the pure divine essence—the creative substance—as opposed to creation, al-Khalq …
>
> And now, how to explain that after having isolated, by definition, al-Haqq, the pure divine essence, from all logical contact with created things—al-Hallaj dares to put it in verbal connection with his 'self'—ana—as a creature.[56]

Beyond the personal encounter of the Catholic and the Muslim, beyond the literary echo of Jesus in al-Hallaj's formula, Massignon discovers in al-Hallaj's mysticism a source for understanding the whole process of incarnation of the transcendent divinity not only in Jesus, but also in the Semitic faith, from Abraham to the later Muslim mystics.

If we now juxtapose Strauss's Jewish–Islamic model with Massignon's Catholic–Islamic model, we may find clear similarities. Both scholars found in Islamic philosophy or mysticism an answer to their Jewish and Catholic concerns: how to philosophize as a Jew after the collapse of German *Aufklärung?* Or how to reintegrate Christ's incarnation into a Semitic continuum that ranges from Judaism to Islam? This new insight was meant to be an answer to both the European and Oriental crises. As with the medieval paradigm previously studied, it proposed a

55 Massignon et al., 444.
56 Massignon et al., 446.

renewed religious and philosophical sense of authority, against its liberal and later fascist flattening. Yet, the differences between Massignon and Strauss are also clear. If Massignon devoted his whole academic, public, and personal life to the Christian–Islamic encounter at all levels (religious, scientific, and political), no similar commitment to Jewish–Islamic or Jewish–Arab collaboration can be found in Strauss's life and work. With his emigration to the United States, Strauss invested less in developing this 1930s Jewish–Islamic model in favor of a broader comprehension of Western political philosophy. Similarly, Massignon's commitment to his Catholic–Islamic model obliged him to dissociate himself more and more from Zionism and Judaism after 1948. As in the case of the rediscovery of medieval philosophy, the dialogical rediscovery of Christianity and Judaism through the Islamic tradition in Massignon's and Strauss's works did not merge into a collaboration. Nor into a vision of and commitment for the shared Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious-cultural history inherited from the past, as articulated programmatically by Egyptian scholar Taha Husayn (1889–1873) in his 1938 book *The Future of Culture in Egypt* with the paradigm of a Mediterranean culture.[57] An opportunity for a joined Christian, Jewish and Muslim answer to the crisis of liberalism was missed once again on the two shores of the Mediterranean Sea.

Epilogue

A fateful division of labor has brought scholars to study the history and crisis of liberalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe entirely separately from the history of liberal conceptions and reforms in late Ottoman Empire and early British and French imperial politics in MENA. This essay is an attempt to pick up the broken pieces of the crisis in liberalism spread in the East and the West. The dialogical confrontation of Leo Strauss's rediscovery of a Jewish–Islamic medieval model of philosophizing, with Gilson's gigantic mapping and conceptualizing of Christian medieval philosophy, and with Louis Massignon's development of a Catholic–Islamic mystic model, has revealed a Jewish, Christian, and Muslim articulation of the religious-political problems of modernity in connection with the theopolitical question of the Orient. A critical understanding of the shift from medieval to modern philosophy as well as the retrieving of Jewish–Islamic and Christian–Islamic models (esotericism and mysticism) appeared as promising intellectu-

57 Taha Husayn, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, trans. Sidney Glazer (Washington, DC: American Council of Learned Societies Devoted to Humanistic Studies, Near Eastern Translation Program, 1954).

al possibilities to articulate a shared crisis of liberalism in Western Europe and MENA. Strauss, Gilson, Massignon, and their colleagues in the Levant often practiced highly comparative and dialogical scholarly research, yet they failed to articulate their renewed understanding of the Abrahamic religions and the challenges in the West and the East into a joined reform of liberalism. Finally, the encounter of the 1930s ended in the three independent paths of Gilson, Massignon, and Strauss, with no memory of their shared possibilities.

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