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Sherman A. Jackson (2024). *The Islamic Secular*. 621
Oxford: Oxford University Press. 527 pp.
Hardback. ISBN: 9780197661789. £32.99.
Reviewer: *Hamza Dudgeon*

Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	‘
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	’
ض	ḍ		ي	y

Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
اَ، اِ، اُ	a		آ، عَ، يَ	an
وْ	u		وُ	un
يَ	i		يِ	in
آ، عَ، يَ، عِ	ā		وِ	aw
وُ	ū		يِ	ay
يِ	ī		وُ	uww, ū (in final position)
			يِ	iyy, ī (in final position)

Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: <http://rotas.iium.edu.my>

Remembering Muhammad Asad: The Modernist Reformer of the 20th Century

Ahmad Farouk Musa*

Abstract: This paper focuses on one of the most famous modern Muslim scholars: Muhammad Asad. He was born as a Jew by the name of Leopold Weiss in the year 1900. In his life's works, Asad drew his methodology from the medieval Spanish scholar Ibn Hazm whom he called *Imām al-A'zam* (the greatest Imam). His translation and exegesis of the Qur'an in English—*The Message of the Qur'an*—drew its inspiration from Muhammad Abduh's tafsir *Al-Manar*, where he attempted to fuse *'aql* (reason) and *naql* (texts). Muhammad Asad struggled for the renaissance of Islam and the rejuvenation of Islamic spirit. Through his extensive journey throughout the Muslim world, he made acquaintances with renowned Muslim scholars including Shaykh Mustafa al-Marāghī, who would later become the Mufti of al-Azhar, Omar al-Mukhtar, the symbol of resistance in the Muslim world, and Muhammad Iqbal, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. This paper will briefly look into his Qur'ānic exegesis *The Message of the Qur'an*. His thoughts and ideas might have evolved later in his life since he lived a full 92 years, but his ideas as seen in *The Message* was ahead of his time and showed how he appreciated the ideas of Islamic reform that was promoted by Muhammad Abduh and Jamaluddin al-Afghānī before him. Indeed, the first and most important idea of Muhammad Asad's vision was his conviction that Islam is based on *reason* and, consequently, argumentation is necessary to becoming and being a Muslim.

Keywords: Muhammad Asad, *ijtihād*, reform, renaissance, *The Message of the Qur'an*

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Abstrak: Makalah ini menumpukan kepada salah seorang cendekiawan Muslim moden yang paling terkenal, iaitu Muhammad Asad. Beliau dilahirkan sebagai seorang Yahudi dengan nama Leopold Weiss pada tahun 1900. Dalam keserjanya sepanjang hayat, Asad membangunkan metodologinya daripada cendekiawan Sepanyol abad pertengahan, Ibn Hazm, yang beliau gelar sebagai *Imām al-A'zam* (Imam yang Agung). Terjemahan dan tafsiran beliau terhadap al-Qur'an dalam bahasa Inggeris—*The Message of the Qur'an*—adalah mengambil inspirasi daripada tafsir Al-Manar karya Muhammad Abduh, di mana beliau berusaha menggabungkan '*aql* (nalar) dan *naql* (teks). Muhammad Asad berjuang demi kebangkitan semula dan pembaharuan semangat Islam. Melalui perjalanan luasnya ke seluruh dunia Muslim, beliau berkenalan dengan cendekiawan Muslim terkenal termasuklah Shaykh Mustafa al-Marāghī, yang kemudiannya menjadi Mufti al-Azhar, Omar al-Mukhtar, simbol penentangan di dunia Muslim, dan Muhammad Iqbal, pengasas Republik Islam Pakistan. Makalah ini akan melihat tafsiran al-Qur'an beliau secara ringkas, *The Message of the Qur'an*. Pemikiran dan idea dalam hidup Muhammad Asad kemudiannya mungkin telah berevolusi pada akhir hayatnya kerana beliau hidup selama 92 tahun, namun idea-idea beliau yang terdapat dalam *The Message* adalah jauh mendahului zamannya dan menunjukkan bagaimana beliau menghargai idea-idea pengislahan Islam yang dipromosikan oleh Muhammad Abduh dan Jamaluddin al-Afghānī yang hidup sebelum daripada beliau. Bahkan, idea pertama dan paling penting dalam visi Muhammad Asad adalah keyakinannya bahawa Islam adalah berasaskan nalar, justeru perbahasan adalah perlu untuk bertukar menjadi dan terus menjadi seorang Muslim.

Kata kunci: Muhammad Asad, nalar, islah, kebangkitan, *The Message of the Qur'an*

Introduction

Muhammad Asad (1900-1992) is arguably one of the greatest Muslim intellectuals who ever lived, but remains almost unknown in the West and relatively unknown to the average Muslim (Hoffman, 2000, pp.233-237). However, those who have followed his work through his books and writings know that no one has contributed more in our times to the understanding of Islam and the awakening of Muslims, or perhaps worked harder to build a bridge between the East and the West, than Muhammad Asad (Asad T., 2011, pp.155-165).

Muhammad Asad was born Leopold Weiss on 2 July, 1900 in Lviv, Galicia, then part of the greater Austrian empire, but now in Ukraine.

At the age of 26, he converted to Islam and became Muhammad Asad. Before his conversion, his spiritual journey was basically in search of a home, where he was unable to quell his restless spirit until he embraces Islam. How he transformed into this new spiritual life is best described 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 strengths and our weaknesses. So it was in my case. Islam came over like a thief at night; but unlike a thief, it entered to remain for good (Nawwab, 2002).

Asad's journey into Islam

It was in an underground Berlin train that Weiss experienced his first epiphany. In September 1926, he was travelling with his wife Elsa, when he saw that people around him in the train had no smiles on their faces, as if they are in agony, despite their opulent dress. Back to his flat after that incident, he noticed a *surah* of the Qur'ān he was reading earlier on: *Al-Takāthur* (the Abundance of Wealth):

1. YOU ARE OBSESSED by greed for more and more
2. until you go down to your graves.
3. Nay, in time you will come to understand!
4. And once again: Nay, in time you will come to understand!
5. Nay, if you could but understand [it] with an understanding [born] of certainty,
6. you would indeed, most surely, behold the blazing fire [of hell]!
7. In the end you will indeed, most surely, behold it with the eye of certainty:
8. and on that Day you will most surely be called to account for [what you did with] the boon of life! (Asad, 2013, p. 1161)

Weiss said that the Qur'ān literally shook in his hands, and he was speechless. He documented the experience: "It was an answer: an answer so decisive that all doubt was suddenly at an end. I knew now, beyond any doubt, that it was a God-inspired book I was holding in my hand" (Wilmot, 2024, pp. xxi-xxxix). Asad then made his way to an Indian Muslim friend living in Berlin and proclaimed the *shahādah* immediately. A few weeks later, his wife Elsa followed suit. Upon

conversion, he took the names Muhammad in honour of the Prophet, and Asad (meaning “lion”) as a reminder of his given name, Leopold.

In 1922, before embracing Islam, Asad was a foreign correspondent in the Near and Far East for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, one of the most outstanding newspapers in Europe at that time. His career in journalism took him to many parts of the Islamic world including Palestine, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Persia, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan, and made him understand the socio-political issues at that time including those related to Jews and Arabs especially (Iqbal, 2016). He became very critical of the Zionist agenda then, and remained steadfast to be an anti-Zionist throughout his entire life (Maarif, 2024, pp. xxi-xxvii). He subsequently crossed the Mediterranean with his first stop at Cairo, where he learnt Arabic and spent some time with Shaykh Mustafa al-Marāghī, a student of the great Egyptian reformer Imam Muhammad Abduh. This was the same Mustafa Marāghī, a critical thinker himself, who subsequently became the Sheikh of al-Azhar (Musa & Koya, 2009).¹

Asad’s Strong Rebuke against *Taqlid* (Blind Imitation)

It was through his friendship with al-Marāghī that he realised that al-Azhar had lapsed into sterility, a condition that afflicted the whole Muslim world as well, with no new ideas and innovations. Those former Islamic thinkers would never have dreamt that their ideas would remain fossilised for a few centuries, and repeated over and over again, as if they were sacred and infallible truths (Asad, 1996, pp. 188-193; 2019, pp. 199-204).

Muhammad Asad realised at that time that just as some saints and scholars would be surprised to see their graves made into shrines, many will also be shocked to see how their words were immortalised. This was the essence of the concept of *taqlīd*, or blind imitation—a concept that made Muslims backward and unproductive, whereby men clung blindly to the beliefs of their forefathers; a concept that Muhammad Abduh and other reformers waged war against.

¹ Musa, Ahmad Farouk & Koya, Abdul Rahman. Remembering Muhammad Asad, the West’s gift to Islam. In the blurb for the movie screening “A Road to Mecca” on 13th December 2009, Securities Commission, Mont Kiara, Kuala Lumpur

“And [so,] whenever they commit a shameful deed, they are wont to say, “We found our forefathers doing it,” and, “God has enjoined it upon us.” Say: “Behold, never does God enjoin deeds of abomination. Would you attribute unto God something of which you have no knowledge?” [*Sūrah al-A’raf*; 7:28] (Asad, 2013, p. 247).

The blind acceptance of scholars’ opinions, upholding books as al-Bukhārī, Muslim, at-Tirmizī and others as if they were complete truths, has created an interpretation of Islam that does not allow progress and reform. The blind following of scholars such as Imam Shāfi’ī and others of the past, who were only Muslim intellectuals of the first few centuries, has created a version of Islam that does not liberate and develop humanity. The scholars of those times lived under monarchical rules, and were invariably influenced by the rampant culture of collusion between the rulers and the *ulama’* or scholars. The passiveness and downfall of the Muslims as cited from the work of many academics comes from the blind imitation or *taqlīd* and false assumptions we have on the early Islamic scholars and their works (Kuru, 2024, pp. 78-81, 136-148). It was quoted that a renowned scholar among the Sunnis, Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī, who lived in the 11th century, consistently defended the idea of the religion-state collusion. He even wrote in his book *al-Iqtisād fi al-’Iṭiqād* (Moderation in Belief): “[I]t has been said that religion and sultan are twins, and also that religion is a foundation and the sultan is a guard: that which has no foundation collapses and that which has no guard is lost” (Kuru, 2024, p. 148).

Asad believes that the alien-layer that has covered Islam must be removed before the scholars can wake up from their endless repetition, and before the Muslim world wakes up from its dormancy. All the *ahādith* (sing. *hadīth*) and traditions were collected by historians, who left us history they thought were reliable, or through the supervision of the elite culture, were concocted or allowed to be incorporated into the Muslim mind. This does not mean that Asad was against *hadīth* and *sunnah*. In fact, the second book he wrote after *Road to Mecca* was a translation and commentary of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* into English titled *The Early Years of Islam*, published in Lahore in 1938.²

² Arafat publication, later reprinted in Gibraltar: Dār al-Andalus in 1981. The Islamic Book Trust of Kuala Lumpur reprinted the book *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: The Early Years of Islam* in 2013.

So, according to Muhammad Asad, we must approach these books anew as man-recorded history, and thus accept that history and interpretation by scholars to contain forgeries and wrong assumptions. There was a possibility that alien sources and beliefs had entered the minds of the scholars, and tried to infect Islam by making people believe our Prophet said or did certain things. All of the Prophet's deeds and behaviour were a result of the Qur'ān. Not of any revelation next to it. Therefore, to follow the Prophet, we must follow the Qur'ān and start with the Qur'ān. A similar view was uttered by the martyr Sayyid Qutb in his *Ma'ālim fi-at Tarīq* or *Milestones* – which is considered a textbook by the Islamic activists - in the first chapter *Al-Jīl al-Qur'ān al-Farīd* or *The Unique Qur'ānic Generation* (Qutb, 2006, pp. 29-36). To use history as guidance is dangerous and misleading in many cases. It is time to be honest, time to admit many mistakes and lies have entered into the idea of what Islam is and tells us. The Qur'ān is Islam; everything else is human interpretation, explication, and recording of history.

Asad's Formulation of an Islamic Government

Asad believes that history can only give advice, show the underlying factors when a society was successful, but is not to be replicated to decide the ruling of today's states and societies. His book *The Principles of State and Government in Islam* initially published in 1961,³ a small book of only 107 pages, has become an essential foundation for further efforts to rejuvenate Islamic jurisprudence and to develop a much-needed Islamic political theory of statehood. Admittedly, the initial research for this book was prompted by the need to develop an Islamic constitution for the new Islamic Republic of Pakistan. It was meant to base the society not on the basis of race or nationality but solely on the "ideology" of the Qur'ān and the *sunnah* of the Prophet. But then Asad was also aware that Islamic history could not provide models that could be copied directly. The Constitution of Medina was set up under very peculiar circumstances; it was also unique insofar as it was being ruled by a Messenger of Allāh. In the words of the current Islamic scholar Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim, the experience of combining religious and political authority is unique to the Prophet and cannot be replicated (An-

³ University of California Press 1961; reprinted in Gibraltar: Dār al-Andalus 1980. The Islamic Book Trust of Kuala Lumpur reprinted in 2007.

Naim, 2008, p. 53). Islamic history has ever since been characterised by despotism. The ideas al-Mawardi (d. 450/1058) in his oft-quoted book by the Islamic ideologues in this country, *al-Ahkām as-Sultāniyya*, could not serve as the blueprint of an Islamic community in our industrial age (Hoffman, 2000, p. 240).

Asad therefore had to partake in *ijtihād* in order to make a clear distinction between the relatively small set of divine norms found in the Qur’ān and the *sunnah* in governing state and government which falls under the jurisdiction of *as-siyāsi*—that is, the political, profane, and relative—where it was essentially man-made notwithstanding the fact that its ultimate sources are rooted in revelation. This was similar to the idea of *faraghāt* or spaces as articulated by Rachid Ghannouchi, the political leader of *an-Nahda* of Tunisia (Tamimi, 2001, pp. 182-199; 2018, pp. 301-330.). Ghannouchi, similar like Asad earlier on, contends that if Islam is the final divine revelation to humanity, it is only appropriate that no fixed prescriptions are given for matters that are of changing nature. Thanks to the existence of *faraghāt*, Muslims can exercise their *ijtihād* to devise suitable solutions for emerging problems, which makes it fit for all times and places. He strongly asserted that it would be rather naïve to think that all is required for *khilāfah* to be reinstated would be for Muslim leaders especially just to execute a set of *ahkām* (rules) in the name of God’s law. Where is the role for *ijtihād*, or for ‘*aql* (reason) if Islam is conceived of as encompassing, or catering for, all requirements? This view was expressed at the time when Muhammad Asad has left the world despite articulating this idea much earlier in his *Message* and his book.

Hence, we need new interpretation that requires new *ijtihād*. Every generation faces different circumstances, and thus many laws and ways for society cannot be fixed for all time. Laws of Islam in ethics, rights and restrictions, are universal in their application. It is a constitution containing the basis for mankind’s dealing with life. Everything else is time bound and must be reinterpreted by every generation to fit it to their circumstances. This is the true understanding of the *sunnah*, custom of the Prophet, a constant improvement and development of society. A clear understanding of Ghannouchi’s *faraghāt* theory begins with the assumption that the Prophet did not leave his *companions* with a set of rules as to how to choose his successor. *Ijtihād* is mandatory upon them in order to find their own ways and means. Ghannouchi considers this

not as a weakness, but instead one of the miracles of Islam (Tamimi, 2001, p. 188; 2018, p. 301). He argues that if Islam is the final divine revelation to humanity, then there should not fixed laws due to the changing nature of human conditions. From this *murūnah* (flexibility), and the existence of spaces or *faraghāt*, Muslims are free to exercise their *ijtihād* to search for suitable solutions for new emerging problems. Only then can Islam be suitable for all times and places (Tamimi, 2001, p. 192; 2018, p. 318). As Muhammad Asad translated the first verse from *Sūrah al-Furqān*:

“HALLOWED is He who from on high, step by step, has bestowed upon His servant the standard by which to discern the true from the false, so that to all the world it might be a warning.”
[*Sūrah al-Furqān*; 25:1] (Asad, 2013, p. 655).

Asad's Odyssey across the Muslim World

In early summer of 1924, Muhammad Asad was on the move again. He travelled to Amman, to Damascus, Tripoli and Aleppo, to Baghdad and to the Kurdish mountains, then to Iran, and to the wild mountains and steppes of Afghanistan (Abdulfattah, 2024). Travelling extensively throughout the Muslim world, his interest in Islam deepened. As Asad has made Muslim renaissance his main agenda, he took a task in immersing himself in understanding the main source of Islam, the Qur'ān itself. Considering Arabic is a semitic tongue, he embarked on an intensive study of classical Arabic which has remained intact for fourteen centuries, from living with the bedouins of Arabia whose speech and linguistic associations had essentially remained unchanged since the time of Prophet Muhammad. In order to grasp the spirit of the language, he decided that he must be able to feel and to hear the language as the Arabs felt and heard it at the time when the Qur'ān was being revealed. It gave him insight into the semantics of the Qur'ānic language unknown to any Westerner, and enabled him later to translate the Qur'ān into English as *The Message of the Qur'ān* (Asad, 2013, p. xix). Along with his commentary, *The Message* is without parallel in conveying the holy book's meaning and spirit to non-Arab readers in Shakespearean English. It was the best, apart from Abdullah Yusuf Ali's and Marmaduke Pickthall's translations which are the most remarkable among the contemporary efforts to convey the message of the Qur'ān in English (Hoffman, 2000, p. 242).

In his study of the Qur'ān, Asad found that the decline of the Muslims was not due to any shortcomings in Islam but rather to their own fatalistic attitude towards life (Rahim, 1995, pp. 45-46). This was most probably from the theological views of some Imams of later years which evolved predominantly as the Ash'ariyyah school of thought. It was not Muslims per se that had made Islam great: it was Islam that had made the Muslims great (Asad, 2011, p. 193; 2019, p. 204). Modern Muslim thinkers and adherents alike should find in the principles of Islam a flexibility which allows them to explain and interpret with the greatest freedom while still keeping the faith intact. But when their faith became such a routine habit and ceased to be a program of life to keep innovating and improving, it led to the ossification of faith and understanding, which in turn resulted in the decline of their civilisation that ultimately leads to a vacuous sterility.

We know now that Muslims' renaissance was Asad's goal in life. He travelled far and wide, conferred with kings, leaders as well as the common man "between the Libyan Desert and the Pamirs, between the Bosphorus and the Arabian Sea," and began putting his ideas on paper (Faruqi, 2024). *Islam at the Crossroads*⁴, the book that was first published in 1934, still keeps the contemporary reader in awe with its analysis of Muslim regression and its prescription for instilling self-confidence to an Islamic world who were facing the onslaught of Western culture (Hoffman, 2000, p. 238).

Asad continued his travel and managed to get across from the northern confines of Arabia towards the south until in 1932 when the monsoons of India replaced the dry desert sand. Asad befriended Muhammad Iqbal, the spiritual father of the idea of a separate Pakistan, while in India. He was in the Indian continent when Iqbal persuaded him to abandon plans to travel to the East including Indonesia in order "to help establish the intellectual premise of a future Islamic state." He started his ambitious project of translating *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* into English including writing the commentary once he was in India (Musa, 2024, pp. ix-xx).

⁴ Asad, Muhammad. First published in Delhi and Lahore in 1934. Later reprinted by Dār al-Andalus in 1982. Reprinted by The Other Press, Kuala Lumpur in 2022. Translated into Malay as *Islam di Persimpangan Jalan* by the Islamic Renaissance Front, Kuala Lumpur in 2016.

At the end of the war, Asad was interned in India by the British since he was considered a citizen of an enemy state after Germany took over Austria in World War II (Hasan, n.d.). His project to translate *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*⁵ was stalled and the manuscripts destroyed during the chaos from the partition of Pakistan from India after the war. (Asad, 2013, pp. v-viii). When Pakistan was born in 1947, Asad became the first citizen of Pakistan (Shabbir & Laskowska, n.d.). and was then appointed as its undersecretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs and became its permanent representative to the United Nations in 1952. This was where he met his wife, Pola Hamida, a Polish-American and a Muslim convert whom he married the same year (Kepa, n.d.). It was also here that he began writing his remarkable and celebrated autobiography *The Road to Mecca*,⁶ covering the first half of his life and his travel in the Middle East, including his spiritual journey and later ended with the year 1932 where he left the Middle East for British India (Rubin, 2016, pp. 1-28).

After two years in New York, and after his marriage to Pola Hamida created a ruckus with his wife in Pakistan, the couple travelled extensively after his resignation from his position at the Pakistan Foreign Service (Musa, 2024, pp. xvii-xviii). They initially travelled to Morocco, then to Tangiers, then to Portugal, and finally they resided in Spain. In his book that was initially inspired from the formation of the Islamic state of Pakistan, *Principles of State and Government in Islam* (Asad, 1980),⁷ Asad did not lay down the blueprint for an Islamic state but the religious fundamentals such as the concept of *shura* or mutual consultation in establishing an Islamic government. Within this framework, Asad showed that an Islamic state had the flexibility to contain features of parliamentary democracy and the rule of law as long as *shura* is observed, not excluding the likes of American institutions of presidency and the Supreme Court (Asad, 1980, pp. 30-50).

⁵ Asad, Muhammad. Preface to *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*: The Early Years of Islam. First published in 1938 by Arafat publication, Lahore. Reprinted in 1981 by Dar al-Andalus, Gibraltar. Reprinted by the Islamic Book Trust in 2013.

⁶ Asad, Muhammad. Originally published by Max Reinhardt 1954. Republished by the Islamic Book Trust, Kuala Lumpur in 1996. The Malay translation *Jalan ke Mekah* was published by the Islamic Renaissance Front in 2019.

⁷ Asad, Muhammad. *Principles of State and Government in Islam* was originally published in 1961 by University of California Press, and a revised edition in 1980 by the Islamic Book Trust.

The Message of the Qur'ān

“And be conscious of the Day on which you shall be brought back unto God, whereupon every human being shall be repaid in full for what he has earned, and none shall be wronged.”

[*Sūrah al-Baqarah*; 2:281] (Asad, 2013, p. 75).

It was probably his last project, after years of labour in translating *Ṣaḥīḥ* Bukhārī, that he embarked on translating his magnum opus *The Message of the Qur'ān*. *The Message* in a complete form of thirty *juzu'* was published in 1980 but he published the first edition in 1964 by the Islamic Centre of Geneva based in Switzerland (Mykhaylo, n.d.). Coincidentally, the Islamic Center of Geneva was established by Sa'id Ramadan, the son-in-law of the *Ikhwān al-Muslimin's* (Muslim Brotherhood) founder Imam Hassan al-Banna. It is true that Muhammad Asad meant to devote only two years to completing the translation and the commentary but ended up spending seventeen years instead. However, it has been acclaimed as one of the best, if not the best, translations of the Qur'ān into English (Eaton, 2003, pp. i-v). Hasan Charles Le Gai Eaton, the British Muslim intellectual, said that no other translator has come close enough to conveying the meaning of the Qur'ān to those who are not familiar with the Arabic language than Muhammad Asad (Eaton, 2003, p. i).

As we have said earlier on, Muhammad Asad dedicated *The Message* to “people who think.” Indeed, Asad had clearly pointed out in his explanation of verses 31-33 of *surah al-Baqara* that by virtue of man's ability to think conceptually, man is superior in this aspect even to angels.

“And He (God) taught Adam all the names”

[*Sūrah al-Baqarah*; 2:31] (Asad, 2013, p. 30).

The subsequent verses show that owing to his God-given knowledge of those “names”, man is, in certain respect, superior even to the angels. The “names” are a symbolic expression for the power of defining terms, the power to articulate thinking which is peculiar to the human being and which enables him, in the words of the Qur'ān, to be God's vicegerent on earth. Hence, there is no virtue in *taqlīd* or blind imitation; and the Qur'ān categorically denounces it in a clear rebuke:

“And never concern thyself with anything of which thou hast no knowledge, verily [thy] hearing and sight and heart -all of them – will be called to account on it [on Judgement Day]”
[*Sūrah al-Isrā’*; 17:36] (Asad, 2013, p. 507).

Instead, each believer is acquired to “use *reason*” and their own judgement, pursue knowledge in its widest sense, and gain the ability for discernment on moral and religious issues. As this passage in the Qur’ān makes clear, the accountability on the Day of Judgment is individual: we will be asked what we have done, *not* who we followed blindly. Thus, Muslims should not be following their Shaykh and religious leaders blindly without knowing the *dalil* or religious reasonings but should instead use their own critical mental faculties.

Muslims were obligated to understand their faith based on the Qur’ān as best as they could. They should use their own faculty or reasoning, understanding the message of the Qur’ān by themselves, before seeking help to empower their understanding. To Muhammad Asad, every Muslim ought to be able to say “The Qur’ān has been revealed for me” (Asad, 2013, pp. xv-xxiii). In translating his *Message*, Muhammad Asad had made copious references especially in his footnotes to Muhammad Abduh whom he considered a person where every single strand of the modern Islamic movement converges (Asad, 2013, p. xx). This is an important fact to be realised since we will not get a clear understanding of his thought without understanding the influence of Muhammad Abduh on him.

Finally, in 1987, Asad published *This Law of Ours and Other Essays*,⁸ which was basically a collection of articles he had written over the years on Muslim religious and political thought but had not published. He remained intellectually active for the next few years until the last days of his life. He spent the final days of his life in Mijas in the Andalusian province of Spain after spending a record 19 years in Tangier, Morocco. Leopold Weiss was born on 2 July 1900. Muhammad Asad died on 20 February 1992. He was buried in the Muslim cemetery in Granada, Andalusia (Musa, 2024, p. xx).

8 Asad, Muhammad. *This Law of Ours and Other Essays*. First published by Dār al-Andalus, Gibraltar in 1987. Republished by The Islamic Book Trust in 1987.

It has been Asad's dream to see the living body of Islam flourish in the modern world. Although distressed by the sad state of the Muslim world and its inconclusive agenda of Islamic reformation, he remained optimistic that, post-Islamic revolution of Iran, a new generation of Muslims would rise eventually to make his dream a reality. He would, in particular, have invested high hopes on Muslim youth for their idealism and their ability and prowess to think and reason. He wanted to revise his *Message* but his age and health took a toll upon him. To me, Muhammad Asad was the conscience of thinking Muslims, the kind of reformer we need most when entering the new millennium.

Asad's Qur'ānic Hermeneutics

"The Most Gracious has imparted this Qur'an [unto man]. He has created man: He has imparted unto him articulate thought and speech"
[*Sūrah al-Rahmān*; 55:1-4] (Asad, 2013, p. 986)

If we were to understand about the entire hermeneutical approach of Muhammad Asad, it lies in the assertion that every Qur'ānic statement is directed to man's reason and must, therefore, be comprehensible either in its literal sense or allegorically. This was clearly explained in the Foreword to *The Message* (Asad, 2013, pp. xv-xxiii). The Qur'ān can only be understood if it is read thoughtfully, as one integral whole, and not as a mere collection of moral maxims, stories or disjointed laws. It is God who reveals the Qur'ān and it is Him who bestows upon man the ability to understand it. Asad insisted that the Qur'ān is read, as "it ought to be read" and it becomes, "its own best commentary."

"Thus, when We recite it, follow thou its wording [with all thy mind] and then, behold, it will be for Us to make its meaning clear"
[*Sūrah al-Qiyāmah*; 75:18-19] (Asad, 2013, p. 1093).

In interpreting the Qur'ān, Asad asserted that apart from linguistic considerations, there were two fundamental rules of interpretation he tried to observe consistently. His basic approach is grounded in the belief that all the Qur'ānic injunctions and exhortations (the ethical message) are all interrelated and should be viewed together as an exposition of an ethical doctrine in which every verse and sentence has an intimate bearing on other verses and sentences. This is the concept of *at-Tafsīr al-Qur'ān bil Qur'ān* (the exegesis of the Qur'ān *with* the Qur'ān) where the verses, all of them, clarify and amplify one another. Consequently,

its real meaning can be grasped only if we correlate every one of its statements with what has been stated elsewhere, and try to explain its ideas by means of frequent cross-references (Asad, 2013, p. xxii). That is why reading of *The Message* must be done when we have the entire Qur'an in hand i.e. *The Message*, due to its heavy cross-referencing. Whenever this rule is faithfully followed, we realise that the Qur'an is, in the words of Muhammad Abduh, "its own best commentary" (Asad, 2013, p. xx).

Secondly, no part of the Qur'an should be viewed from a purely "historical" point of view. The Qur'an provides general principles that are presented for sermonic and didactic purposes. This means, for instance, that its references to historical circumstances and events should not be taken literally as constituting a factual record, but as being illustrations of the human condition (Asad, 2013, p. xxii). I think at this juncture, it would be good if we can view one simple example. In *Sūrah al-Burūj*; *Sūrah* 85:1-21 (The Great Constellations), Asad denies the story has any correlation with Abraham's experience with his idolatrous contemporaries, or the Biblical legend of Nebuchadnezzar's attempt to burn pious Israelites, or the persecution of the Christians of Najran by the Yemeni King or the apocryphal of a Zoroastrian King who burnt his defiant subjects (Asad, 2013, pp. 1126-1128). To him, as a matter of fact, the anonymity of the evildoers shows us we have a parable and not an allusion to a historical event. The pit of fire is a metaphor for the persecution of the believers by the unbelievers, a phenomenon not restricted to any time, or any particular people, but recurring in many forms and many degrees of intensity throughout human history (Asad, 2013, pp. 1126-1127 fn).

Moreover, as he points out, the underlying purpose of a verse and its relevance to the ultimate message of the Qur'an should not be clouded by the preoccupation of classical commentators with the historical occasion when a particular verse was revealed. The classical *mufasssir* (interpreter or commentator) sometimes lost sight of the purport of the verse in their unwarranted details to embellish the Qur'ānic narrative. To him, one needs to be clear about the Qur'ānic perspective and its message.

Asad is of the view that in the interpretations, and especially of such narratives as the science of creation, one should be able to understand

from the modern scientific disciplines. This would not make people to look at the scriptures as anti-intellectual or anti-science. The main reason is for making such narratives comprehensible to people of the modern era. Let us look at *Sūrah al-Ṭāriq*; 86: 5-7 to make this point clearer. In these verses, Muhammad Asad translated as:

5. LET MAN, then, observe out of what he has been created:
 6. he has been created out of a seminal fluid
 7. issuing from between the loins [of man], and the pelvic arch [of woman]
- (Asad, 2013, pp. 1129-1130)

In his commentary in the footnotes, Asad uses pelvic arch for the translation *tarā-ib* (Asad, 2013, pp. 1129-1130). This is more consistent with the scientific fact that the ovaries are located in between the pelvic bones rather than the ribs, which are also *flat bones*, similar to the pelvic bones. This is something which is often neglected by many *mufasssir* despite living in the scientific age.

Muhammad Asad's emphasis on the rationality of Islam went hand in hand with his intellectual approach to religion. This is in tandem with the approach of Muhammad Abduh who developed a belief system based on reason. In the words of Abduh: "religion must be accounted as a friend to science, pushing man to investigate the secrets of existence, summoning him to respect the established truths and to depend on them in his moral life and conduct" (Salleh, 2003, pp.133-142).⁹

One final point to emphasise, although it might not be relevant to our discourse, is that the Qur'ān tells us clearly that many of its passages and expressions must be understood in an allegorical sense, and not simply literal, for the simple reason that, being intended for human understanding, they could not have been conveyed to us in any other way. That is, if we disregard the possibility of some of the verses of the Qur'ān were supposed to be understood allegorically, and if we only take every Qur'ānic verse in its literal sense, we would be offending against the very spirit of the divine writ (Asad, 2013, pp. 1179-1181).

⁹ See also Musa, Ahmad Farouk. Speech on *The Message of the Qur'an* by Muhammad Asad 2009. Securities Commission, Mont Kiara. Available at: <https://irfront.org/post/speech-delivered-by-dr-ahmad-farouk-musa-on-muhammad-asad-146> (Accessed on 27 July 2024).

Given that the metaphysical ideas of religion relate to *al-ghayb* (a realm which is beyond the reach of human perception), the only way they could be successfully conveyed to us is through loan-images derived from our actual—physical or mental—experiences (Asad, 2013, pp. 1179); or using the words of az-Zamakhshari – which was heavily quoted by Muhammad Asad in his commentary – on verse 35 from *Sūrah ar-Ra'd* (Asad, 2013, pp. 439-440), "...through a parabolic illustration, by means of something which we know from our experience, of something that is beyond the reach of our perception" [*tamthilan li-mā ghāba 'annā bi-mā nushahid*]" (Asad, 2013, pp. 439-440 fn). And this is the innermost purport of the term and concept of *al-mutasyābihāt* (the ambiguous) as used in the Qur'ān.

Conclusion

Muhammad Asad had a colourful life. His brilliance is evident in his translation and explanation of the compilation of *ahādith* in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (although most of his works were destroyed during the commotion from the India-Pakistan partition) and his magnificent translation of the Qur'ān which conformed the modernists' agenda. He is a person who has committed his entire life to the rejuvenation of Islam and to the renaissance of the Muslim *umma* and civilisation. His other books basically touched on issues relevant to the Muslims in the contemporary age. Although some of his ideas changed as we observed in the later edition of *Islam at the Crossroads* for example, it only shows that Asad is a pragmatic scholar who is not rigid in his thought and ready to evolve when the situation changes. That is why we believe that his stand in his book *Principles of State and Government in Islam* would also change when looking at the current discourse of political Islam in the Islamic world. Whether we are ready to accept his call and the call of the other Muslim reformers to abandon *taqlid* and to instead use both '*aql* (reason) and *naql* (revelation) in understanding our religion is yet to be seen. But one thing is certain: Asad has left a very profound mark on our thinking with his work. May he get the best reward from Allah in the hereafter.

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(i) direct quotation, write as 30:36

(ii) indirect quotation, write as Qur'ān, 30:36

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The glorious Qur'ān. Translation and commentary by A. Yusuf Ali (1977). US: American Trust Publications.

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(i) Al-Bukhārī, 88:204 (where 88 is the book number, 204 is the ḥadīth number)

(ii) Ibn Hanbal, vol. 1, p. 1

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(i) Al-Bukhārī, M. (1981). *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.

(ii) Ibn Ḥanbal, A. (1982). *Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*. Istanbul: Cagri Yayinlari.

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