

Serge de Beurecueil, OP (1917–2005)

A Life Curve

. . . of course, your task is not to engage in the conquest of Islam, not even try to convert a few individuals here and there separated from the Muslim community. On the contrary, you must give yourselves utterly to an in-depth study of Islam, its doctrines and civilization. This is a long and abiding apostolate of institutional quality.¹

One of the jewels of Cairo, the city of a thousand minarets, is known as “Islamic Cairo” in the neighborhood of ‘Abbāsiyya. In this part of the city, visitors marvel at Cairo’s Islamic heritage, which is a world of famous gates, medieval forts, shrines, and century-old marketplaces. Above all, the vicinity is filled with Fatimide, Mamluk, and Ottoman mosques; and mausoleums with breathtaking architecture. Another point of reference nearby is the quarter of Gamaliyya, where Naguib Mahfouz (d. 2006) locates the scenes of his major work of fiction. His Nobel Prize–winning novel, *Midaq Alley* (*zuqāq al-midaq*), is set in an alley in Khān al-Khalīlī (a major bazaar) in Islamic Cairo.

Indeed, in this historical district of ‘Abbāsiyya, the Dominican friar, Antonin Jaussen (d. 1962), built an impressive Dominican priory at 1st Maṣnā’ al-Ṭarābīsh Road, about a mile away from al-Azhar’s Mosque and University. Today the precious jewel of the priory is the library of the Dominican Institute of Oriental Studies (IDEO),² named after one of the founding members of the institution, Georges G. Anawati (d. 1994). It is within the walls of this priory and its library that Brother Serge de Laugier de Beurecueil would start a unique journey that would lead him to Afghanistan in the footsteps of ‘Abdullah Anṣārī. Correctly, Dominique Avon remarks, “within the

vast field of Islamic mysticism, Serge de Beaucueil cuts a path of astonishing originality."³

Borrowing from J. J. Pérennès's book *Passion Kaboul: Le père Serge de Beaucueil*, this biography studies de Beaucueil's family background and focuses on the social and theological backgrounds that influenced his Dominican formation. The chapter is divided into four sections: first, de Beaucueil's early life in Paris; second, his Dominican formation at Le Saulchoir; third, the establishment of a Dominican center of study in Cairo; and, last, his scholarly endeavor at the IDEO.

I. A Wounded Privilege

1. *Negotiating an Aristocratic Childhood*

On August 28, 1917, Serge Emmanuel Marie de Laugier de Beaucueil was born into an aristocratic family in his maternal grandfather's house. His birthplace was the luxurious district of Paris (16^e arrondissement) at 42, Rue Copernic, the present location of the Lebanese Embassy. His father was le Comte Pierre de Laugier de Beaucueil, a thirty-three-year-old cavalry officer, away on the battlefields and trenches of World War I at the time of his birth. His mother, Roberte de Quelen, came from a family of wealthy *Drogomans* (interpreters) of the Ottoman Empire who had settled in Istanbul for generations.⁴ De Beaucueil gives a quick look at his genealogy: "My family formed a surprising genetic melting pot, a mix of Provençal and Brittany, Corsican and Polish, and all from an aristocratic lineage, with a good dash of Jewish blood. My grandmother's maiden name was Oppenheimer."⁵

Unfortunately, the privileges of an aristocratic heritage did not guarantee a happy childhood. His parents married in 1914 and divorced in 1931. Three children were born out of this unhappy marriage: Serge, born in 1917; his sister, Antonia, born in 1920; and younger brother, Raoul, born in 1922. Antonia became a hermit in the Benedictine Order in the region of the Drôme, and Raoul a social worker in Paris. Pérennès remarks about Serge's parents:

The couple was certainly from aristocratic stock but sadly unhappy. They did not get along for multiple reasons: their marriage was arranged as it was often the case in certain

circles at the time. Above all, the mother, a very beautiful woman, was capricious, wounded herself by a difficult childhood.⁶

Hence, de Bearecueil spent most of his childhood and youth with the stigma of a child born into a privileged yet broken family. Catholic aristocratic circles of the time were comfortable, bourgeois, and religiously conservative. Divorce or birth out of wedlock was an anathema. In their case, de Bearecueil and his siblings paid a tremendous price even though they had nothing to do with their parents' divorce. They could not enjoy a regular childhood where they invited peers to their house or visited others.

At this point, a brief exposé on the relation between de Bearecueil's childhood misfortune and his later attachment and care for children in dire situations is in order.⁷ The friar's early life was marked by the neglect and absence of his mother, the authoritative and military discipline of his father, and the regime of boarding schools. Even later in life, he recalls, "In a broken family like ours, children must be sent away. Hence, I followed my fate. It was the beginning of a wretched childhood for children born to a divorced couple. Even at the age of seventy five, the memories of this period still burn vividly."⁸ Obviously his childhood woes had a lasting impact on him. Pérennès believes that Serge's childhood story is the key to understanding his entire life and his spontaneous affinity with children in difficult situations.⁹ There are reasons to believe that the divorce of his parents, the stigma he endured, his mother's indifference, and lack of care sparked in him a compassion for the afflicted.

Later in life, he would show a natural disposition, a remarkable tenderness and care for children and youngsters. He seemed to have turned this traumatic childhood experience around. Pérennès remarks, "Born into a divorced family, he has always loved children, maybe trying to give something he never experienced himself."¹⁰ Throughout his life, children's hospitals would remain one of his favorite locations for ministry. However, this view is a little far-fetched. Unlike Serge, his brother, Raoul, and sister, Antonia, who suffered the same fate, did not exhibit such a disproportionate attachment to suffering children. Seldom did Serge himself link his care for children to his own childhood experience. It is safe to argue that the friar's childhood experience alone fails to explain fully his utter dedication to suffering children in his mature age.

Therefore, the influence of his difficult childhood needs not to be exaggerated but kept in due proportion. Although it is tempting to read too much into these experiences of his early days,¹¹ I believe that his premature choice to join a religious order, his decisive will to go as far as possible from the aristocratic Catholic milieu of Paris, and his utter compassion for suffering children were the result of a web of reasons and circumstances. Understandably, he was reluctant to open the pages of his early life and entertain the memories of his relationship with his mother. Now and then, he would volunteer a few facts about his parents, a grandfather, and an uncle, but astonishingly little about his mother. Later chapters tease out the different aspects of the influence of his childhood on the mature Serge.

At any rate, two words summarize his early childhood: fear and dream. These sentiments fueled an unquenchable desire to go as far as possible from Paris.¹² For certain, the longing to go away stems mainly from a lonely childhood experience. He refers to it as "a wretched childhood." In dreams he found the remedy against fear and loneliness. He hoped for a journey that would take him away from France, from all that his childhood symbolized.¹³ For example, he saw himself as the son of an Indian Rajah in exile and hoping to return home one day.¹⁴ He said to himself, "I had to dream to keep my mind away from family matters and school work."¹⁵ During this ordeal, he found solace in the world of his books as well. His childhood dreams, born out of cultural and religious stigma, would find an echo in his religious zeal for foreign lands and peoples. Here lies, in my view, his deep-seated longing to travel the world and visit remote lands. Egypt and Afghanistan would fulfill such a yearning.

Serge's early childhood traumatic years and his determination to run away explain his impetuous wish to join a religious community. These two factors sowed the seeds of a deep longing, a search for otherness, and a will to go to mission lands. He sought to leave his country, family, and friends and go to unforeseen destinations. His life would be marred by points of departure. No wonder he was mesmerized by the patriarch Abraham, who was called to leave all beyond and trust in God's providence on his journey to unknown destination. It is probable that this earlier experience of uncertainty and ambiguity would facilitate his encounter with the religious other and later his mystical conversation with Anṣārī's work. As his life journey unfolds, his entire epistemology and hermeneutic of the religious other took root at Le Saulchoir, continued in Cairo, and blossomed in Kabul.

To return for a moment to his early life, under the care of his grandfather, his early schooling and secondary education took place at the most prestigious and elite schools in Paris. After Saint Croix de Neuilly, he went to l'École de Gerson and then to Lycée de Janson de Sailly where he earned his *Baccalauréat*. Maybe the only laudable aspect of his childhood was the prestigious schools he attended. Early on he developed a fascination for foreign places and languages. At twelve he started learning Russian, and at fourteen he enrolled in Arabic classes at Lycée de Janson de Sailly. He passed his baccalaureate in philosophy with Arabic as a third language.¹⁶ The dream of a future life in a distant land and the desire to stay as far as possible from married life and aristocratic Paris might have opened a window to religious life. He recalled his dream to join a religious community at a tender age:

I dreamed a future far away from all my surroundings, and henceforth my desire to join a religious community. I said to myself: I will never marry because marriage is a recipe for disaster. I would go as far as possible and within my childlike logic, I convinced myself that if Jesus gave his life for me, I must as well give mine for his sake.¹⁷

2. *An Unexpected Call to a Life as a Dominican Friar*

De Beaurecueil spent some of his holidays in Vaulogé in the region of Sarthe at the castle of his uncle de Carini. In spite of his fear of dark stairways and nocturnal sounds, he paid attention to a painting of John of the Cross¹⁸ holding a jug of water and a dry loaf of bread in his prison cell. The holiness and austere demeanor of John of the Cross deeply impressed the young man; with the naiveté of a teenager, he confesses:

In addition there was *The Life of the Saints*, which I read constantly at my uncle de Carini's castle on Thursday night after the Boy Scouts' meetings. John of the Cross, in his prison cell, was in ecstasy, and wearing a frock and a white cloak. He was locked up by his Carmelite brothers, who found him too dangerous and subversive. I decided to be a Carmelite.¹⁹

This spontaneous desire remained a childlike dream but points to a deep-seated search or restlessness. Nevertheless, at the age of thirteen, during a summer vacation at Mer-les-Bains in Normandie, he met a strange person, Père Aquity. This fortunate encounter would change the course of his life and alter his dream to join the Carmelites. De Beaucueil recounts his meeting with Aquity:

At the young age of thirteen, we went to a summer vacation at Mer-les-Bains in Normandy. It was our introduction to the sea. At our hotel, there was a priest with a long beard, Père Aquity, who was also on vacation, and always ate alone. I will never forget his name. One day, while it was too cold to swim, he invited me to walk to the statue of the Blessed Mother in the hills. On the way, he asked: what would you like to do when you grow up? I will be a Carmelite monk, I replied. Do you know them? He asked. I have never met one but I read about John of the Cross, Theresa of Avila, and the ascetic life . . . Believe me, the priest said, I lived in the Holy Land for years and met many Carmelites. But, why not think about Dominicans? In Jerusalem, I studied at the École biblique. I think, you would make a good Dominican.²⁰

This advice stayed dormant in his consciousness but not for too long. Upon his return from Mer-les-Bains, de Beaucueil searched for a Dominican priory in his area. Fortunately he found one at rue Faubourg-Saint Honoré (Couvent de l'Annociation) and took a chance on the priest's advice. He writes:

Père Aquity's remarks stuck in my mind and one day I paid a visit to the Dominican priory at 2 rue du Faubourg St. Honoré. Père Kételaire welcomed me and noted "You came at the right time; I am the syndic of the house." Then, he gave me the tour of the vicinity from the basement to the attic. I was mesmerized and decided to become a Dominican.²¹

His visit to the Dominican priory and the hospitality of friar Kételaire changed his mind. He felt a sharp difference between the

atmosphere of his childhood abode and his first impressions of the Dominican priory at rue Faubourg-Saint-Honoré. He remarks:

What hospitality! He [friar Kételair] gave me a complete tour of the priory. Everything pleased me: the white habit, the silence of the cloister, and the impressive painting of Desvalières entitled "Dominican Apostolate." Also, the brightness of the building, the chanting at holy hours, and the smile of the brethren in the hallways were unforgettable. What an environment imbued with joy! Goodbye, the Carmelites! Of course Père Aquity, I will become a Dominican.²²

After the enthusiasm of his first visit, de Beurecueil stayed in touch with the priory, and for four years he kept steady correspondence and regular contacts with the Dominicans at rue Faubourg-Saint-Honoré. In the meantime, his father did not take seriously his son's desire to become a Dominican. He had more suitable careers in mind for him than the life of a Dominican friar. He hoped that the experience would be brief once the youngster discovered the austerity of religious life. However, thanks to friar Périnelle's persuasion, the novice master at the time, Pierre de Beurecueil did not oppose his son's decision to enter the novitiate. Therefore, on October 14, 1935, de Beurecueil joined the Dominican province of France and started his novitiate in Amiens. Later he recalled that his father was in the chapel when he received the Dominican habit.²³

Like many an immature young mind, he was very easily persuaded. It did not take much to make him switch from a Carmelite vocation to a Dominican one. It is remarkable, however, that the desire to join a religious community took precedence over other possible careers. The aristocratic environment of his grandfather's and uncle's castles, the emptiness left by his mother's absence and neglect, and his early boarding school life, all provide some explanation for his great interest in religious life. None of these experiences advocates for marriage as the most attractive option in life. Maybe the aristocratic Catholic milieu also provides a hint as to his early vocation. Religious life in such a milieu was looked upon with great respect, even though his father, Pierre de Beurecueil, was not amused.

Above all, the young man was searching for a place he could call home. The Carmelites or the Dominicans seemed to offer a way

out of a dreadful childhood and lonely bourgeois upbringing. One can speculate on the real meaning of his premature vocation to religious life. He seemed to have made up his mind very early and never looked back. There is almost no trace or hint of regret in his letters and other writings concerning his choice to become a friar as such a young age. His choice might have looked hasty, but he lived his religious life to the fullest and without regret.

Moreover, his choice to become a friar preacher opened the doors to the fulfillment of his childhood dreams. From then on, the possibility of going as far as possible from the Catholic aristocratic milieu of Paris was within reach. In a posthumous tribute to de Beaurecueil, André Velter writes, "Born in Paris in 1917 into a broken family, the youngster dreamt of decisive projects which would take him as far as possible from France, and God heard his prayers."²⁴ Velter did forecast precisely de Beaurecueil's lifelong yearning to find in the farthest lands the face of the divine. In his own words, he brings his childhood drama to a hopeful conclusion: "[My] wretched childhood, however, was blessed and indispensable for my experience in Kabul. My childhood was a 'call' to leave, to fly away without looking back. I knew this intimately from within the experience of a miserable childhood."²⁵ He finally found a family in the Order of Preachers and a place where his dreams would become a reality, starting with his formation years at the Dominican studium.

II. Le Saulchoir: A Rebirth of Dominican Scholarship²⁶

1. *A Special School of Theology and History*

Before probing de Beaurecueil's scholarly endeavors, we must set the scene by describing the Dominican studium (or seminary) of Le Saulchoir, where de Beaurecueil was educated and formed as a friar preacher. In 1903, the French government of Emile Combes (d. 1921) enforced rigorous policies of a strict separation of Church and State.²⁷ Many religious institutes were expelled from France, and the French Dominicans had to move their formation house from Flavigny-sur-Ozerain (Côte d'Or) to Belgium.²⁸ The Dominicans of the province of France relocated to Le Saulchoir Kain les Tournai. The building was an old monastery abandoned by Cistercian nuns and called Le Saulchoir because of a grove of willows (*saules* in French) at the edge

of a pond in the yard. The Dominican studium would remain in Tournai for thirty-five years and return to France in 1939 at Étiolles, a few kilometers from Soisy-sur-Seine. During those years of exile in Belgium and upon its return to France, Le Saulchoir was a hallmark of scholarship and intellectual excellence. Most of the best minds of the Order of Preachers who would influence the Second Vatican Council were alumni of Le Saulchoir.²⁹

At the studium of Le Saulchoir, the Dominican community lived a quasi-monastic life away from city noise and mundane preoccupations. But the friars were deeply aware of “the signs of the times.” Le Saulchoir was at the beginning under the aegis of two great minds: Ambroise Gardeil (d. 1931) and Pierre Mandonnet (d. 1936).³⁰ In the words of Yves Congar (d. 1995), Gardeil was “a thinker of the highest level in theology and determined to raise the quality of the seminary studies (at Le Saulchoir) to a university level.”³¹ His epoch-making book, *Le donné révélé et la théologie*, stressed the primacy of the revealed word over tradition. The book opens a path to a dialogue between Thomistic studies and contemporary philosophy. In the words of Chenu, Gardeil’s book was the “breviary of Le Saulchoir’s methodology; in other words, Dominicans found therein the spirit and perspective to guide their own studies and writings.”³² A. Gardeil was Regent of Studies for many years and pioneered a school of theology that would integrate methods borrowed from social sciences into theology and philosophy and be opened to public universities’ curriculum and the larger secular society. Chenu remembered his own early experience at the studium:

By the time I arrived at Le Saulchoir, the studium had found its inspiration, methods, and balance through the gifts of many friars who, although they were living in the church of France which was enmeshed in the modernist crisis, had serenely articulated a theology which combines scientific principles, contemplative richness and apostolic roots.³³

Along with Gardeil, Mandonnet insisted on the historical study of medieval texts, particularly Thomas Aquinas’s writings. As a scholar and historian of medieval philosophy, Mandonnet had for decades published a series of studies that placed the writings of Aquinas in their historical and cultural perspectives and provided Le Saulchoir with the methodology of a new orientation. He introduced Chenu

and many friars to the historical study of medieval texts.³⁴ Thanks to Mandonnet, an institute of medieval studies was founded at Le Saulchoir in collaboration with Étienne Gilson, who chaired medieval studies at the prestigious university of La Sorbonne. The rise of medieval studies and the application of historical methods to the study of Thomas Aquinas would lead to the foundation of another important center in North America, the medieval institute in Toronto, Canada.³⁵

In 1934, while the studium was still located in Belgium, two Pontifical faculties of theology and philosophy were erected. There were twenty-two professors and about one hundred students, including non-Dominicans. In 1932, Chenu was appointed Regent of Studies (the director of students' study programs and head of the school).³⁶ The biographer of Chenu, Jean Pierre Jossua, is correct in remarking, "In 1932, M. D. Chenu became Regent of Studies, and along with his friends Henri-Marie Féret and Yves Congar, he would give Le Saulchoir an international reputation . . . He was a friar gifted with a marvellous human spirit and a spark of genius."³⁷ Chenu's tenure as rector is regarded as the most significant period in the life of the institution.

As noted earlier, in both Kain les Tournai and Étiolles, Le Saulchoir hosted remarkable friars, including erudite and prolific theologians Antonin-Gilbert Sertillanges,³⁸ Antoine Dondaine, Gerard des Lauriers, Louis-Joseph Lebreton, and Yves Congar; biblical scholars Roland de Vaux and Pierre Benoit; liturgists Pierre Marie Gy and Irenée Dalmas; and pastoral and moral theologians Albert Plé, Pierre Liégé, and Pie Régamey. Famous Dominicans from other provinces, including Edward Schillebeeckx (a Dutchman born in Belgium), Fergus Kerr, and Timothy Radcliffe (both from Blackfriars in England), also were educated at Le Saulchoir. These friars worked intensely, and those years were extremely productive.³⁹ A case in point is that, in 1907, they published the epoch-making *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*.⁴⁰ The reputation of this scholarly journal remains intact to this day.

The Dominican friars at Le Saulchoir were doing for theology and philosophy what Marie Joseph Lagrange (d. 1938) was doing for scriptural studies. At a time when ecclesiastical training was for the most part accomplished by using theology manuals—second- and thirdhand accounts of the scriptures, the fathers, the councils of the church, and the great schools of theology—Le Saulchoir's friars argued for theological formation that used primary sources and

embraced Gardeil's and Mandonnet's critical methodologies in every branch of ecclesial studies. The friars called for the absolute necessity of integrating historical criticism and scientific rigor in all aspects of Catholic theology. The modernist crisis at the beginning of the twentieth century and historical criticism had shattered the Catholic *weltanschauung* and disoriented the advocates of *philosophia perennis*. Chenu summarizes the situation:

After a long brooding period, the historical and philosophical foundations of the Catholic faith were on the brink of collapse; and thus, the entire edifice of religious studies, from practical knowledge to scholastic theology, from biblical studies to ecclesiology were unraveling.⁴¹

Fully aware of the crisis, Chenu not only insisted on historical criticism and engagement with modernity, but also called on the Dominican friars of France to take seriously the study of other religions.⁴² His first intuition as a medievalist was the influence of Muslim and Arab philosophy on Latin medieval philosophy and theology, particularly Thomism. Chenu raised fundamental questions about the nature of Catholic theology in terms of its methodology and pedagogy, particularly with regard to seminaries and Pontifical schools. He tried to rethink theology's fundamental relationship with history on the one hand and faith on the other. Chenu was a wellspring of daring ideas and had the intelligence to forecast necessary theological and ecclesial turns. Christopher F. Potworowski believes that "[i]t would be very difficult to write an accurate history of Catholicism in the 20th century without granting a pivotal role to the contributions of the French theologian M. D. Chenu."⁴³

Indeed, the year he was appointed rector (1937) of Le Saulchoir, Chenu wrote a little pamphlet destined to shake the ground of Catholic seminary education. He questioned the entire structure of Dominican friars' initial formation in his *Une école de théologie: Le Saulchoir*. Claude Geffré calls it "Chenu's small programmatic book (*son petit livre-programme*)."⁴⁴ He sought to articulate a vision for Le Saulchoir and its theological, philosophical, and pastoral programs, which were faithful to Gardeil's and Mandonnet's visions. Paul Philibert, in a book he coauthored with Thomas O'Meara, summarizes the content of this remarkable book: "In this small book . . . [Chenu points to] the school's fidelity and to the genius of Lacordaire and Gardeil. He spoke

of the spirit and method of its philosophical and theological teaching. Finally, he gave an appendix listing the publications of the members of the school."⁴⁵ Also, in an interview with Jacques Duquenes, *Un théologien en liberté*, Chenu recounts himself the circumstances of the book's inception:

This book started as an improvised short pamphlet. Indeed, it was customary to deliver a lecture on the feast of St. Thomas Aquinas. In fact, it was a good occasion to take stock of our deep motivations. I did so as the Rector of Le Saulchoir in a short address. My paper impressed students and faculty alike and they took notes and decided to publish it. After all, the first draft was improvised, so I decided to rewrite the entire paper and further clarify my views on the historical critical method in theological studies.⁴⁶

It was not only Catholic theology and its neo-Thomistic approaches that were in dire need of rethinking. Chenu saw clearly that:

The intelligibility of the mystery of faith has to be understood in its historical context and sacred history. Of course, such a position challenges the concept of "perennial theology" which freezes theological thought in time and space. Here, theology is dragged into relativism, or in other words, into the complex game of relations which modify not the substance of faith, but its historical expressions.⁴⁷

One can hardly overestimate the influence of Chenu and Le Saulchoir on de Beaurecueil. This period of formation was crucial for him and for the entire community at Le Saulchoir. Like others, he had to rethink the Catholic approach to history, philosophy, hermeneutics, and other faith traditions. He had to place the entire work of Thomas Aquinas and its influence in the context of thirteenth-century medieval Europe and take seriously the influence of Islamic civilization on the Latin West. In other words, historical situations and circumstances, the limitations of theological formulations, and dissent in theological matters were part of a theologian's worldview and epistemology. He questioned the pertinence of neo-Thomism and neo-scholasticism, which had dominated Catholic theological imagination for centuries. The three confrères Anawati, Jomier, and de Beaurecueil would carry

these radical approaches to Catholic studies learned at Le Saulchoir, which would influence their own research of Islamic studies, with them.

Under Chenu's aegis, de Bearecueil learned to cut against the grain, to listen to the movement of the Spirit, and to be bold in his choices. Unfortunately, Chenu's revolutionary view did not fare too well in Catholic circles, particularly in Rome.⁴⁸ Concerning Roman authorities, Philibert notes, "in general, they mistrusted the use of history in theology and considered it a risk destined to lead to relativism by abandoning a timeless *philosophia perennis*."⁴⁹ In 1942, Chenu was silenced and forbidden to teach and publish. His book was banned by Rome and put on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* by Pope Pius XII.⁵⁰

However, history has its way of vindicating forerunners. Indeed, twenty years later, the Second Vatican Council of 1962–65, under Pope John XXIII, started an *aggiornamento* (or updating of the Church). During the council the Catholic Church's theology toward other faith traditions would change drastically. Chenu's solid theological understanding, erudite historical insights, intuition, and remarkable creativity cost him dearly but also resulted in fruitful new departures that have remained classical resources for contemporary theology, particularly for the French Dominican order's engagement with the Arab and Muslim world.

Chenu and his teaching team insisted that theologians must keep their eyes on the signs of the times by discerning possible "seeds of the Word" or the inchoate reality of the reign of God, as Vatican II sees Christian vocation. Anawati, Jomier, and de Bearecueil all were the fruits of Chenu's intelligent and prophetic foresight.⁵¹ Jean Pierre Josua summed up Chenu's life in these words: "His fundamental optimism and communicative genius made him an incomparable brother and teacher. The French Dominicans owe to him the splendid vitality of this period of their lives, and so does the Catholic Church even more, although she has ever been willing to acknowledge it."⁵² In a nutshell, Chenu revitalized the tradition of Dominican formation and scholarship. With regard to de Bearecueil, he energized Dominican engagement with the Muslim world.

2. *Summoned to Islamic Studies by M. D. Chenu*

De Bearecueil was nineteen when he arrived at Le Saulchoir de Kain Les Tournai in 1936. He had already started learning Arabic at Lycée

de Janson de Sailly in Paris, a move that would serve him well later on. After a year of novitiate in Amiens (northern France), he started his study in Catholic theology and philosophy along with his senior brothers Jomier and Anawati. As noted earlier, Chenu would have a decisive role in the direction their lives would take. It was at Le Saulchoir and under Chenu's persistent call that the Dominican investment in the Arab and Muslim world would take a providential turn. They were groomed for a serious study of Islam and Muslim societies. Chenu wanted them to study Islam as a religion, a civilization, and a polity in order to correct long-standing historical misconceptions about Muslims. At the time, the wave of *la nouvelle théologie* and the Catholic *ressourcement* movement deeply questioned Catholic theology and its triumphalist and arrogant views of other faith traditions.

At Le Saulchoir, de Beaucueil became the third member of a core team designated for Islamic studies. Chenu protected the trio against any attempts to assign Jomier, Anawati, and de Beaucueil to a different task. Many times he would intervene to cancel assignments with regard to them.⁵³ At the studium and during four years of intense study in the Dominican tradition, de Beaucueil achieved a deeper understanding of his Dominican calling. Theology and philosophy at Le Saulchoir were taught in the context of a renewed understanding of Thomism. In addition to classical courses in Catholic and Thomistic tradition, Chenu introduced the trio to Massignon and encouraged them to attend his lectures at the Collège de France. Regis Morelon, the former director of the IDEO, reports Massignon's first visit to the Dominican studium at Le Saulchoir de Kain Les Tournai:

An interesting event! L. Massignon, professor of Arab civilization at the Collège de France, during a visit at Louvain University for a conference, called from Brussels to ask for a meeting at Le Saulchoir between 1h30 and 2h30 in the afternoon. Father Syave, who knew him well, welcomed him kindly, and we all gathered to visit with him. On Father Mandonnet's prompting, Massignon came to see how Latin medieval scholars (that we were) could collaborate with Arabist medieval scholars for the study of the relations between Arab and Latin philosophies of the XIII century.⁵⁴

This occasion was a sign of a solid rapprochement between this outstanding Orientalist and the Dominicans of France. Massignon would

remain a close friend of the Dominicans and a frequent guest at the IDEO in Cairo. Later he would be instrumental in helping de Beaucueil embark on the study of mystical Islam.

Sadly, in 1939, the Second World War broke out, and de Beaucueil had to interrupt his studies. He was called to military service and sent to the city of Jounieh in Lebanon. At the time, Lebanon was a French protectorate. Throughout his entire stay, he hoped to practice Arabic and encounter Lebanese. Unfortunately, he missed the opportunity because of the dire military restrictions. His first experience in a predominantly Muslim country was a disappointment. He remarked, "Nothing is more detrimental to one's desire to know a people and its land than the life of a soldier living in a barracks for marines. All relations were lost because of the uniform."⁵⁵ This missed opportunity did not, however, crush his desire for a scientific investigation of Islam and Muslim civilization.

De Beaucueil stayed in Jounieh for eight months; then he was sent back to France. Upon his return, he spent two months in Mont-Clergeon, near Rumilly, in Haute-Savoie, where he volunteered to work with young people in a program called *Les jeunes des chantiers de jeunesse*.⁵⁶ In June 1940, he was discharged from military duties and reentered Le Saulchoir at l'Étiolle to complete his studies. Toward the end of his theological studies, and mostly building on his missed opportunity in Lebanon, de Beaucueil enrolled at *l'École nationale des langues orientales* in Paris to continue his studies of Arabic. It was there that he furthered his relationship with Massignon. The latter would have a decisive influence on de Beaucueil in terms of what Chenu called "Islam as a vocation (*L'Islam comme vocation*)."

In so many ways, Massignon's honest, generous, and at times controversial views of mystical Islam sank deep into de Beaucueil's consciousness.⁵⁷ As a result, he read and studied Anṣārī, like Massignon's study of the famous Baghdad mystic al-Ḥallāj. Although there was a communion of thought in terms of epistemology and hermeneutics between the two Orientalists, de Beaucueil and Massignon did differ.⁵⁸ Massignon was an exceptional Orientalist but not a theologian. Avon is correct in noting that de Beaucueil departed to a certain degree from both Massignon's Ḥallājism and L. Gardet's neo-Thomism. He notes:

At the beginning I enjoyed Gardet's articles. Later on, however, I distanced myself as I did for Massignon. I did not

care for Gardet's neo-thomism, particularly, his distinction between natural and supernatural mysticism. Also, I did not like the tendency (in Massignon's case) to make al-Hallāj the towering figure of mystical Islam.⁵⁹

In 1943 de Beaurecueil completed his theological studies at Le Saulchoir with the equivalent of a doctorate in theology⁶⁰ and earned a licentiate in Arabic literature from *l'École nationale des langues orientales*.⁶¹ The same year, he was ordained as a priest in the Order of Preachers by Cardinal Suhard of Paris.⁶² By that time, Anawati and Jomier were already in Cairo at the IDEO. This project of a Dominican study center, launched in 1938 by both the Dominican Order and the Vatican, could finally be implemented. Anawati, Jomier, de Beaurecueil, and Jacques Dominique Boilot are often considered the founding members of the institute. Their endeavor is in the lineage of the French Dominican province's involvement with the Arab and Muslim worlds, but it also fits the larger context of the Order of Preachers' history with Islam. Indeed, the IDEO is the *terminus ad quem* of the history of Dominican erudition in Islamic studies.

Anawati, Jomier, and de Beaurecueil formed an unusual trio in terms of personalities, destinies, and talents. Even though these friars shared bourgeois and upper-class upbringings, they were very different in temperament. Avon speaks of "diverse founding members (*une équipe fondatrice bigarrée*)."⁶³ Their success remains a historical achievement. For decades, these friars (with the help of countless others) managed to make Dominican scholarship on Islam and Muslim civilization one of the best in Catholic traditions. As noted, the IDEO was built on the original idea of Marie Joseph Lagrange (d. 1938), the handiwork of Antonin Jaussen (d. 1962), and the adamant belief of Chenu (d. 1990) in the signs of the times.⁶⁴

III. The French Dominican Friars in Cairo

1. *The Vision of Biblical Scholar M. J. Lagrange*

A brief history of the IDEO is in order at this point. The foundation of the Dominican house in Cairo was first the dream of Lagrange. At the *École biblique*,⁶⁵ Lagrange directed his students to investigate the entire land of the Bible scientifically in terms of exegesis, Semitic

languages, history, geography, epigraphy, and archeology. He added study travels to various sites mentioned in the biblical narratives. According to Lagrange, “the bible should be read in relation to the land in which it was written, and studied in the physical and cultural context that gave it birth.”⁶⁶

Lagrange had the extraordinary talent of spotting genius in young Dominicans friars. Within a decade, he selected and formed the first generation of astonishingly talented young Dominicans in biblical studies. The most important were Antonin Jaussen, a specialist of Arab ethnography;⁶⁷ Louis-Hugues Vincent (d. 1960), considered the father of Palestinian archeology; Antoine Raphaël Savignac (d. 1951), an excellent Semitic epigraphist; Felix-Marie Abel (d. 1953), a scholar whose erudition and keen critical sense resulted in an incomparable mastery of the history and geography of Palestine; and Edouard-|Paul Dhorme (d. 1966), an Assyriologist and the first to decipher Ugaritic.⁶⁸

In Lagrange’s foresight and vision, Cairo, Egypt, was a natural destination where students of biblical studies could be initiated into archeology and Egyptology. Almost a century after Napoleon Bonaparte’s expedition to Egypt (1798–1801), the French had established in 1898 the IFAO,⁶⁹ which would be an undeniable support to the Dominican biblical scholars in terms of Egyptology and the archeology of Ancient Egypt. As a seasoned scholar, Lagrange understood the historical and cultural importance of Cairo. He wrote:

The great interest of this institute is that Cairo is the intellectual heart of Sunni Islam and the location of important European study centers. There is a considerable interest in establishing an institution of high education for young Catholic religious which could help prepare Muslim intellectuals for an unforeseeable future, and impress upon them a respect for secular sciences, attract oriental Christians and finally anchor Latin Catholics in their faith. . . . If I am so adamant about such a school, it is due to my global vision for the *École biblique*, which must take priority at the beginning. However, there is clear advantage to start slowly and avoid undue publicity.⁷⁰

Hence, he sought to build a kind of *pied à terre* (an adjunct house) in the service of the *École biblique*. He insisted:

It would be honorable for the Catholic Church to have in Cairo an institute for the study of Christianity in Egyptian, without mentioning Egyptology and Arabic studies. Cairo is by far the most important intellectual center for Islam, and it has an important center of Egyptology. The Catholic Church must be represented by a center of such studies.⁷¹

In 1911 Lagrange officially proposed to the Dominican province of France, gathered at Le Saulchoir de Kain, the project of establishing a house in Cairo, which would include an institute of study (Egyptology in connection with biblical studies) and a little apostolic team to support pastorally and spiritually the small Latin community of Cairo.⁷² The city of Cairo seemed a natural choice because it is the location of one of the most prestigious Sunni universities, Al-Azhar University, which forms and educates Muslim religious leaders and scholars from Indonesia to Senegal. Unfortunately, Lagrange's idea ran into a number of complications mainly because of the difficulties of finding a consensus between the Holy See, the Dominican headquarters in Santa Sabina (Rome), St. Étienne's Priory in Jerusalem, and the province of France. Luckily, Jaussen, from the province of Lyon, would bring Lagrange's hope to fruition.

2. A. Jaussen: *The Builder of a Dominican Institute*

As noted earlier, Jaussen was a professor at the *École biblique* of Jerusalem, where he taught Oriental archeology, ethnography, Arabic, and Sabeian script. He spent a great deal of his study in anthropological research among the Bedouins of the region. From 1895 to 1925, Jaussen and A. R. Savignac (d. 1951) traveled through the region to document the people's way of life. Jaussen was one of the first Western scholars to delve into Arab and Middle Eastern anthropology. His *Coutumes des Arabes au pays de Moab et Coutumes palestiniennes-Naplouse et son district* and a three-volume book titled *Mission archéologique en Arabie (mars-mai 1907)* are classics in the field of Arab Bedouin ethnography and anthropology.⁷³ During World War I, he traveled all around the Middle East working for the French and British alike.

Jaussen settled in Egypt in 1928. Until 1932, he lived alone and worked tirelessly to raise money to build the Dominican house in Cairo. In 1931, thanks to his relationship with Egypt's King Fuad (d. 1936), he bought a piece of property at half-price in the name of the *École biblique* in 'Abbāsiyya. According to the contract signed with

the Egyptian authorities, the Dominican house was affiliated to St. Etienne in Jerusalem, and its sole purpose and vocation would be strictly scientific.⁷⁴ Clearly, no proselytism would be allowed; otherwise they would lose their property. By 1935 the main part of the building was completed. As Morelon explains, “As put forth by father Jaussen, the purpose of this institute is faithful in its principles to father Lagrange’s intentions during his first visit, but the goal is now much more ambitious.”⁷⁵ However, Lagrange’s dream took a long time to come to completion.

With regard to the foundation of the IDEO, Lagrange conceived the idea, Jaussen built the priory, Chenu imagined the decisive turn, and Anawati led the first crew on the ground. The friar who held things together between Jaussen and Anawati was Marie Dominique Boulanger (d. 1961). He was the first to be assigned to Cairo and arrived in 1932. He would take over after Jaussen moved to Alexandria, where he settled permanently in 1937 until his return to France for health reasons in 1959.⁷⁶

In Cairo, Boulanger and another newcomer, Anselme-Bertrand Carrière (d. 1957), would devote themselves to the pastoral care of the French Catholics of the Latin rite and the Dominican Third Order founded by friar Martin Rousseau (d. 1940) in 1910.⁷⁷ Boulanger and Carrière maintained the Dominican presence until the decisive turn initiated by Chenu in 1938. Meanwhile, Boulanger took great care of the priory and in 1933 founded the “Thomist Circle” of Cairo. The Circle was an intellectual, cultural, and religious forum and a veritable formation place for the French-speaking community associated with the Dominicans.

Jaussen, Lagrange, and other members of the *École biblique* visited often to give conferences.⁷⁸ In 1934, the Circle printed its first bimonthly journal, “*Cahiers du Cercle Thomiste*.”⁷⁹ The *Cahiers* were the printed versions of the conferences given by Dominican friars and lay scholars who were members of the Third Order. Unfortunately, the original goal of the institution—Egyptology related to biblical studies—seemed to have been forgotten. Also, in terms of Islamic studies, there was no resident scholar yet. Jaussen nonetheless had sown the seeds of a solid network that would greatly benefit the friars later. Morelon remarks:

Finally, one must add that the intellectual reputation of father Jaussen and the web of relations he established in Egypt were very valuable to the first three members of the

institute from its inception in 1944. This network allowed the founding members of the IDEO to acquire good and credible reputation very early on.⁸⁰

Since 1932 and under the leadership of Boulanger, the Dominican priory in Cairo has been a functioning institution. But, the decisive turn in terms of its destiny (i.e., Islamic studies) took place in the academic year 1937–1938 at the studium of Le Saulchoir d’Etiolles, thousands of miles away from Cairo. Chenu, dean of the studium,⁸¹ groomed three student brothers for a scientific study of Islam and its civilization. This initiative almost coincided with the request of the French Cardinal Eugène Tisserant (d. 1972), secretary of the Congregation for the Oriental churches, request on behalf of the Vatican. Tisserant invited the Dominican Order to initiate a committee to consider a scientific engagement with Islam and the Muslim world.

Unlike Chenu, Cardinal Tisserant’s first intuitions were to support the Oriental Christian minority. First he met with the Missionaries of Africa (the White Fathers) in Tunis, where they had established a study center (IBLA: *Institut des belles-lettres arabes*),⁸² and then the Dominicans. Cardinal Tisserant had been a student of J. M. Lagrange at the *École biblique* and had a real connection to the Order. He asked Martin-Stanislas Gillet (d. 1951), the Master of the Order at the time, to envision a Dominican mission in predominantly Muslim lands. In response, Gillet sent Chenu on a tour in Jerusalem, Cairo, Tunis and Algiers, where the Dominicans had priories and houses. Chenu did not reinvent the wheel of Dominican Orientalism, but he gave this endeavor a decisive turn.

For Chenu, the time had come to bring his vision to fruition. He has always believed that a proper understanding of medieval European thought, particularly Thomistic philosophy and theology, needed a good knowledge of its sources, Islamic and Arabic philosophy. According to Chenu, European medieval thought is

largely unintelligible if it is not connected to its Arab and Muslim sources in which it takes its roots, and draws its fundamental structure and vitality with regard to philosophy as well as other sciences such as mathematics, astronomy, and medicine.⁸³

The necessity for Dominicans to open a center of Islamic studies had never been so urgent in Chenu’s eyes. He writes: