

Tributes to Giuseppe Simone Assemani
(Yūsuf Sham‘ūn Assemani)
(Chronological Order)

To the beloved son Giuseppe Simone Assemani, one of our court’s Superiors, our confident, associate and companion.

Beloved son Greetings and Apostolic Blessings.

[...] Considering our ample trust in your honesty, straightforwardness, knowledge wisdom and your religious devotion, and complying with the opinion of the Council for the Propagation of Faith we appointed you and gave you the authority in our capacity as the Apostolic Authority and according to the wish of the Holy See to call the Council for a meeting and to have the right of voicing your opinion with Giuseppe Petros the Patriarch and the superiors of the Bishops, and the other Bishops mentioned.

Written in Rome in St. Mary Majore Church sealed with the Fisherman’s Ring on 26th of November, 1735, the sixth year of our papacy.

Pope Clement XII,

First Clerical Confirmation. The Local Synod held in Mount Lebanon by the exalted master, the Patriarch of Antioch for the Syriac Maronite congregation with the support of the exalted master Giuseppe Simone Assemani, the Nonce Apostolic. Translated from a translation from Latin into Arabic by Bishop Yūsuf Najm, Al-Arz Printing Press, Jūniyah, 1900, pp.6-8.

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To the beloved son Giuseppe Simone Assemani, one of our Court's superiors, associate and companion.

Beloved son, Greetings and Apostolic Blessing.

We sent you previously a letter as a sort of confirmation where we appointed you on our part and that of the Apostolic See a nonce to our venerated brethren Joseph Patriarch of Antioch, the Archbishops and Bishops. Authorized by the Patriarch and the Archbishops, we charged you to express your opinion, in the Local Synod assuming that it will be held in that place as we explained in detail in our previous letters. We are willing to honor you further and bestow upon you special privileges. In our capacity as holders of the Holy Apostolic See we grant you the right of wearing the crown in the Local Synod and to use it freely and with permissibility after we release you in our letter from any bond as excommunication, prohibition and the other judgments, punitive, and punishment whether a result of the law or man, to present the cause and reason confidently as a preparation to abide by the contents of the letter without paying heed to what contradicts it.

Pope Clement XII,

Written in Rome in St Mary Majore Church sealed with the Fisherman's Ring on the 12th of January, 1735, the sixth year of our Papacy. Second Confirmation. Local Synod held in Mount Lebanon by Venerable Aster Patriarch of the Syriac Maronite Congregation with the support of the Venerable Master Giuseppe Simone Assemani, the Nonce Apostolic. Translated from a translation from Latin into Arabic by Bishop Yūsuf Najm, Al-Arz Printing Press, Jūniyah, 1900, p.9.

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The great Assemani, meaning Yūsuf Sham'ūn, was born on the 27th of July, 1687 and entered the College of Rome when he was eight years old. As he completed his studies and decided to return to Lebanon, Pope Clement XI entrusted him to prepare a Latin index to the Oriental books to summarize their contents. He accomplished the task adding valuable comments which proved to the Pope that Yūsuf Sham'ūn Assemani deserves to be a translator of Arabic, Syriac and Chaldean books in the Vatican Library.

In 1710 he graduated and was appointed an advisor in the committee of revising the Holy Book that is used by people of the East. In 1715 he was sent by the Pope to search for manuscripts in the different countries. He brought several books from all parts of the Orient which constituted the material for his famous book: “The Oriental Vatican Library”.

In 1730 the Pope called him Custodian of this grand library, then he became its director. His mastery of ten languages helped him in this grand endeavor so he sorted out the summaries of these Oriental books to the Latin language.

Mārūn ‘Abbūd,

From *Al-Majmū‘ah al-Kāmilah*, Vol. I, in *Adab al-‘Arab*, Dār Mārūn ‘Abbūd, Dār al Thaqāfah, Beirut, 3rd edition, 1978-1979, p.407.

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Whenever we raise the question of “Latinization” with Assemani or with the others, we forget the other side of the picture: the question of “Lebanonization”, or the intellectual and cultural role that the Lebanese have played in the West in the twentieth century. I consider this matter to constitute the essence of our contemporary being, and if neglected we lose a vivid significance of our vital cultural and active presence in the world.

Father Yuwakīm Mubārak considered that Assemani constituted the stake of the European modernity in its scientific and philosophic principles derived from the Greek Hellenistic heritage, the Oriental authenticity in its Arabic and Islamic dimensions and an awakened ecumenical Romanian stake directed towards freedom. We incorporated these suggestions in the context of the profound intellectual and intense debate around the Arabic and Lebanese Awakening since the beginning of the 17th century where an independent study is essential. I will conclude in this context by two sayings on Assemani: the first is an Oriental theological crossing from reason to faith may be paralleled—though in different degrees—with a similar European crossing. The second saying is that the literary crossing from Syriac to Arabic to Latin, and then to Arabic

again may form an orbit around which Arabic may be consolidated as an intellectual, literary, classical, modern language. Though ancient like Lebanon, it is being revived as from the ancient slumber to the orbit of creative innovation, to the core of the lively and flowing enlightenment, and the truth of our modernization and enlightenment which are still unfolding in us.

Ameen Albert Rihani,

“Dihniyyat al-‘Ubūr As-Sim‘ānī”’, in *Kitāb Al-‘Ilāhiyyāt by Assemani: Min al-Falsafa ‘ilā al-Lāhūt fa An-Nahḍah*, (Assemani From Philosophy to Theology to Illumination), Lebanon, Notre Dame University Press, 1st edition, 2003, p.22.

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Is it not possible – but essential - to consolidate this theological common factor between Christian and Moslem beliefs in a way that will establish an essential cultural dialogue between Islam and Christianity to be a basis for other dialogue domains and constitute the common principles between these two religions.

One of the results of such a step is to draw the attention of the scholars and their followers in the two religions not only to the essential common denominator between them, but to what in my opinion is more important and this is the historical human aspect in this conflict for we have to confess that we seldom distinguish in Christianity and Islam between religion and religious thinking: What is permanent is religion, but religious thinking is variable and changes for it is produced by people in the different epochs and circumstances of history.

An example is the question of the unity of the Creator - which is the core issue in both religions- It appears one in its essence and is the basis of the Abrahamic religions. The difference, however, is in its historical and human representation between what is abstraction as in Islam, or humanization as in Christianity. Divine Existence – pictured both in Islam and Christianity - is an abstract existence sublime and absolute and its attributes are the same and cannot be reached by human reason but in faith through its effects. What al Assemani mentions in his Al-‘Ilāhiyyāt centers in most of its parts on these facts. It does not differ in most of its evidences and proofs

from al Ghazzālī and other Islamic scholars who treated this subject. In spite of this, most of the Christians and Moslems conception centers on an essential difference between Islam and Christianity in what concerns Monotheism.

In his propositions and argumentative meticulous proofs, Assemani the scholar leaves no room for doubt as to Christian belief in unity. He considers that reason independently can be aware of the existence of God, His unity, His freedom from the sensible, His necessary existence and the sameness of His Essence and Existence. On the other hand, Reason cannot independently understand the Trinity without the text, meaning Revelation.

As a result, Muslim Kalām scholars and Christian theologians believe that reason has its independent precepts and proofs and they accept ---in the realm of Divinity- what reason prescribes or independently knows, and consider it the center of belief. They resort to the text to prove the remaining religious issues which could engender disagreement even in the same religion. The understanding and the interpretation of the text (Revelation) even if sacred cannot be considered as such for it is always subject to interpretation meaning diversity and multiplicity in different times, places and among different people.

Al ‘Allāmah Muḥammad Hasan al-Amīn,

Al-‘Ilāhiyyāt: Qirā‘ah fīl Burhān wal Mushtarak al-Lahūtī al-Masīhī al-Islāmī, fī al ‘Allāmah Yūsuf Sham‘ūn As-Sim‘ānī, Kitāb Al-Ilāhiyyāt, min al Falsafa ‘Ilal-Lāhūt fan-Nahḍah, Lebanon, Notre Dame University Press, 1st edition. 2003, pp. 32-33.

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He excelled in Theological and Philosophical sciences and in Orient Literature and in rhetoric, and in the science of history and the principles of Law and he succeeded in mastering several of the Western and Oriental languages perfectly to an extent that he was able to write and speak around thirty of these languages.

It is difficult to limit the specialization of Assemani to one of the disciplines, for it appears as if all the disciplines were his specialization. When he completed successfully and excellently, in 1708, his higher studies, he was asked by Clement XI to compose a Latin index for the Oriental manuscripts. He accomplished his task perfectly and the index came out well knit, systematically classified, with sequential chapters, containing valuable interpretations and beneficial footnotes. This made His Holiness the Pope appoint him in 1710 a translator of the Arabic books and the Syriac manuscripts in the Vatican Library, and later an advisor in the committee which was responsible to review the books of the Orientals.

Assemani obtained while in the third decade of his life the confidence of the Roman Papacy under whose protection and patronage he survived.¹ In 1711 he was confirmed in two important posts in the Roman circles before he was sent by Pope Clement to the East in 1715 to collect old manuscripts from the churches, libraries and convents of Egypt, Syria, Palestine and Lebanon.

Father Dr. Būlus Sfayr,

Al-'Ilāhiyyāt Nitāj Fikrī Lāhūtī li Talāmiḍhat Madrasat Roma al-Mārūniyyah, in Yūsuf Sham'ūn Assemani, *Kitāb Al-Ilāhiyyāt, Min al-Falsafah Ilal-Lāhūt fan-Nahḍah*, Lebanon, Notre dame University Press, 1st edition, 2003, pp.38-39.

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Assemani's attempt, initiated by the Vatican or possibly by the graduates of the Maronite schools awareness of the necessity of organizing the affairs of the Maronite community, required at the same time a clear theological organization where theoretical and religious teaching go hand in hand. This is how he introduced to the Maronites and others in the East the gist of the Academic Catholic theological schooling. Accordingly, he prepared for the Maronite Lebanese council which was summoned in 1736 a basic agreement supporting the leading administrative

¹ Assemani was a coeval of six great Popes, Clement XI (1700-1721), Innocent XIII (1721-1724), Benedict XIII (1724-1730), Clement XII (1730-1740), Benedict XIV (1740-1758), and Clement XIII (1758-1769).

educational proposal among whose facets was the imposition of obligatory gratuitous teaching and the teaching of girls. More than half a century before similar French measures were taken by the French Revolution.

We go back to Giuseppe Simone Assemani's reliance on the Arabic Language as an educational pedagogical method to approach the Maronites in particular and any seeker of knowledge in general. I think this was intended to reach his mentioned goal and to begin at the same time from an existing reality.

In spite of his cognizance of many languages, Western and Eastern and despite his upbringing since a young age, while only nine years old in Rome, on languages other than Arabic as Italian, Latin, Greek and others reaching, according to the researchers of his heritage, more than thirty languages, he chose Arabic for the two reasons mentioned each completing the other. Arabic with its sister the Syriac was naturally widespread in Mount Lebanon and in other areas since a long time, and the Maronites who combined the two languages in their daily life and cultural affairs were turning more and more to Arabic. Assemani was aware of this reality as well as the precedence of the spoken, philosophical and scientific heritage written in Arabic in spite of the weakness and deterioration caused by the Mongol invasion and the dominance of the Ottomans who chose Persian and Turkish-Ottomans. This is how Arabic cultural circulation to the convents, mosques, and different schools decreased.

Victor al Kik,

“Manhagiyyat Assemani fī Burhānihi al-Ilāhī al-Mawarīnat, Sadanat al Falsafat bi al ‘Arabiyyah Ba’d Ibn Rushd”. In Yūsuf Sham‘ūn as Sim‘ānī, *Kitāb Al-Ilāhiyyatī, Min al Falsafa ila al Lāhūt fan-Nahḍah*, Lebanon, Notre Dame University Press, 1st edition, 2003, pp. 56-57.

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All the above shows that Assemani was more than a Maronite, became Lebanese so he lost his identity. He is a Maronite scholar who was influenced by European modernity during his time to offer to the world a distinguished intellectual quintessence where East and West are harmonious, reason and faith compatible and the traditional philosophical school, Eastern wisdom and modern science are found.

In this way it is not permissible to outstrip Assemani the master of his Eastern affiliation and his Maronite authenticity. It is true that not all masters possess the same personality and method. But it is fair to ask: did any of those we are used or able to call Maronite Eastern masters affect the destiny of the Maronite Church as Assemani in his sayings, Writings or works? Did any of these teachers make their voice heard to the world as Assemani did in all of his writings especially in those he wrote in foreign languages? Which is better: A master who acquaint us with what we are without any innovation, or a master who acquaint us with what we are and what we could be if we adopt what is new in the world and open our potentials to horizons of innovation and development.

Real authenticity is not to isolate and seclude ourselves and be ossified, and modernity is not to deny our past and adopt what is new and live in self-estrangement. The ideal solution for us is to combine and coordinate between authenticity and modernity. It is for the Maronite, Orthodox or Moslem, each to be himself, open to others and to truth wherever it is found, and to modernity whenever its wind blows. Perhaps the example of as Assemani in this respect could be followed for he was successful and efficacious.

Dr. Tanyūs Nujaum,

“Assemani wa al Burhān al Ilāhī” min Youssef Sham‘ūn Assemani, *Kitāb Al-Ilāhiyyāt, min al Falsafa ilal Lāhūt fan-Nahdat*, Lebanon, Notre Dame University Press, 1st edition, 2002, p.92.

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The book *al Ilāhiyyāt* is an encyclopedia of orthodox Faith in all what concerns the one God in three persons. Its method is clear, its proofs are sound and its reading is interesting. Going deeply in the Divine mystery of the One God in three persons leads at the same time to reflect on human mystery, help a person to affirm himself and fulfill the image that he was created for. This image cannot be perfected except in its relation with God the Father incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ his eternal son Jesus Christ who gave himself to us through his holy spirit, in order for us to be united with him, live by Him and through Him.

Bishop Kirillos Salim Bustrus,

Ath-Thālūth al-Aqdas Fi Assemani, *Kitāb Al- 'Ilahiyāt, Youssef Sham 'ūn Assemani min al Falsafah ilal-Lāhūt fan-Nahdat*, Notre Dame University Press, 1st edition, 2003, 92.

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If we come to the effective and wide capacity of Assemani to deal with the philosophical terms and expressions and the dictionary of Arabic intellectual words, we can spontaneously say that this scholar was skillful in what we can call acculturation for he transmitted Western thought to an extent that he seemed to adopt it using the same expressions and words that the Islamic theologians and Arab philosophers used in the past, while, affected by an intellectual methodical approach, he avoided cramming and repetition and changing the words for the same meaning. This is to remain meticulous and concrete in his exposition of the subject and to reach the necessary reasonable deduction in this matter. The purpose of Assemani here is to benefit Arabic religious culture from Western thought and its methods.

Assemani does not forget that he is from the East and from Mount Lebanon so he takes us back to the spiritual experience of God's existence that Father Antonios lived. Assemani recounts that the superior of the monks was asked how he obtained the utmost wisdom and understanding without studying. His answer was that he studied in the book of the world, meaning meditating the creatures and their levels.

The significance of Assemani’s message to us today when we are approaching an ecclesiastical event, the summoning of the Maronite council to discuss questions of identity, belonging and other subjects, that it is not sufficient to translate Western thought, whether theological, philosophical, or sociological, but what is more important is to apprehend this thought well in our language and culture in order to collaborate with the world of Arab thought and to revive this thought to be the thought of the present situation, the thought of awakening and cultural creativeness. Assemani might have been mistaken in not enlarging his intellectual vision to directly take into consideration the Arabic philosophical data, but he was able easily to express in a solid Arabic philosophical language what he desired to prepare as a theological tool for the culture of his Maronite Church.

Father Dr. Salim Daccash,

“Al Bu’d al Falsafī ad-Difā’ī li Barhanat Wujūd Allah” in Yūsuf Sham’un Assemani, *Kitāb Al-Ilāhiyāt, min al Falsafah Ilal-Lāhūt fan Nahdat*, Lubnān, Notre Dame University Press, 1st edition, 2003, p. 110.

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But collecting the Manuscripts alone is not enough. Coming back to Rome, Assemani delved into indexing and translating what he wrote to a more popular language, to Latin. These manuscripts will form the main subject to his encyclopedia” Oriental Library” (Bibliotheca Orientalis) which is relied on till the present day. It is evident from this compilation that he did not leave an Eastern language without expounding it. The languages cannot be counted: They say that he knew more than thirty languages used in indexing a Syriac, Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Hebrew, Samiri, Armenian, Ethiopian, Copt, Iberian and Malaysian manuscripts. This, though containing few mistakes due to haste in working, was tackled by The Nestorian, Syriac, Arab and Coptic writers opening the horizons of Eastern literature and its history to European scholars.

It could be beneficial to go back to what was written by John Batiste Shabou:” *The Eastern Biblioteque* for its writer Assemani, appeared in Rome at the same time when Renaudot passed

away. In this way the manuscripts of the Vatican Library proved that it is the real Syriac literature. This is how the Maronite Pontiff veiled the glory of the French scholar.”

Assemani did not come to Lebanon after a long absence as a tourist, but to search and investigate. There was a need to go back to the roots, to search for the origins: the linguistics, the historical and the theological. He made it all accessible to the scholars in a scientific language, Latin, which was understood in all Europe.

Bishop Nasser Gemayel,

“Ta’athur Yūsuf Sham’ūn Assemani bi at tayyārāt al Fikriyyah al Gharbiyyah Tamhīdan li an Nahdah” in *Youssef Sham’ūn Assemani, Min al Falsafah Ila al Lahūt fa an Nahdah, Lubnān*, Notre Dame University Press, 1st edition, 2003, pp. 144-145.

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Western culture was not for him Westernization and isolation, dissociation and Latinization. A cultured individual is not afraid and will not bend, He is courageous, descent, lover of knowledge, truth, freedom and innovation. He is the open person who enriches and is enriched in a loving interchange.

Living peacefully and calmly in Rome, Assemani was dedicated to the life of thought. He always wished that the East regain its radiation, beauty and its human, intellectual and spiritual splendor, that its lights remain shining and glittering and to be moving forward towards innovation, advancement and salvation.

His aspiration towards the East was at the beginning the propagation and translation of Eastern culture which was handwritten and not known. But his concern and longing was to reform the set up for the development of man and to bring back prosperity to this magical East.

Assemani remained in his plans of reform faithful to his Maronite affiliation, and dedicated to development and improvement. He was against Latinization and against the nullification of the

other or belittling the original Antiochian Maronite heritage. He protected culture and responded to the political, economic, sociological and ecclesiastical changes and developments. He was the pioneer of reform who worked for the development of the Maronite church and other Eastern churches in Lebanon and the Arab world. He is also considered one of the pioneers of the Arab Awakening.

Father Dr. Antoine Daw,

“Assemani Rāid at Tafā^cul athaqāfī”, in Yūsuf Sham[‘]ūn Assemani, , *Kitāb Al-Ilāhiyyāt, min al falsafa ila al Lahūt fa an Nahdah*, Lebanon, Notre Dame University Press, 1st edition, 2003, pp 150-151.

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This is a sound proof of a stand that as Assemani took concerning the philosophical heritage at that time, that intellectual reasoning is not less important than knowledge through the senses. After the affirmation of Thomas Aquinas following the steps of his teacher the philosopher – meaning Aristotle - that no fact reaches the mind without passing through the senses, and after the coming of Descartes to prove the contrary, Assemani, when 20 years old and before the two of them, noticed their differences. It is to be noted here that Assemani distinguishes between the scholars and the ordinary people. After affirming that the existence of God without an agent is known for the scholars and the knowledgeable, he adds that the matter is not the same for the ordinary people.

Assemani goes on to stress on the differences between the first proposition, reason, and the second, the senses in affirming God’s existence. The first is addressed to the scholars, and the second to those who did not accept the Holy Books.

Concerning the scholars, Assemani considers that they are aware of the existence of God and cannot deny it. Assemani comments here on a passage in the Psalms (Psalm 52) and it is “the fool says in his heart, there is no God”. Assemani comments, “He did not say in his reason for

reason acknowledges the existence of God in a general way... especially the mind of a scholar...”

“He moved forward dealing with the subject as a competent scholar similar to Descartes in his book “Meditations” in spite of the fact that he did not open new horizons as Descartes”.

Dr. Doumit Salāmeḥ,

“Assemani wal Falsafah al Klāsikiyyah Ḥawl Wujūd Allah”, In *Yūsuf Sham‘ūn Assemani, Kitāb Al-Ilāhiyyāt, min al Falsafah ila al-Lahūt fan Nahḍat*, Lebanon, Notre Dame University Press, 1st edition, 2003, pp.150-160.

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The second day, after the mass, the Patriarch and the rest of the bishops, the general superiors, superiors of the convents, the priests, the sheikhs and the rest of the people met in the church. Assemani, with a pontiff garment stood at the step of the altar. They all were unveiled. Priest Ward, student of the Roman school, read the confirmation of the Roman Pontiff in Latin while Bishop Sim‘ān ‘Awwād read it in Arabic. Assemani representing the Roman Pontiff bestowed on them the blessing.

Assemani headed to the monastery Quzḥayya and then to monastery of Mār Tadros affiliated with the monastery of Mar Elisha, the cedars of Lebanon and then to Bsharrī. He was welcomed by its inhabitants and with them was the Hamādah Sheikhs, Sheikh Hussein Ibn ‘Īssa and Sheikh Manaser Bin Mūsā. They slept that night in the monastery of Mār Sarkīs in Bsharrī at Badiriyyah the Carmelite.

The second day they went to Haṣrūn. Before their arrival its people welcomed them with the usual celebration and with them was Sheikh Mūsā son of ‘Īsā Ḥamādah who kissed Assemani’s hands showing him great respect and veneration as a king. He offered him a valuable horse.

The Hamādah, corresponding with each other at that time and mentioning Assemani said Monseigneur the Apostolic representative from the Supreme State.

He then moved to Dayr al Qamar to salute Emīr Milḥim son of Emīr Haydar ash-Shahabī ruler of the country. He was welcomed by the inhabitants of the convent who led him with a great reception worthy of his status to their town and there he stayed in the house of al Sheikh al Fāḍel. He then entered the Serail of Emīr Milḥim where he was received honorably and dearly. He later offered the Emīr and his brothers Emīr Aḥmad and Emīr Maṣṣūr the presents that he had brought with him.

He later met privately with Emīr Milḥim and negotiated with him about his work and went to his house. Emīr Milḥim called subdeacon Buṭrus Fahd al ‘Ashqūfī and sent him to Assemani’s house to accomplish for his responsibilities. Then Assemani bid farewell to Emīr Milḥim who offered him a valuable horse with its whole equipment in addition to a quantity of silver.

Fr. Agnātius Saādeh,

From *Khumāsyāt al-Ab Ibrahīm Harfūsh*, Jūnih, Ar-Rusul Publications, 2010. Pp 73-75.

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Europeans were complicit in the act of creating an archive of Eastern Christianity, which even today shapes how historians study the history of the Middle East. Already in the 1720s, these documents were of such importance that the Vatican scholar Joseph Assemani, himself a Maronite from Mount Lebanon, endeavored to complete a detailed catalogue and description of them in his *Bibliotheca Orientalis*.

The sheer size of Assemani’s work, which was published in Rome in nine massive folio volumes, indicates the breadth and diversity of the Vatican’s collection as early as the eighteenth century. Even today, the collection contains copies of medieval and early modern documents that have not survived anywhere else.

John-Paul Ghobrial,

“The Archive of Orientalism and its Keepers: Re-Imagining the Histories of Arabic Manuscripts in Early Modern Europe”, *Past & Present*, Volume 230, Issue suppl_11, 1 November 2016, pp. 90–111.

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