

## Islam at the Crossroads: The Perceptions of Muhammad Asad

- Sumaiya Ahmed

### Abstract

*Seldom has mankind been intellectually as restless as it is in our time. Not only are we faced with a multitude of problems requiring new and unprecedented solutions, but also the angle of vision in which these problems appear before us is different from anything to which we have been accustomed so far. In all countries society passes through fundamental changes. The pace at which this happens is everywhere different; but everywhere we can observe the same pressing energy which allows of no halt or hesitation. The world of Islam is no exception in this respect. Here also we see old customs and ideas gradually disappear and new forms emerge. Where does this development lead? How deep does it reach? How far does it fit into the cultural mission of Islam? Muhammad Asad answers all these questions through his book 'Islam at the Crossroad.'*

*This short book, written in 1935, is essentially an appeal to the Muslims of the 20th century to return to their own tradition and not abandon it in favour of a materially-ascendant Western civilization. At the time of its writing, the Muslim world was in the midst of what seemed to be a thoroughgoing secularization. With the subsequent rise of global Islamic movements and even full-blown theocracies, it's clear now in hindsight that Muslims didn't totally abandon Islam over the past century as Muhammad Asad feared that they might. But the type of Islam that has taken prominence over this time is also not quite the same one that lit such a spark in Muhammad Asad's heart during his lifetime.*

*The present study is an attempt to analyse Islam which is indeed at a crossroads, choosing between moderate and radical interpretations in the Perceptions of Muhammad Asad. And while Muslims work through their current crisis, the author encourages the West to "recognize and support the voices of moderate Islam."*

### Introduction:

*In the foregoing, I have tried to show that Islam, in its true meaning, cannot benefit from the assimilation of Western civilization. But presently the Muslim world is lacking in energy to offer sufficient resistance. The remnants of its cultural existence are being leveled to the ground under the pressure of Western ideas and customs. A note of submission is felt; and submission, in the life of nations and cultures, means death<sup>1</sup>." - Muhammad Asad*

Muhammad Asad began to see Islam as a *perfect* piece of architecture that embraced the entire gamut of human activity. Islam introduced a new chapter in the development of man. It was a civilization in which there was no place for nationalism, vested interests, no class divisions, no church, no priesthood, and no hereditary nobility; in fact, no hereditary functions at all.<sup>2</sup>

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**Sumaiya Ahmed**, Ph.D, is Assistant Professor & Head, Department of Islamic Studies, Aliah University, Kolkata.

**Email ID:** sumi.ahmad21@gmail.com

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Muhammad Asad found that Muslims had gradually ceased to follow the teaching of Islam in its weakness: Islamic society had been built from the very outset, on religious foundations alone, and the weakening of the foundations had necessarily weakened the cultural structure. Muslim renaissance remained Muhammad Asad's goal in life. His Book *Islam at the Crossroad* (1934) still stuns the contemporary reader with its analysis of Muslim regression and its bold prescription for instilling self-assurance into an Islamic world suffering from lack of confidence under the onslaught of western technology. On the contrary, the insecurity of the west is born of spiritual despair, its might and majesty being a defensive façade. The west is so protective of itself that it would readily kill and destroy the whole world for its security and dominance.<sup>3</sup>

### **Muhammad Asad**

Muhammad Asad born Leopold Weiss in the Polish city Lvov in 1900, was the grandson of an Orthodox Rabbi, and the Son of a lawyer. He became a master of Hebrew and Aramaic at the age of thirteen. He rejected his father's plan and desire of him becoming a rabbi. By his early twenties, he could write and read German, French and Polish languages. He took to journalism and achieved quickly wide notice as an outstanding near eastern correspondent to the leading newspaper of the continent, more especially as a correspondent of *Frankfurter Zeitung* of Germany. His interest to study Muslim religion grew on his visits to Arab and North African Counties. Traditions and the Arabic language. He also travelled to Iran, Afghanistan, and other countries and learned Persian. From there he went to Berlin through Moscow and Poland, in 1926. Here he took Muslim religion and gave himself the new name Muhammad Asad. After his conversion, he again traveled and worked throughout the Muslim world and stayed in Saudi Arabia for more than five years. Then he came to India in 1932 and settled in Lahore (now in Pakistan). At Lahore he wrote the book namely "*Islam at the crossroads*"<sup>4</sup>.

### **Islam at the Crossroads**

#### ***Background:***

At the time this book was written, colonial powers had subdued the Islamic world politically, economically, and more so intellectually, and morally. Missionaries had their reins lost while busy proselytizing (converting people to their religion) where once they would not have dared set foot. The lands where once children would quote Plato were reduced to a state wherein now only the privileged afforded the luxury of education. Moreover, the instructions imparted, for example in British India, delineated the merits of a cold climate for higher thought or geographical location for progress. Here political systems were deceived with and economic systems were broken under false narrations. In defense of the Muslim faith arose two reactions as evident in British India- Aligarh and Deoband. One was to follow the path of the Master's glory through reinterpretations of Muslim intellectual legacies and the other was a boycott of every idea foreign to shield the Islamic faith. Muhammad Asad's approach lies in

between Aligarh and Deoband: it is neither about conforming to nor avoiding the western intellectual framework<sup>5</sup>.

### **Outline of *Islam at the Crossroads*:**

The book was written in autumn of 1933. It was first published in Delhi in 1934, and subsequently in Lahore. In this book he makes an emotional request to Muslims of his generation to avoid blindly following western culture, social form and values and try to uphold and preserve Islamic Heritage <sup>6</sup>

The book is divided into six chapters.:

- i. *The open Road of Islam*
- ii. *The Spirit of the West*
- iii. *The Shadow of the Crusades*
- iv. *About Education*
- v. *About Imitation*
- vi. *Hadith and Sunnah*

### ***I: The open Road of Islam:***

Islam is unique in its own and in a way that it not only reflects a spiritual attitude of mind which is adjustable to different cultural settings but also a combination of culture and a social system of clearly defined features. When, as is the case today, a foreign civilization extends its radiations into our midst and causes certain changes in our own cultural organism, we are bound to make it clear to ourselves whether that foreign influence runs in the direction of our own cultural possibilities or against them; whether it acts as an invigorating serum in the body of Islamic culture, or as a poison<sup>7</sup>. Muhammad Asad stated that:

*We have to find out the motive forces of both civilizations - the Islamic and that of the modern West - and then to explore how far a cooperation is possible between them. And as the Islamic civilization is essentially a religious one first of all we have to define the general impact of religion in human life<sup>8</sup>*

Muhammad Asad words:

*I believe, is the reason for the peculiar form of the Islamic prayer, in which spiritual concentration and certain bodily movements are coordinated with each other. Inimical critics of Islam often select this way of praying as a proof of their allegation that Islam is a religion of formalism and outwardness. And, in fact, people of other religions, who are accustomed neatly to separate the "spiritual" from the "bodily" almost in the same way as the dairyman separates the cream from the milk, cannot easily understand that in the unskimmed milk of Islam both these ingredients, though distinct in their respective constitutions, harmoniously live and express themselves together<sup>9</sup>.*

Islam makes it possible for a man to enjoy the full range of his earthly life without necessarily losing his spiritual orientation. This makes it so different from the Christian conception! According to the Christian belief, mankind staggers under a hereditary sin which was committed by Adam and Eve, and consequently, the whole of human life is looked upon as a dark valley of sorrows. It is considered as a battlefield of two opposing forces: the Evil, represented by Satan, and the Good, represented by Jesus Christ. Through the use of a bodily temptations, Satan tries to prevent the progress of the human soul towards the of attainment eternal light; and whereas the soul belongs to Christ, the body is the playground of satanic influences. One could express it differently: the world of Matter is essentially satanic, whereas the world of the Spirit is divine and good. Everything in human nature that is material, or "carnal", as Christian theology prefers to call it, is a direct result of Adam's succumbing to the advice of the hellish Prince of Darkness and Matter. Therefore, to attainsalvation, man must turn his heart away from this world of the flesh towards the future, spiritual world, where the "original sin" is won back by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross<sup>10</sup>.

At the end of this chapter Muhammad Asad well thought out:

*Every individual Muslim has to hold himself responsible for all happenings around him and he has to strive for the establishment of Right and the abolition of Wrong at every time in every direction<sup>11</sup>.*

A sanction for this attitude is to be found in the Qur'anic verse:

كُنْتُمْ خَيْرَ أُمَّةٍ أُخْرِجَتْ لِلنَّاسِ تَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَتَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَتُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَلَوْ آمَنَ أَهْلُ الْكِتَابِ لَكَانَ خَيْرًا  
لَهُمْ مِنْهُمْ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَأَكْثَرُهُمُ الْفَاسِقُونَ

"You are indeed the best community that has ever been brought forth for the virtue of mankind: you enjoin the doing of what is right and prevent the wrong doings" (Al Quran 3:110)

This is the moral justification of the aggressive activism of Islam, a justification of the early Islamic conquests and its so-called "expansionism". The world of Islam was sometimes expansionist if one insists on using this term, but this kind of activism was not prompted by a love of domination; it had nothing to do with the greed to increase Muslim comforts at other people's cost; nor has it ever meant the coercion of non-believers into the fold of Islam. It has only meant, as it means today, the construction of a worldly framework for the best possible spiritual development of man.<sup>12</sup>

## ***II: The Spirit of the West:***

Islam has never taken for granted, as does the West, that human nature - in its general, supra-individual sense - is undergoing a process of progressive change and improvement resembling the growth of a tree: simply because Islam rests on the premise that the basis of that nature, the human soul, is not a biological quantity. The fundamental mistake of modern Western thought to regard an increase in material knowledge and comfort as identical to a moral improvement in mankind stem from the equally fundamental mistake of applying biological rules to non-biological facts<sup>13</sup>.

The mention of Roman civilization as being responsible for the materialism of the modern West may sound unusual to those who have heard the frequent comparison of the Roman Empire with the old Islamic Empire. How, then, could there be such a pronounced difference between the fundamental conceptions of Islam and the modern West if in the past the political expressions of both were akin to one another? The simple answer is: that they were not akin. That popular, so often quoted comparison is one of the many historical platitudes with which superficial half-knowledge feeds the minds of the present Western generation. There is nothing in similar between the Islamic and the Roman Empires except the fact that both extended over vast territories and heterogeneous peoples-for, during the whole of their existence these two empires were impelled by utterly different motive forces and had, so to speak, different historical purposes to fulfil. Even on the morphological side, we observe a vast difference between the Islamic and the Roman Empires. It took the Roman Empire nearly one thousand years to grow to its full geographic extent and political maturity, whereas the Islamic Empire sprang up and grew to its fullness within a short period of about eighty years.<sup>14</sup>

Muhammad Asad writes:

*the Islamic Empire had its stretch over three continents and was all the time surrounded by hostile powers of considerable strength and exuberance. Since the dawn of history, the so-called Near and Middle East was the volcanic centre of conflicting racial and cultural energies; but the resistance of the Islamic social organization was, until recently at least, invincible. There is no need to search far for an explanation of this wonderful spectacle: it was the religious teaching of the Qur'an that gave a solid foundation and the life-example of the Prophet Muhammad that consolidated it even more. that grand social structure. The Roman Empire had no such spiritual element to bind it together, and therefore it collapsed so rapidly.*<sup>15</sup>

### ***III: The Shadow of the Crusades***

With the approach of Islamic civilization, a new intellectual light dawned on the skies of the West and infused it with fresh life and a thirst for progress. It is no more than just appreciation of its value that European historians term that period of regeneration the Renaissance - that is, "re-birth". Aptly, a re-birth of Europe as such<sup>16</sup>.

Muhammad Asad argues that:

*The first great clash. between a united Europe, on the .one side, and Islam, on the other, namely, the Crusades, coincided with the very beginning of European civilization. At that time this civilization, still in alliance with the Church, had just begun to see its own way after the dark centuries which had followed the decay of Rome... And it was exactly at that extremely critical period that the Crusades brought it into hostile contact with the world of Islam*<sup>17</sup>

At the end of this chapter, Muhammad Asad stated that:

*Western influences are today more potent than ever in the Muslim world; we are sleeping, while those influences undermine and destroy Islamic society everywhere. To desire the expansion of Islam is one thing; and to build false hopes on this desire is another.*<sup>18</sup>

#### **IV: About Education:**

In the previous chapters of this book, Muhammad Asad mention that Islam and Western civilization, being built on opposed conceptions of life, are not compatible in spirit. This being so, how could we expect that the education of Muslim youth being conducted on Western lines which as an education system based entirely on Western cultural experiences and values, could remain free from anti-Islamic influences?<sup>19</sup> *He answers to this question:*

*This, of certainly, does not suggest that Islam has preserved its integrity as a practical religion among the non-educated classes: but anyhow, we find a far greater sentimental response to the call of Islam-in the primitive way in which they understand it than among the more Westernized "intelligentsia". The explanation of this estrangement is not that the Western science with which they have been fed has furnished any reasonable argument against the truth of our religious teachings, but that the intellectual atmosphere of modern Western society is so intensely anti-religious that it imposes itself like a dead weight upon the religious potentialities of the young Muslim generation*<sup>20</sup>

If, in the past, Muslims had neglected the scientific research then they cannot hope to repair that mistake today even by whole hearted acceptance of all Western learning. The effects of our scientific backwardness and poverty stand no comparison whatever with the deadly effect that a blind following of the Western educational structure must necessarily have on the spiritual potentialities of the Muslim world. By blindly following the manners and life style of the West, the Muslims are being gradually dragged towards the Western moral outlook: for the imitation of outward appearance leads, by degrees, to corresponding assimilation of the world-view responsible for that appearance<sup>21</sup>.

#### **V: About Imitation**

The author has mentioned that Muslim ignorance of the true teachings of Islam - very largely due to the narrow minded attitude of the so-called 'Ulama' class - arose the idea that Muslims might not be able to keep pace with the progress of the rest of the world unless they adopted the social and economic rules of the West. The Muslim world was inactive and static and many Muslims came to the very vague conclusion that the Islamic system of society and economics does not boost the requirements of progress, and should, therefore, be modified on Western lines<sup>22</sup>.

Muhammad Asad's words:

*the Muslims, before adopting any measures of reform must set themselves, free themselves entirely from the spirit of apology for their religion and social structure. A Muslim must live*

*with his head held high. He must realize that he is distinct and different from the rest of the world, and he must learn to be proud of his being different. He should initiatives to preserve this difference as a precious quality, and call out it boldly to the world instead of being apologetic for it and trying to merge into other cultural circles.*<sup>23</sup>

#### **VI: Hadith and Sunnah:**

The term Sunnah is used here in its widest meaning, namely, the example that the Prophet has set before us in his attitudes, actions, and sayings. His wonderful life was a living illustration and explanation of the Qur'an, and we can do no greater justice to the Holy Book than by following him who was the means of its revelation<sup>24</sup>.

The Quran says:

فَلَا وَرَبِّكَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ حَتَّىٰ يُحَكِّمُوكَ فِيمَا شَجَرَ بَيْنَهُمْ ثُمَّ لَا يَجِدُوا فِي أَنفُسِهِمْ حَزَجًا مِّمَّا قُضِيَتْ وَبِئْسَ مَا تَسْلِيْمًا

*But no, by your Lord, they will not [truly] believe until they make you, [O Muhammad], judge concerning that over which they dispute among themselves and then find within themselves no discomfort from what you have judged and submit in [full, willing] submission.*

**(Al-Quran,4:65)**

قُلْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُحِبُّونَ اللَّهَ فَاتَّبِعُونِي يُحْبِبْكُمُ اللَّهُ وَيَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ ذُنُوبَكُمْ وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ

*(O Messenger!) Tell people: 'If you indeed love Allah, follow me, and Allah will love you and will forgive you your sins. Allah is All-Forgiving, All-Compassionate.*

**(Al-Quran,3:31)**

قُلْ أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَالرَّسُولَ فَإِن تَوَلَّوْا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْكَافِرِينَ

*Say: 'Obey Allah and obey the Messenger.' If they turn away from this then know that Allah does not love those who refuse to obey Him and His Messenger.*

**(Al-Quran,3:32)**

The Sunnah of the Prophet is, therefore, next to the Qur'an, and is regarded as the second source of Islamic Law. It must regard the Sunnah as the only binding explanation of the Qur'anic teachings, the only means of avoiding permanent dissensions concerning their interpretation and adaptation to practical use. Many verses of the Qur'an have an allegorical meaning and can be understood in different ways<sup>25</sup>.

Despite of all the efforts to challenge the authenticity of hadith as a body, those modern critics comprising both Eastern and Western, have failed to support their purely subjective criticism with results of scientific research. It would be rather difficult to do so, Since the compilers of the early hadith collections, and particularly Bukhari and Muslim, have done whatever was humanly possible to test the authenticity of every Tradition in a way even more rigorous test than Western historians usually apply to any historical document<sup>26</sup>.

Of late, when the impact of western civilization makes itself more and more felt in Muslim countries, still another motive is added to the negative attitude of the so-called "Muslim intelligentsia" in this matter. It is rather impossible to live in accordance to the Sunnah of our Prophet and to follow the Western style of life at the same time. But many among the present generation of Muslims are ready to adore everything Western, to worship the foreign civilization simply because it is foreign, powerful, and materially imposing. This "westernization" is the strongest reason which has led the Traditions of our Prophet and, along with them, the whole structure of the Sunnah to have become so unpopular today<sup>27</sup>.

According to Muhammad Asad,

Nothing else matters. Of course, there are commands of the Prophet which are very important and others that are less important, and we have to give the more important priority over the others. But never have we got the right to disregard anyone of them just because of the fact they appear to us "unessential" - for it is said in the Qur'an of the Prophet

وَمَا يَنْطِقُ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ

*He does not speak out of his own desire*

**(Al-Quran,53:3)**

That is, he speaks only when an objective necessity arises; and he does it because God has inspired him to do so. And for this reason, we are obliged to follow the Prophet's Sunnah in spirit and in form, if we wish to be true to Islam. We do not regard its ideology as one way among others, but as the way; and the man who conveyed this ideology to us is not just one guide among others, but the guide. To follow all his commands is to follow Islam; to disrespect his Sunnah is to disrespect the reality of Islam<sup>28</sup>.

### **Conclusion:**

Finally, Muhammad Asad finds that the original intentions of Islam have been brought into a false perspective through inadequate but nevertheless. commonly-accepted interpretation, and those Muslims who are not in a position to go back, by themselves, to the sources and thus readjust their conceptions are confronted with a partially-distorted picture of Islam and things Islamic. The Muslims educated on western lines, mostly unacquainted with Arabic and not well-versed with the intricacies of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), are naturally prone to regard those worn-out, subjective interpretations and understanding as bringing out the true intentions of the Law-Giver: and .in his disappointment over their insufficiency he often draws back from what he supposes to be the Canonical Law (sharf'ah) of Islam. Thus, so that it may once again become a creative force in the life of the Muslims, the valuation of the Islamic proposition must be revised in the light of our understanding of the sources and freed from the thick layer of conventional interpretations which have accumulated over the centuries and have been found wanting in the present time.<sup>29</sup>



This book has no pretension of giving an exhaustive answer to all these questions. The book is a plea to Muslims to avoid blind imitation of Western social norms and values, and to try to preserve instead their Islamic heritage which once upon a time had been responsible for the glorious, many-sided historical phenomenon comprised in the term "Muslim civilization". Asad has dedicated the book to "the Muslim youth of today" in the hope that it may be of benefit to them<sup>30</sup>.

### References:

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- <sup>1</sup>Muhammad Asad, *Islam at the Crossroads*, (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1982) p. 98  
<sup>2</sup>*100 great Muslim leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century*, (New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 2005) p. 280  
<sup>3</sup>*Ibid*, p. 281  
<sup>4</sup>*Islam at the crossroads, Op.cit.* p. VII-VIII  
<sup>5</sup>Retrieved from <https://www.scribd.com/document/503717132/Islam-at-the-cross-roads-Proof-Read-1> (Accessed on 13<sup>th</sup> May, 2022)  
<sup>6</sup>*Islam at the crossroads, Op.cit.*, p. 7  
<sup>7</sup>*Ibid*, pp.14-15  
<sup>8</sup>*Ibid*, p. 15  
<sup>9</sup>*Ibid*, 18  
<sup>10</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 24-25  
<sup>11</sup>*Ibid*, p. 27  
<sup>12</sup>*Ibid*, p. 28  
<sup>13</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 30-31  
<sup>14</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 32-33  
<sup>15</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 34-35  
<sup>16</sup>*Ibid*, p. 40  
<sup>17</sup>*Ibid*, pp.51-52  
<sup>18</sup>*Ibid*, p. 62  
<sup>19</sup>*Ibid*, p. 63  
<sup>20</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 63-64  
<sup>21</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 73-74  
<sup>22</sup>*Ibid*, p. 75  
<sup>23</sup>*Ibid*, p. 79  
<sup>24</sup>*Ibid*, p. 83  
<sup>25</sup>*Ibid*, p. 85  
<sup>26</sup>*Ibid*, p. 86  
<sup>27</sup>*Ibid*, p. 96  
<sup>28</sup>*Ibid*, p. 97  
<sup>29</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 102-103  
<sup>30</sup>Retrieved from [https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Islam\\_at\\_the\\_Crossroads](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Islam_at_the_Crossroads) (Accessed on 25<sup>th</sup> May, 2022)