

## MUHAMMAD ASAD'S CONTRIBUTION TO ISLAMIC LEARNING

### Scholar

Abroo Aman Andrabi

### Supervisor

Department of Islamic  
Studies  
Jamia Millia Islamia

Muslim converts of European and American origin have played and are playing an important role in the development of Islamic studies. I present here the case of a European of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one Mohammad Asad, who took it upon himself to study the Arabic language in which he became fully proficient. One day he picked up a copy of the Qur'an and was impressed with the beauty of its diction and the spiritual depth of its ideas. He continued to read the Qur'an and, gradually, the immortal truth of this Divine Book unfolded itself before him. Finally, convinced that he had found the truth, he embraced Islam.

To discuss the role of Muhammad Asad in Islamic learning, it is necessary to answer basic questions about his origin, his reasons for leaving his religion and why he converted specifically to Islam.

Muhammad Asad was one of the great intellectuals of his time and a great scholar of Islam. A Jew by birth, his name was Leopold Weiss. He was born in the Austrian city of Lwow in eastern Galicia (now in Ukraine) in July (1318 A.H) 1900 A.D.

The story of how Asad walked out of Berlin, away from the west and into a new spiritual life is best told in his own words.

"After all, it was a matter of love; and love is composed of many things; of our desires and our loneliness, of our high aims and our shortcomings; of our strength and weakness. So it was in my case, Islam came over me like a robber who enters a house by night; but unlike a robber, it entered to remain for good."

He found in Islam a social order and an outlook on life fundamentally different from that of the European mode of living. This sympathy gradually led him to an investigation of the reasons for such a difference, and he became interested in the religious teachings of the Muslims. He became a Muslim and it was not any particular teaching that attracted him, but the entire wonderful, inexplicably coherent structure of moral teaching and a practical life programme.

Leopold Weiss now had access to the Qur'an in the original Arabic. He also read other Islamic literature, which strengthened his belief that the way of Islam should not be taken for granted. So he started making a systematic study of Islam, especially the Qur'an, and this marks the beginning of his journey to Islam.

The more he studied the Qur'an, the more he was deeply impressed. He now looked upon Europe and his environment differently, as he saw Islamic culture to be more deep-rooted in the human values of love, sympathy, well wishing, the desire for equality, etc. This was the voice of his own nature.

He was greatly impressed by the simplicity of Muslims and their organized way of life. When in Afghanistan, he discussed Islam, the teachings of the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace and blessings be upon him) with the Governor. He says that the Governor finally told him:

"You have already become a Muslim without noticing it. Only a true Muslim would defend Islam as earnestly as you are doing now."

These words made such a lasting impression on his mind that he took the momentous decision to embrace Islam. At the end of September 1926, he went to the Berlin mosque and told the head of the small Muslim community of his intentions. Then he declared the creed of Islam.

One great virtue of Muhammad Asad was that he not only read, but also did his best to understand the deeper meanings of the Qur'an and other source books of Islam. He also wanted to observe Islam in practice. So just after his conversion to Islam, he traveled to the Middle East and spent six years in Arabia at Hijaz where the Prophet Muhammad (Peace and blessings be upon him) had lived. There he sought first hand information about the founder of Islam and the circumstances of his prophethood. Although belonging to a rich and prosperous European culture, Muhammad Asad led a simple life and underwent great hardship, travelling in the deserts of Arabia just for the sake of his faith and his emotional attachment to this great religion. His attachment to the Prophet Muhammad (Peace and blessings be upon him) was very strong and he lived in the neighbourhood of Madina, simply to understand the place where the Prophet Muhammad (Peace and blessings be upon him) had lived 1400 years ago.

The writings of Muhammad Asad on Islam and the Muslims span almost a century, from the 1920's to the 1980's. These writings include: *Unromantisches Morgenland (The Unromantic Orient)*, Frankfurter Zeitung, Palestine, 1924; *Islam At the Cross Roads*, New York, 1934; *The Road To Mecca*, New York, 1954; *The Principles of State and Government In Islam*, California Press, 1961; *Sahih al-Bukhari: The Early Years of Islam*,

Arafat Publication, Srinagar, Kashmir, 1935; *Translation of the Qur'an into the English language with explanatory notes*, *The Message of the Qur'an*, Dublin, 1980, and *This Law of Ours*, Dacca, 1980. He also brought out a journal, *Arafat*.

Muhammad Asad has made an enormous contribution to Islamic thought and falls into the group of scholars who substantiate the concept of the state in Islam. He wrote a treatise exclusively devoted to the subject of the state in Islam – *The Principles of State and Government in Islam*, which was published by the University of California Press, Los-Angeles in 1961. This work, written from the modern perspective, is a rational critique of basic western philosophy. In his raising of such issues as 'Why an Islamic State, Religion and Morality?', 'The Scope of Islamic Law', and 'Misapplications of Western Terms', etc., he aims to remove any misconceptions about the Islamic state. The other dimension of his approach is to deal with the issue of the principles of state. Here he breaks new ground by exploring the various political forms of the state and the wisdom behind the unwritten nature of the Islamic Constitution. In addressing the crucial demand of the Muslim world to formulate the guiding principles of statecraft in Islam, he throws light on the scope of Islamic law, and on the nature of the council and the assembly in the state.

Muhammad Asad depicts his Islamic state as a welfare state whose inspiring principles originated more than thirteen hundred years ago. The period of Hazrat Umar (May God be Pleased with him) presages the modern welfare state by many centuries. Muhammad Asad believed that the presidential form of government was best suited to an Islamic state, as it corresponded to the Islamic concept of a caliphate. A strong head of state, possessing the necessary qualifications to lead the community, should be entrusted with the task. His ministers should hold office at his pleasure.

In almost all Muslim states, even those not governed by Islamic law, the constitution requires that the leader be a Muslim. He says; "It is obvious that only a person who believes in the Divine origin of that Law, in a word, a Muslim – may be entrusted with the office of head of the state. Just as there can be no fully Islamic life without an Islamic state, no state can be termed truly Islamic unless it is administered by people who can be supposed to submit willingly to the Divine Law of Islam."

A state is constituted by four elements: territory, population, organization and sovereignty. Islam differs on the element of sovereignty. No state is independent if it lacks sovereign power or the power to make laws for its people. In an Islamic state, sovereignty belongs to God. It should not, however, be taken that all the laws are made by God or that all possible laws are set forth in the Qur'an. Nevertheless, Qur'anic principles should be fundamental to the laws made in an Islamic state by its people. Thus people enjoy only a restricted right of making laws: they cannot go against Qur'anic principles. The law-makers are only executors of law and are at par with the ordinary citizens. The Qur'an is the original source that lays down principles and ordinances. It is a divine book and the laws given therein are superior to man-made

laws. It is regarded as the foundation upon which the superstructure of Islam rests.

The contribution to Islamic research made by Muhammad Asad is quite extraordinary. The dedication in his annotated translation of the Qur'an reads:

*(Liquamin Yatafakarun)*

"For the people who think"

The spirit of the translation is resolutely modernist.

No translation can perhaps ever be satisfactory, nor is an authorized or standard version possible. However, Muhammad Asad's translation has some unique qualities. He spent more than 20 years of his life in contemplating the meaning of the Qur'an in English and the commentary in the tradition of the great commentators whose scholarship has enriched Islamic studies over the centuries.

Muhammad Asad not only rendered the Qur'an into English, he also wrote a commentary on it. He was eminently qualified for his task. He spent his whole life studying the Qur'an, the *Hadith* and other allied Islamic disciplines. He had lived in Arabia, leading a Bedouin life-style, which made him uniquely capable of understanding the Qur'an. Through daily contact with the people, he had gained greater familiarity with Arabic than any other western translator of the Qur'an.

Muhammad Asad had a special system of translating the Qur'an into English, which made Islam easier to understand for many Europeans and Americans in the Islamic world.

The first verse of the Qur'an is:

*"Bismillah-irahmani-rahim."* (1:1)

It was perhaps the first time that an English translator presented the translation of this verse as, "In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Dispenser of Grace." This appears to be very close to the words '*Rehman* and *Rahim*', while the other English translators of the Qur'an translate the same verse as:

"In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful." (M. M. Pickthall)

"In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful." (Abdullah Yusuf Ali)

"In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful." (Ab. Majid Daryabadi)

Similarly, Muhammad Asad translated certain verses of the Qur'an into English in a manner different from other translations of the Qur'an.

He translates the verse "*inna llazzina kafaru .....*" (2:6) as:

"Those who are bent on denying the truth....."

While the other English translators of the Qur'an translate this verse as:

"As for the unbelievers....." (Al-Tabari, Marmaduke Pickthall)

"As to those who reject faith....." (Abdullah Yusuf Ali)

"Surely those who have disbelieved....." (Ab. Majid Daryabadi)

This concept appears in Qur'anic revelation at other places: "...men who have hearts with which they fail to grasp the truth, and eyes with which they fail to see, and ears with which they fail to hear...." (7:179)

Many misconceptions about the Qur'an which have been attributed to the verse "*wa-idh qala Mush..... Fa'-qtulu anfusakum.....*" (2:53) are automatically explained when we consider that English translators of the Qur'an have translated "*Fa'-qtulu anfusakum*" as:

"Slay one another" (Al-Tabari, Ab. Majid Daryabadi)

"Kill (the guilty) yourselves." (Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall)

"Slay yourselves" (Abdullah Yusuf Ali)

But Muhammad Asad translates this as "Mortify yourselves."

This translation is valuable for Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and also for pioneers in the Islamic culture who speak English but have no knowledge of Arabic.

The main aims of Muhammad Asad's translation was to penetrate the veil that over the years has enveloped the meanings of some Arabic words due to semantic change and to reveal them in their original connotations at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an. He documented these semantic changes by careful reference to the work of classical lexicographers and philologists and earlier commentators and thus brought a rare freshness and accuracy to his rendering.

Muhammad Asad's disillusionment with the attitude of Muslims towards Islam is evident from the latter part of his work. Muslims did not come up to his expectations. In his book *Islam at the Cross Roads*, he writes that Muslims have left the way of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace and blessings be upon him) and have started adopting the European culture, regarding Islam as "out-dated" (p.135) and out of form. This hurt Muhammad Asad.

Muhammad Asad wanted to see the living body of Islam flourish in the modern world. Although distressed by the sad state of the Muslim world and its reactive agenda, he remained optimistic to the end that a new generation of Muslims would eventually arise to make his dream a reality. According to him, this would be the foundation of an Islamic state on the basis of Qur'anic injunctions and the Prophet's sayings. He had argued for a rational Islam; he had sought to reconcile Islamic teachings and democracy, he had tried to make the Qur'an speak to modern minds.

He continued to serve Islam till his death in Spain on February 23, 1992 at the age of 92. He was buried in Granada, Andalusia. But death will not be the final chapter in Muhammad Asad's close relationship with the Muslims. His luminous works remain a living testimony to his great and enduring love affair with Islam.