

Why the conversion? In 1934, Asad wrote that he had no satisfactory answer. He could not say which aspect of Islam appealed to him more than another, except that Islam seemed to him “harmoniously conceived... nothing is superfluous & nothing lacking, with the result of an absolute balance & solid composure.” But he still found it difficult to analyze his motives. “After all, it was a matter of love; & love is composed of many things: of our desires & loneliness, of our high aims & shortcomings, of our strength & 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.”

Crusader against misperception: Asad notes that westerners could not really comprehend his conversion to Islam because they took it for granted that Muslim culture was inferior to western civilization. History, to Europeans or Americans, was the account of the rise of Occidental civilization, and took in nonwestern cultures only as they affected the emergence of Europe & America as the leaders of the world. This distorted vision, he comments, began with the Greeks & Romans, who identified themselves as “civilized” & the rest of the world as “barbarian.” The western mind could contemplate Hinduism or Buddhism with interest & equanimity because they seem so alien, but Islam – because it had come from the same tradition as Judeo-Christian theology – was feared as a competitor. This antipathy was expressed in the Crusades, which in providing a common enemy for “Christendom” brought Europe together. According to Asad, the Crusades were the beginning of **“a poisoning of the Western mind against the Muslim world through a deliberate misrepresentation of the teachings & ideals of Islam.”**

Asad’s intention in writing an autobiography was not to chronicle his adventures in the exotic East for westerners, but to dispel some of these erroneous views. He realized that he was in the unique position of having fully known both cultural hemispheres: “I was a Muslim – but I was also of Western origin: and thus I could speak the intellectual languages of both Islam & the West.” He was careful to point out that it was not the Muslim peoples that made him convert to Islam, but rather his love of Islam that encouraged him to stay living in Muslim countries.

As time passed Asad began to see European culture from a different perspective, particularly in relation to its emotional insecurity & moral ambiguity. In contrast, he noticed the sense of brotherhood & unity of thought & action that Muslims seemed to enjoy. He realized that Europe too had once enjoyed this spiritual wholeness, expressed, for instance, in the music of Bach, the art of Rembrandt, & the Gothic cathedrals, but that this had given way to a materialism that had fragmented the continent’s collective psyche. The aim of “progress” had

come to represent European culture, **but this focus on material improvements had not led to greater happiness.**

Christianity had lost its force in western society & become a mere convention, politely observed. In Asad’s mind, Europeans no longer had the awareness that the universe was “an expression of one Planning Mind & thus formed one organic whole.” **Instead of faith**, the West had put **science & technology at the center of life**, with the result that legitimacy was only given to things that could be physically proven. There was no longer any room for God in its intellectual system. Asad was determined to stay in the Muslim world, and fortunately his appointment as a correspondent was extended, allowing him to travel all over the Mid-East. In the years to follow he wrote many penetrating analyses of the region’s people & issues.

Asad rejected Zionism as a racist aberration. After all, he knew first-hand that Palestine was not a “land without people.” Thus he recovered his own Abrahamic roots in Islam’s equalitarianism & universalism.

While staying with his uncle in Jerusalem, he came into contact with the Zionist Committee of Action & was repelled by its contempt toward the Arabs. “Although of Jewish origin myself,” wrote Asad, “I conceived from the outset a strong objection to Zionism...I considered it immoral that immigrants, assisted by a great foreign power, should come from abroad with the avowed intention of attaining a majority in Palestine & thus to dispossess the people whose country it had been...This attitude of mine was beyond the comprehension of practically all the Jews whom I came in contact with. They could not understand what I saw in the Arabs... They were not in the least interested in what the Arabs thought; almost none of them took the pains to learn Arabic; everyone accepted without question the dictum that Palestine was the rightful heritage of the Jews.”

It was here that Asad encountered Chaim Weizmann, the undisputed leader of the Zionist movement, and had a heated discussion with him regarding the Zionist philosophy. ““What about the Arabs?” Asad asked as Dr. Weizmann was one day articulating his vision of a Jewish National Home.

“What about the Arabs?” echoed Dr. Weizmann.

“Well, how can you ever hope to make Palestine your homeland in the face of the vehement opposition of the Arabs who, after all, are in the majority in this country?” The Zionist leader shrugged his shoulders and answered dryly: **“We expect they won’t be in a majority after a few years.”**

Asad was overcome with sorrow as he reflected on this experience. “How was it possible, I wondered, for people endowed with so much creative intelligence as the

Jews to think of the Zionist-Arab conflict in Jewish terms alone?...Were they so hopelessly blind to the painful future which their policy must bring to the struggles & the bitterness to which the Jewish island would forever remain exposed in the midst of a hostile Arab sea? And how strange, I thought, that a nation which had suffered so many wrongs in the course of its long & sorrowful Diaspora was now in single-minded pursuit of its own goal, ready to inflict a grievous wrong on another nation. Such a phenomenon, I knew, was not unknown to history, but it made me, nonetheless, very sad to see it enacted before my eyes.”

The Message of the Quran: Asad’s translation opened with this dedication: **“For people who think.”** The spirit of the translation is resolutely modernist, and Asad expressed his profound debt to the reformist commentator Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905). As another convert later wrote: “In its intellectual engagement with the text and in the intimate, subtle and profound understanding of the pure classical Arabic of the Quran, Asad’s interpretation is of a power & intelligence **without** rival in English.” There are many English-speaking Muslims who will attest to the appeal of this translation, and who rely upon it daily.

In his study of the Quran, Asad found that Islam gave “Yes to action, No to passivity. Yes to Life & No to asceticism.” In its pages, he found an intense God-consciousness that made **no division** between body & soul or faith & reason, but consisted of a harmonious interplay of spiritual need & social demand. “It was obvious to me that the decline of the Muslims was **not** due to any shortcomings in Islam **but rather** to their own failure to live up to it... **It was not Muslims that had made Islam great: it was Islam that had made the Muslims great.** But as soon as their faith became habit & ceased to be a program of life, to be consciously pursued, the creative impulse that underlay their civilization waned & gradually gave way to indolence, sterility & cultural decay.” Asad worked assiduously to elucidate the intellectual premises of an Islamic state. “I fell in love with Islam,” he said matter-of-factly shortly before his death in 1992, “but I **overestimated** the Muslims.”

With his death passed a journalist, traveler, social critic, linguist, thinker, reformer, diplomat, political theorist & translator, a scholar dedicated to the service of God & humankind & to leading a righteous life. “And there I stood before the temple of Abraham & gazed at the marvel without thinking (for thoughts & reflections came only much later), and out of some hidden, smiling kernel within me there slowly grew an elation like a song.” Worth repeating... “And yet it was from this desolate, lifeless land, from amidst these sandy valleys & naked hills that **the most life-affirming faith of man’s history sprang forth.**” In a spiritual desert? **Read this book!** Or even if you’re in an oasis of faith!

Must Become a **STANDARD** textbook in all Islamic schools

The Road to Mecca

The Journey of Muhammad Asad

This is the story of a convert to Islam who had crossed the **spiritual deserts** of Europe & the **sand deserts** of Arabia, on a trek that brought him ultimately to the **oasis** of Islamic belief. **“And yet it was from this desolate, lifeless land, from amidst these sandy valleys & naked hills, that the most life-affirming faith of man’s history sprang forth.”** As a child, Leopold Weiss received a thorough grounding in Hebrew religious lore. At his father’s insistence, he spent long hours poring over the sacred scriptures & by the age of thirteen he could read & speak Hebrew with great fluency. He studied the Old Testament, the Mishna & Gemara, in its original form & became knowledgeable with the text & commentaries of the Talmud. He then immersed himself in the intricacies of Biblical exegesis, called Targum, just as if he had been destined for a rabbinical career. **He was no ordinary convert.** Asad **not** only sought personal fulfillment in his adopted faith. He affected the course of contemporary Islam, as an author, activist, diplomat & translator of the Quran.

Keep his final words in mind...

“I fell in love with Islam,” he said matter-of-factly shortly before his death in 1992, “but I overestimated the Muslims.”

Now Muslim, ask yourself...**WHY?**

The Road to Mecca remains one of the great accounts of spiritual transformation.

In the book, which is much more than a travelogue or memoir, Asad recounts the story of his initial attraction to Islam & his eventual marriage to the faith. The beauty of his writing means that readers will come away from this book with a changed perception of the religion. It sits easily among the world's best travel & adventure writing, providing unforgettable descriptions of black, starry nights in the desert, oases, bustling bazaars, Mecca & Medina, the idiosyncrasies of pampered kings & the customs of the Bedouin. It provides unique insights into the history of the house of Saud, the politics of colonialism & Arab self-determination, as you would expect from a newspaper correspondent. But the book becomes a work of literature in its description of a man's slow realization that his heart belongs to a religion in which he was **not** brought up. If you have never really understood Islam & the faith that it inspires, this book will be a great teacher. **The beauty of Islam is apparent to anyone with an open & enquiring mind.** When Asad on a visit to the Old City of Jerusalem, in the 1920s, saw an old hajji leading a prayer at a mosque, he noted that the man appeared to be praying with his "whole soul." For a European & Christian it was disturbing to see prayer combined with mechanical body movements. This led him to put questions to the hajji who said: "How else then should we worship God? Did He **not** create both, soul & body together? And this being so, should man **not** pray with his body as well as his soul?"

Through his travels in the Middle East and his relationships with Muslims he began to understand and appreciate the religion of Islam. He learned that Islam is **not** merely a religion but a way of life with a programme of social & personal behavior based on the Muslims' consciousness of God, and that unlike Christianity there is no need for salvation since there is no original, inherited sin between the individual and his destiny. "For nothing will be attributed to man but what he himself has striven for," the Quran states.

Islam views Man's original nature as essentially good which is contrary to the Christian idea that Man is born sinful. Or the Hindu belief of incarnations through which Man attains perfection. The Quran: "Verily, We create man in a **perfect state.**"

While critics might see the Quran as being concerned with seemingly trivial & mundane aspects of life, Islam insists that Man is an integral unity of body & soul & that no aspect of life can be considered too trivial to

come under the purvey of religion. It is the presence of **urges, temptations & conflict, and the possibility of choice which makes a man into a moral being, a being endowed with a soul.** Islam regards the soul of Man as one aspect of his personality & not as an independent phenomenon. For the Muslim, his spiritual growth is inextricably bound up with every other aspect of his nature. Hence, the issue is not how Man **suppresses** his physical desires but, rather, how he **coordinates** them with the demands of his spiritual growth in such a way that his life becomes full & righteous.

Muhammad's message to Mankind does not postulate spirituality as something divorced from or opposed to physical life but rests entirely on the concept that spirit & flesh are different aspects of the same reality, that of human life. Given this, Man has to translate his moral attitudes & beliefs into definite social programmes to ensure the physical, material & spiritual well being of his community. The Prophet (p) stated that "Action is part of faith," for God is not only concerned with our beliefs but also with our doings. There is no dividing line in Islam between faith and social behavior and Man is taught to not only utilize his life to the full but that he is obliged to do so.

This kind of social scheme has the simplicity that goes together with real grandeur. While material prosperity in the world is desirable it is not an end in itself and Islamic teachings forward the idea that Man's appetites must be restrained & controlled by moral consciousness, a consciousness that relates not only to his relations to God but also to his relations with men.

For those who believe, Islam provides a sense of security that is lacking in the West where the chaotic state of ethics & morality might be the outcome of its loss of contact with the religious faith that shaped Western civilization. Perhaps it is because of its loss of faith that the West always underestimates the value of the unfamiliar and is tempted to do violence to it, to appropriate it, and to bring it on their own terms into their own intellectual environment. The conflict in the Middle East could be seen in this light and this might make the perceptions of Asad prescient for he set down these thoughts & observations about Islam & the Muslim world, and about how the West view them, in this inspiring book.

It was the words of that old hajji that caught his interest and started him on a path of discovery, and he wrote about his journey, both the physical & intellectual journey that led to him to embrace Islam. By the time Muhammad Asad took the Road to Mecca he had **surrendered himself to God** which according to the Quran is "**man's natural inclination.**" His submission included his awareness that as a Muslim, his life on earth was only one stage of his journey to a higher existence, and that his ultimate goal was

spiritual, and not material. He also knew that God did **not** want from him blind subservience but preferred an appeal to his intellect for God did **not** stand apart from Man's destiny but was "nearer to you than the vein in your neck."

Islamic teachings were different from everything Asad had experienced in the West where the emphasis was on the material aspects of life, and, in his book, he reflected on the Sunday Sabbath of the Christian faith which was an escape into the unreal, and was a temporary refuge from everyday work & routine. However, when he first entered a mosque & understood that for Muslims **prayer was not divorced from their daily work & life** but was part of it, and that **prayer was not meant to help them forget life but to remember it better** by remembering God, it was, for him, a life changing moment.

Asad had grown up in Europe and wrestled with questions about reality & existence since he was a youth. The journey that took him to the Kabbah "lay in a hidden desire to meet myself by meeting a world whose approach to the innermost questions of my life, to reality itself, was different from all I had been accustomed to in my childhood and my youth." In Islam, he found peace & the true meaning of his existence & when his journey ended & he walked around the Kabbah he found that "**all that had been small & bitter in my heart begin to leave my heart** And the minutes dissolved, and time stood still, and this was the centre of the universe..."

Asad wrote his book half a century ago, but there is plenty of evidence that the gap in understanding between the West & the Muslim world has grown wider, which makes perspectives like his all the more valuable. He was a spiritual purist, and regretted people's failure to live up to Islam's high ideals, but this criticism could easily be applied to Judaism & Christianity as well. Late in the book Asad introduces the reader to the Islamic mythological figure Dajjal, who was blind in one eye but possessed powers to see & hear to the far corners of the Earth. Asad saw this figure as representing the power of humanity to control the world through technology, **yet the semi-blindness symbolized a mind closed off to God.** Every culture has this weakness for worshipping material progress, he noticed, but it can never fill the place reserved in every one of us for a connection to the Divine.

As a scholar of Muslim history & culture, Asad notes that Islamic learning had led the world during the centuries after Muhammad's death, and the reason was simple: This new **religion was a profoundly rational one** that exhorted believers to marvel at & understand God's creation, unlike, as Asad notes, the "world-hating" theologies of Christian church fathers St. Paul and Augustine. The Prophet (p) said: "Striving after knowledge

is a most sacred duty for every Muslim man & woman." A natural connection was made between knowledge & worship, and science advanced with this inspiration.

Nevertheless, Asad was not blind to the intellectual & material decay in many Muslim societies, which had led them to become scientific & economic backwaters. According to Asad, when this deep faith & day-to-day accordance with Muhammad's teachings waned, so did the creative impulse & ingenuity that had made Islamic civilization great. In total opposition to the western view that adherence to Islam was responsible for the decline, he notes: "It was **not** the Muslims that had made Islam great: it was Islam that had made the Muslims great."

Asad adored Islam's pared-down love of the Absolute, & the simplicity & beauty of the Quran, **which did not require official interpreters of its wisdom.** In contrast to the individualism that western faiths seemed to inspire, he reveled in the sense of community that Islam bestowed on its believers. Because Islam had no notion of "original sin," everyone was assumed to be a person of God until proven otherwise; this outlook was expressed in courtly & reverential forms of Muslim greeting, which emphasized "thou" rather than "you." There are many passages in the book in which Asad tries to convey his feelings for the Arabs & Islam. The following quote ends with a line from the Quran that captures the Muslim feeling for the closeness of God: "They were a people that had grown up in silence & solitude between a hard sky & a hard earth; hard was their life in the midst of these austere, endless spaces; and so they could not escape the longing after a Power that would encompass all existence with unerring justice & kindness, severity & wisdom: God the Absolute. He dwells in infinity & radiates into infinity – but because you are within His working, He is closer to you than the vein in your neck..."

The Prophet (p) originally found it difficult to get his view of an absolute God accepted in the tribal societies of Arabia, which wanted to maintain the division between private faith & the world realms of business, social custom & daily habit. Asad argues that only when Islam (which literally means surrender to God) was allowed to shape institutions & customs was the promise of the Arab world fulfilled.

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