



MENASCE, JEAN PIERRE DE

MENASCE, JEAN PIERRE DE (b. Alexandria, Egypt, 24 December 1902; d. Paris, 24 November 1973), an eminent Iranist and historian of religions.

Jean André Moïse de Menasce was born into one of the richest and most distinguished Jewish families in Egypt. His father, the Baron Felix, was the head of the Alexandrian Jewish community, and his mother was French from a Spanish lineage. He learned English early in life from his Irish governess, and later on learned German (from another governess), Italian, and less fluently Russian and Spanish. He received his secondary education at the French high-school in Alexandria, and then, after studying at the French School of Law in Cairo, he went to Balliol College (in 1921) at Oxford University to study philosophy, political science, and economics. There, he made many acquaintances, notably T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) (see Eliot, *passim*; Balliol College) and Bertrand Russell (1872-1970). His first works were translations into French of Russell's *Mysticism and Logic* and the German philosopher Max Scheler's (1874-1928) *Ressentiment*. He also translated poems by Eliot, including *The Waste Land* (see Eliot, p. 291), and the 17th-century poet John Donne.

He left Oxford for the Sorbonne, where he studied philosophy for one year. Interested in Zionism, he became in 1925 Secretary of the Zionist Office in Geneva, but he returned to Paris where, in 1926, he converted to Catholicism and entered the Dominican monastic order. He tied a deep friendship with the thomist Jacques Maritain and his Jewish wife, Raïssa, and with the Islamists and Iranists Louis Massignon and Louis Gardet. He studied Syriac at the



Catholic Institute of Paris, and in 1931 published *Quand Israël aime Dieu*, an engaging book on the Jewish Hasidic movement.

At his baptism he received the name Pierre, although all his life he was known as Jean. He was ordained as a priest in 1935 and sent to Fribourg in Switzerland, where he was teaching the history of religions and missiology (1936-48). As stated by Adrian Hastings (p. 168): “de Menasce’s major contribution to missiology needs to be understood not as something apart from the study of religions, which came to occupy him entirely when in 1948 he moved back to Paris to teach for the next twenty-five years at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes. ”In the same period, Father de Menasce would attend the lectures of the eminent Iranist Professor [Emile Benveniste](#) at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes until the beginning of World War II. During the war he remained in Fribourg, working on the translation of the Pahlavi text of the *Škand-gumānīg wizār*, which was his doctoral dissertation, published in 1945. He would help many Jewish people in this dark period, and in particular Benveniste, whom he urged to leave Paris and take refuge in Switzerland.

In 1947, he was invited by the University of Paris to deliver lectures sponsored by the Katanbai Katrak Foundation, which were published under the title *Une encyclopédie mazdéenne, le Dēnkart*, and in 1954-55 he was visiting professor at the universities of Harvard and Princeton. In the same year he contributed to the Bible de Jérusalem in translating the *Book of Daniel* (1954a) In November 1948, the chair Religions of Ancient Iran was created for him at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, which he held from 1949 till 1969. A number of scholars of Iranian studies were his students, including André Maricq, Marijan Molé, and Ahmad Tafazzoli. His last student was Philippe Gignoux, whom he urged to become his successor.

In fact teaching had become very difficult for him, since he had suffered two major strokes, one in 1959 (a severe aphasia, in Switzerland), which paralyzed the right side of his body, and another in 1969 (dysarthria). He, however, managed to regain speaking ability and could communicate to his friends and students who visited him in his apartment in Neuilly, near Paris. He described his illness with a sense of humor in an article published in *Journal de psychologie* in 1973.

De Menasce contributed greatly to the development of the library of the Institut d’Etudes Iraniennes by acquiring books from the personal libraries of



William Jackson, Louis Gray, Antoine Meillet, Delphine Ménant, Marijan Molé, and André Maricq. He was a foundation member, with Henry Corbin and Gilbert Lazard, of the French “Association pour l’avancement des études iraniennes,” which was established with the purpose to promote and assist the publication of such studies. This association made it possible to create in 1972 the *Studia Iranica* journal and later the collection of the *Cahiers*, of which the third volume was dedicated to the tenth anniversary of Menasce’s death. The Festschrift that Phillippe Gignoux and Ahmad Tafazzoli had prepared for honoring him was published as *Memorial Jean de Menasce* a few months after he had passed away.

Those who knew him personally, including most Iranists, have fond memories of him. As observed by one of his colleagues, “the courage and resourcefulness with which he bore the misery of his last years was saintly.” Gilbert Lazard (1974) has well pointed out: “Son esprit lucide, teinté d’humour oxfordien, était d’une inlassable curiosité pour toutes les formes de la pensée et de l’art.” A memorial volume edited by Michel Dousse and Jean-Michel Roessli was published in 1998 and presented at an exhibition of his works at the Bibliothèque cantonale et Universitaire de Fribourg (Switzerland) from 9th July to 29th August 1998. This same exhibition with a series of panel discussions illustrating the life and work of de Menasce were presented in Paris in December 1999, sponsored by the Dominican convent and at the initiative of Philippe Gignoux.

Works. Menasce, above all attuned to the poetic art, always considered himself a philosopher and historian of religions rather than a linguist, despite his astonishing facility with ancient (Arabic, Hebrew, Syriac, Iranian) as well as modern languages. From the beginning of his career as an Iranist, he apparently was haunted by the problem of suffering and evil and was eager to analyze the responses to it in non-Christian religions (Gignoux, 1998). In both 1940 and 1945, he dedicated two course-lectures to the problem of evil in religion in the context of his teaching about the world’s great religions. For this reason, the concept of dualism in both Manichean and Mazdean ideas were to serve him as a remarkable laboratory experiment. On the other hand, his awareness of the desperate lack of sources, whether archeological or literary, on Iran (de Menasce, 1968a, p. 107), must have driven him to devote himself to scholarly editions of Pahlavi religious texts. For these two reasons, it appears that even though he made his own the Thomist response to the problem of evil, his interests led him to the Mazdean apologetic and polemic text, like the



Škand-gumānik vizār (ŠGV), of which he published a French translation in 1945. Having acquired a solid familiarity with Islam, he notes at the very beginning of this work that Islam had to respond to the criticisms of Mazdean dualism. His extensive familiarity with Arabic sources is clearly demonstrated in his contribution *Arabische Philosophie*. He (1954a, pp. 50-59) was the first to translate and comment on Jayhāni's account of Mazdaism, preserved in Šahrestāni's *al-Mellal wa'l-neḥal* (pp. 185 ff.; tr., pp. 186 ff.; Monnot, p. 186).

De Menasce uncovered in Islamic texts the points that would illuminate the allusions made by the author of the ŠGV, an incomplete work written by Mardān-farrox in the 9th century CE and preserved in Pahlavi and Pāzand (see, e.g., de Menasce, 1948b). His "Note sur le dualisme mazdéen" (1948) explicates the place of the Principle of Evil within Mazdean Iran. Evil has no origin on its own, as shown by the personification of the evil principle, which is not symmetrical with that of Good, which benefits from late, superficial systematization. The Manichean anti-god is more original, as it is the principle of Matter. This book is an affirmation of Mazdean doctrine that sets forth the contradictions within other religions. The first ten chapters cover Mazdaean doctrine, and in chapter 7, de Menasce distinguishes the Mazdean theory of the origin of evil from the Thomist theory, according to which evil is a loss or defect in being: as God cannot be a principle of evil, it is necessary to resort to an antagonistic principle to explain sin.

Chapters (11–16) are specifically polemic, directed against the monotheistic religions. De Menasce divides these chapters according to the various themes and scriptural references adduced by the Mazdean polemicist, adding a very extensive commentary that shows the immense familiarity he already possessed with Pahlavi literature, through which he was able to explicate the author's philosophical argumentation. He was struck by the possible relationship between Mazdean theology and the Mu'tazilites, suggesting that Islam had stimulated the Mazdean theologians to perfect their intellectual apparatus and deepen their elaboration of dogma. By using Dēnkard 3 in his commentary, de Menasce unveiled his purpose "to recover the essence of Mazdean dualism, so often misunderstood" (p. 11) at the last stage of its historical development. De Menasce shows that the Mazdeans were familiar with the Bible through Christian Syriac translations, but he maintains that the themes treated are "commonplaces of polemic," "the residue of the extensive commingling of doctrines in the first centuries of Islam and the meeting of four religious currents that were nearly equally vital and militant" (p. 181). De



Menasce, by comparing the passages of Dēnkard III with the notices in chapter 16 of ŠGV on Manicheans, highlighted some characteristics of Manicheism that until then had been little recognized (e.g., the prohibition of agriculture, of building even to receive a guest, of not instituting legal proceedings, perhaps according to the teaching of St. Paul, I Cor. 6:7).

His great interest in the Manichean concept of dualism, the idea of the two primordial principles of Light and Darkness, is evident in his article “Augustin manichéen.” His curiosity made him try to discern how [Augustine](#), who would later characterize Manicheism as “this absurd gnosis,” had been able to adhere to it for about a decade. Citing passages from the Manichean Psalter, de Menasce also wondered why Augustine had transmitted nothing of this spirituality, offering nothing but a caricature of his former belief. In fact, this spirituality underlies Augustine’s argumentation. He was not unaware of the Christian nature of this gnosis, which he abandoned because it contained the metaphysical error of dualism. De Menasce never lost his interest in Manicheism, even though this was not his principal field of research. His contribution to Manichean studies includes his publication of a Manichean seal with André Guillou in 1946, the article on St. Augustine in 1956, the edition of “Fragments manichéens de Paris” in 1970, and the article in which he showed the Mazdean origin of a Manichean myth (1968b)—the handshake that symbolizes the myth of Call and Response.

De Menasce, who had been trained in law, contributed original works in this area as well. In a paper on the *Rivāyat ī Emēdī Ašawahištān* (1962), a Pahlavi work from the 10th century, he showed that practices like the *xwēdōdah* (consanguinous marriage) were maintained in complete contradiction to Islamic morality. His small work on the *Feux et fondations pieuses* (1964) rests on the prescriptions of the Sasanian law book, *Mādayān ī hazār dādestān*, relating to the legal status of fires. Another work of his in the field of law is a study of legal terminology found in the Syriac treatise of Išō‘buxt translated from Pahlavi (1964b). His article on the problems that Zoroastrians have in Islamic Iran (1967b) shows how the legal status of the non-Mazdean or of the converts to Islam was perceived in these two law books. De Menasce was a pioneer in the interpretation of these legal texts, in the process paving the way for scholars such as Anait Perikhanian and Maria Macuch who would make it the main topic of their research. He also studied the tribunals that regulated the activity and maintenance of subterranean water channels (*qanāt*) in Iran.

De Menasce was also concerned with Sasanian epigraphy, which, following the



discovery of the great royal inscriptions of Šāpur I and then of [Kartir](#), began to attract the attention of Iranists in the second half of the 20th century. He commented on the latter in a preliminary article titled “La conquête de l’iranisme ...” (1956a) and showed his interest in Late Pahlavi with his article “Inscriptions pehlevies” published the same year (1956c). He had already published an article on the Inscription of Xerxes in 1943 and a study of Pahlavi papyrology ten years later, which led him to gather materials in a portfolio of the Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum (Ostraca and Papyri, 1957). It is the collections of ostraca in the British Museum and the Museum of Tehran and of papyri in Philadelphia, the Louvre, Göttingen, Strasbourg, and other collections. He was the first one to suggest a decipherment of the connected letters in Sasanian monograms (de Menasce, 1960), a pioneering work that has not yet been followed up. He also published the Pahlavi funerary inscription of Istanbul (1967b), which stimulated further studies by Henrik Samuel Nyberg, Philippe Gignoux, and François de Blois.

His insatiable curiosity made him interested in all aspects of the history of religions and Iranian philology. He wrote a number of short articles that often blazed trails of research along which he directed his students. To Marijan Molé, he suggested mining the Pahlavi texts for the history of Mazdean rituals and cosmology, and he led André Maricq, who was trained in Greek and Iranian, toward historical geography and the great trilingual inscription of Šāpūr I. He also pushed the present author toward Sasanian epigraphy. De Menasce himself took up the geographical information in the *Mādigān ī hazār dādīstān* (1964b) and offered a fine interpretation of the title *driyōšān jādag-gōw ud dādwar* (protector of the poor) .

Comparativism led to his interest in Judeo-Islamic angelology ([Hārūt and Mārūt](#)), to Jayhāni’s testimony on Mazdaism, and to the Mu‘tazilites in relation to Islamic theology (in Gignoux and Lazard, eds., pp. 185–211). He produced several overviews of Middle Persian literature in the *Cambridge History of Iran*, of Pahlavi in the *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, and a survey of ten years of Pahlavi studies in the first number of *Studia Iranica* (1972).

But his masterpiece was the explication of the [Dēnkard](#), book III, a text of philosophical and theological content. He labored on the *Dēnkard* for nearly twenty years, and he involved his students by frequently making it the topic of his lectures at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes. The study of this great treatise in nine books (the first one is lost) and 420 chapters led him to two major publications. The first, *Une encyclopédie mazdénne: Le Dēnkart* (1958), is



the study of the content and the details of the various books with an appendix containing a table of contents of book III, listing all the chapters with transcription of the Pahlavi and with French translation. In 1973 he published a full translation of book III (Figure 1), with keywords inserted in transcription. De Menasce distinguished three different genres in this book: short chapters of two or three pages, long chapters like the one on medicine or the cosmogonic chapter 123, which he translated in a separate article (1968c), and a series of chapters belonging to the genre of *andarz* (precept, advice). The predominant themes are cosmic dualism and the elaboration of a physics adapted to dualist metaphysics. The refutations of Islam, which is never mentioned by name, are patent in many chapters.

De Menasce explicated book IV of the *Dēnkard* in his lecture-course in 1956–57 and intended to publish a new edition of it, but this project never materialized, probably because he had devoted himself entirely to book III.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works of Jean de Menasce.

For a complete list of his works, see Michel Dousse et Jean-Michel Roessli, eds., pp. 235-44; and Philippe Gignoux and Tafazzoli, pp. xvii-xxiii.

Tr., John Donne, *Poèmes*, *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, no. 115, 1923, pp. 620-29. *Quand Israël aime Dieu* (tr. from Hebrew), Paris, 1931; repr., Paris, 1992.

Tr., Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays*, as *Le mysticisme et la logique, suivi d'autres essais*, Paris, 1933.

Tr., Max Scheler, *Ressentiment*, as *L'homme du ressentiment*, Paris, 1933.

“L’expérience de l’esprit dans la mystique chrétienne,” *Der Geist, Eranos-Jahrbuch* 13, 1945, pp. 355-84.



Ed. and tr., Mardān-farrox Ōhrmazdadān, *Škand-gumānīg wizār*, as *Škand-Gumānik Vičār: La solution décisive des doutes: une apologétique mazdéenne du XI^e siècle*, Fribourg, Switzerland, 1945.

“Une cachet manechen de la Bibliothèque National,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 131, 1946, pp. 81-84.

“Une légende indo-iranienne dans l’angéologie judéo-musulmane: a propos de Hārut et Mārut,” *Études Asiatiques* 1/2, 1947, pp. 10-18.

Arabische Philosophie, Bibliographische Einführungen in das Studium der Philosophie 6, Bern, 1948a.

“Note sur le dualisme mazdéen,” in *Études Carmélitaines: Satan*, Paris, 1948b, pp. 130–35.

Tr., *Le sainte Bible: Daniel*, Paris, 1954a.

Tr., “Le témoignage de Jayhānī sur le mazdéisme,” in Erik Gren, ed., *Donum natalicium H. S. Nyberg*, Upsala, 1954b, pp. 50-59.

“La conquête de l’iranisme et la récupération des mages hellénisés,” *Annuaire 1956-1957 de l’Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes*, Paris, 1956a, pp. 3-12.

“Augustin manichéen,” in Max Rychner und Walter Boehlich, eds., *Freundesgabe für Ernest Robert Curtius*, Bern, 1956b, pp. 79-93.

“Inscriptions pehlevies en écriture cursive,” *JA* 244/4, 1956c, pp. 423-31.

ed., *Ostraca and Papyri: Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum*, Part III, vols. IV-V, London 1957.

Une encyclopédie mazdéenne, le Dēnkart: quatre conférences données à l’Université de Paris sous les auspices de la Fondation Ratanbai Katrak, Bibliothèque de l’École Pratique des Hautes Etudes, section des sciences religieuses 69, Paris, 1958.

“Les religions de l’Iran et l’Ancient Testament,” *Sacra Pagina: Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologiarum lovaniensium* 12-13, Paris, 1959, pp. 280-87

“Déchiffrement de motifs alphabétiques de l’époque sassanide,” *Bulletin de l’Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale* 59, 1960, pp. 309-14.



“La Rivāyat d’Ēmēt i Ašavahištān,” *Revue de l’Histoire des Religions* 162, Paris, 1962, pp. 69-88.

Feux et fondations pieuses dans le droit sassanide, Paris, 1964a.

“Some Pahlavi Words in the Original and in the Syriac Translation of Išōbōxt’s Corpus Juris,” in *Dr. J. M. Unvala Memorial Volume*, Bombay, 1964b, pp. 6-11.

“Les données géographiques dans le ‘Mātīgān i Hazār Dādīstān’,” in Georges Redard, ed., *Indo-Iranica: Mélanges présentés à Georg Morgenstierne*, Wiesbaden, 1964c, pp. 149-54.

“Problèmes des mazdéens dans l’Iran musulman,” in Gernot Wiessner, ed., *Festschrift für Wilhelm Eilers: Ein Dokument der internationalen Forschung zum 27. September 1966*, Wiesbaden, 1967a, pp. 220-30.

“L’inscription funéraire pehlevi d’Istanbul,” *Iranica Antiqua* 7, 1967b, pp. 59-71.

“Religions de l’ancien Iran,” *Problèmes et méthodes d’histoire des religions: mélanges publiées par la Section des sciences religieuses à l’occasion du centenaire de l’Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes*, Paris, 1968a, pp. 107-11.

“L’origine mazdéenne d’un mythe manichéen,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 174/2, 1968b, pp. 161-67.

“Une chapitre cosmogonique du Dānkart,” in J. C. Heesterman and G. H. Schokker, eds., *Pratidānam: Indian and Indo-European Studies Presented to F. B. J. Kuiper*, the Hague and Paris, 1968c, pp. 193-200.

“Formules juridiques et syntaxe pehlevi,” *Bulletin of the Iranian Culture Foundation* 1/1, Tehran, 1969, pp. 11-20.

Fragments manichéens de Paris,” in Mary Boyce and Ilya Gershevitch, eds., *W. B. Henning Memorial Volume*, London, 1970, pp. 303-6.

“Dix ans d’études pehlevi: publication de textes,” *Studia Iranica* 1/1, 1972, pp. 133-39.

Tr., *Le troisième livre du Dēnkart*, Paris, 1973.

“Observations d’un dysarthrique sur ses moyens de communication,” *Journal*



de psychologie normale et pathologique, nos. 1-2, 1973, pp. 209-20.

La porte sur le jardin, ed. Robert Rochefort, Paris, 1975.

“Zoroastrian Pahlavi Writings,” in *Cambridge History of Iran III/2*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, Cambridge, 1985, pp. 1161-95.

Jean P. de Menasce and André Guillou, “Une cachet manichéen de la Bibliothèque National,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 131, 1946, pp. 81-84.

Studies and memorials.

Raymond Darricau, “Menasce (Jean de),” *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* 10, 1980, pp. 1108-9.

Philippe Gignoux and Gilbert Lazard, eds., *Etudes iraniennes Jean de Menasce*, Studia iranica Cahier 3, Paris, 1985.

Georges Darmon, *Le cheminement spirituel et religieux du Père Jean de Menasce, O.P., et son itinéraire d’homme de science*, Mémoire de maîtrise, Université de Strasbourg, 1995.

Michel Dousse and Jean-Michel Roessli, eds., *Jean de Menasce (1902-1973), Monographie accompagnant l’Exposition ... du 9 juillet au 29 août 1998*, Fribourg, Switzerland, 1998, pp. 235-44.

Philippe Gignoux, “J. P. de Menasce 1902-1973: Biographie,” in Gignoux and Tafazzoli, eds., 1974, pp. viii-xv.

Idem, “Louis Massignon et Jean de Menasce,” in Jacques Keryell, ed., *Louis Massignon et ses contemporains*, Paris, 1997, pp. 155-61.

Idem, “L’intérêt philosophique de Jean de Menasce au problème du mal,” in Michel Dousse et Jean-Michel Roessli, eds., 1998, pp. 161-67.

Idem, “Louis Massignon et le Père Jean de Menasce,” in Éve Pierunek and Yann Richard, eds., *Travaux et mémoires de l’institut d’études iraniennes* 5, Leuven and Paris, 2000, pp. 13-16.

Adrian Hastings, “The Legacy of Pierre Jean de Menasce,” *International Bulletin Missionary Research* 21/4, 1997, pp. 168-72.



Marcel Henry, "Menasce (Jean de)," *Catholicisme* 8, 1979, pp. 1148-50.

Gilbert Lazard, "Jean de Menasce (1902-1973)," *JA* 262, 1974, pp. 265-70.
Philippe Gignoux and Ahmad Tafazzoli, eds., *Mémorial Jean de Menasce*,
Fondation Culturelle Iranienne 185, Louvain, 1974.

Guy Monnot, "Le Père de Menasce et l'Islam," in Michel Dousse and Jean-
Michel Roessli, eds., *Jean de Menasce in (1902-1973)*, Friborg, 1998, pp. 185-91.

V. Python, "L'oeuvre du Père de Menasce O. P. (1902-1973) sur les missions et
sur le Mazdéisme," *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 30, 1974, pp.
161-72.

Robert Rochefort, "Souvenir du Père J. P. de Menasce, O. P.," *Nova et Vetera* 49,
1974, pp. 113-33.

Werner Sundermann, "Das Manichäerkapitel des Škand Gumānīg Wizār in
dar Darstellung und Deutung Jean de Menasces," in Michel Dousse and Jean-
Michel Roessli, eds., 1998, pp. 169-83.

Ahmad Tafazzoli, "Jean Pierre de Menasce (1902-1973)," *Rāhnemā-ye ketāb* 16,
1974, pp. 724-37 (in Persian).

References.

Balliol College Archives & Manuscripts, available at
<http://archives.balliol.ox.ac.uk/Modern%20Papers/eliot.asp> (accessed 15
January 2014).

Thomas Stearns Eliot, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot: 1926-1927*, New Haven, 2012.

Philippe Gignoux, *Ressembler au monde: nouveaux documents sur la théorie du
macro-microcosme dans l'antiquité orientale*, Brepols, 1999.

Idem, "Les bases de la philosophie mazdéenne," *Comptes Rendus de l'Académie
des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 2001, pp. 117-29.

André Maricq, "Res Gestae Divi Saporis," *Syria* 35, 1958, p. 295-360; repr. in
Classica et Orientalia, Paris, 1965.

Abu'l-Faṭḥ Moḥammad Šahrestāni, *Ketāb al-melal wa'l-neḥal*, ed. W. Cureton,
Leipzig, 1928; tr. Afzal-al-Din Šadr Torka Ešfahāni, ed. Moḥammad-Rezā Jalāli



Nā'ini, Tehran, 1956.