

Abdel Qader al-Husseini

Abdel Qadir Audah

Abdolkarim Soroush

Abdul Rauf Fitrat

Abdullah Ali al-Motawalla

Abdurrahman Wahid

Abdurreshid Ibrahim

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## Great Muslim Leaders of the 20th century

Ahmad al-Khatib Abu Muhammad

Ahmad Muhammad Ali Ansari

Ahmed Husain Deedat

Al Hajj Ta'im Ali Abu Nasr

Alija Izetbegovic

Al-Sadiq al-Mahdi

Anne Sophie Roald

Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie

Dr Abdul Karim Germanus

Dr Ali Shariati

Dr Anwar Ibrahim

Dr Mahathir Mohammad

Dr Mohammad Iqbal

Dr Murad Wilfried Hofmann

Dr Said Ramadan

Dr Yusuf al-Qaradawi

Dr. A.M.A. Azeez

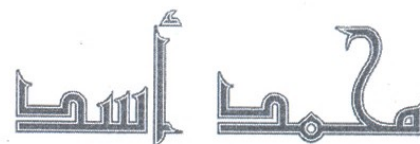


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**New Delhi, India**



# Muhammad Asad

Germany (1900 – 1992)



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His books were a bold prescription for instilling self-assurance  
into an Islamic world suffering  
the onslaught of Western technology.

Muhammad Asad was a writer, adventurer, diplomat, Muslim thinker, translator of the Quran, and author of one of the most remarkable spiritual autobiographies ever. Those who know his career through his works are aware that hardly anyone has contributed more in our times to the understanding of Islam and awakening of Muslims, or worked harder to bridge the gulf between the East and the West than Muhammad Asad.

Born Leopold Weiss in the Polish city of Lvov, Muhammad Asad was the grandson of a rabbi. By his early 20's he could write and read German, French and Polish languages. Leopold was given thorough grounding in religious studies. He became fluent in Hebrew, and his

Aramaic came handy in learning Arabic. Later, secular education at the university did not inspire him much. At last, he gave up formal education, and abandoned his studies for a doctorate degree.

The young Leopold ran away from home at 14 and joined the Austrian army to fight in World War I. By 1922, he had become a foreign correspondent covering the Far East for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, then one of the most outstanding newspapers in Europe. His career in journalism also took him to Palestine, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Persia, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, and gave him a unique perspective on world affairs, particularly issues relating to Jews and Arabs.

After his conversion to Islam in 1926), Muhammad Asad travelled and worked throughout the Muslim world. When World War II broke out, Asad was in India, where he befriended Dr Mohammad Iqbal, the philosopher poet, who is attributed with having propounded the idea of a Muslim-majority state within an Indian federation. Dr Iqbal persuaded Asad to abandon plans to travel and 'to help elucidate the intellectual premises of the future Islamic state'. "To me, as to Dr Iqbal, this dream (of Pakistan) represented a way, indeed the only way, to a revival of all the dormant hopes of Islam, the creation of a political entity of people bound together not by common descent but by their common adherence to an ideology," Muhammad Asad wrote.

Muhammad Asad was interned in India at the end of the war. When Pakistan was created in 1947, Asad was appointed its under-secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs and became its permanent representative to the United Nations in 1952. Here he met his future wife, Pola Hamida, a Bostonian, whom he married the same year. It was also here that he began writing his incomparable *The Road to Mecca* that was published in 1954. Later, he moved to Morocco where he completed his magnum opus, the *Message of the Qur'an* (1980). He went on to settle in Lisbon, where he breathed his lived his life as a practising Muslim.

The story of the years before his conversion reflects the 'spiritual odyssey of a man in search of a home, a man... unable to quell his restless spirit until embracing Islam'. Muhammad Asad, who felt that one needed a stronger reason than just habit or a carefree attitude to have something akin to faith, was repelled by the Zionist Action Committee's contempt toward Arabs. "Although of Jewish origin myself", wrote Asad in *The Road to Mecca*, "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 and thus to dispossess the people whose country it had been.... And how strange, I thought, that a nation which had suffered so many wrongs in the course of its long and sorrowful history...its diaspora was now in single-minded pursuit of its own goal, ready to inflict a grievous wrong on another nation."

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

What attracted him most was Islam's 'whole, wonderful, inexplicably coherent structure of moral teaching and practical life programme'. Islam appeared to him like a work of architecture, whose 'parts are harmoniously conceived to complement and support each other: nothing is superfluous and nothing lacking, with the result of an absolute balance and solid composure'. The feeling that everything in the teachings and postulates of Islam is 'in its proper place', created the strongest impression on him.

Yet Muhammad Asad, the Westerner needed more than that rationale to become a Muslim. He wanted to know whether the Quran was really the word of God. His critical approach towards his own society and analytical understanding of the teachings of the Quran brought him to the conclusion that the Quran is God's word. In the Quran, he saw 'not mere human wisdom of a man of a distant past in distant Arabia....Out of the Quran spoke a voice greater than the voice of Muhammad (ﷺ).



No man could have foreseen as the Quran has done the torment so peculiar to the Europe of 20<sup>th</sup> century," Muhammad Asad concluded.

During his quest for truth, Muhammad Asad spent over five years in Hijaz and Najd, mostly in Medinah, so that he could experience something of the original surroundings in which Islam was preached by the Prophet (ﷺ). Those studies created in him the firm conviction that Islam as a spiritual and social phenomenon was still going strong in spite of all the drawbacks caused by the deficiencies of Muslims. It still remained the greatest driving force mankind had ever experienced; and all his interests became centred on the problem of how to regenerate Islam.

The next question that he posed to himself was as to why Muslims had abandoned full application of Islamic teachings to real life. Muhammad Asad found that Muslims had gradually ceased to follow the teachings of Islam in its spirit. "Islam was still there; but it was a body without soul. The very element which once had stood for the strength of the Muslim world was now responsible for its weakness: Islamic society had been built, from the very outset, on religious foundations alone, and the weakening of the foundations has necessarily weakened the cultural structure," he wrote.

To understand how Muslims could revitalise themselves, Muhammad Asad took a characteristic approach: he immersed himself in understanding the source of Islam, the Quran. In his study of the Quran, Asad found that, "Islam said 'Yes to action, No to passivity.

Yes to Life and No to asceticism. There was an intense God-consciousness that made no division between body and soul or faith and reason, but consisted of a harmonious interplay of spiritual need and social demand. It was obvious to me that the decline of 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 a habit and ceased to be a program of life to be consciously pursued, the creative

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impulse that underlay their civilisation waned and gradually gave way to indolence, sterility and cultural decay." For a time the great thinkers of Islam kept its true ideology aloft and pure. But later generations 'lapsed into a

morass of intellectual convention, ceased to think for themselves and became content to repeat the dead phrases of earlier generations'.

Muslim renaissance remained Muhammad Asad's goal in life. *Islam at the Crossroads* (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 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.

In the *Principles of State and Government in Islam* (1961), Asad laid down in unambiguous terms the foundation of an Islamic state on the basis of Quranic



injunctions and the Prophet's (ﷺ) teachings. "The two defining limits are that in an Islamic state true sovereignty lies with God and believers must conduct all businesses pertaining to the state and community through mutual consultation. Islam postulates a self-contained political community which cuts across conventional divisions. God-consciousness is the sole basis of all social institutions, of an open ideological society. Its aim is to establish theocracy with regard to God and a democracy between man and man," he wrote. Within this framework, Asad showed that an Islamic state had the flexibility to contain features of parliamentary democracy and the rule of law, including the American institutions of presidency and the Supreme Court.

*The Message of the Quran* was published (1980) after 17 years of work. Along with his commentary, *The Message* is without parallel in conveying the holy book's meaning and spirit to non-Arab readers. He dedicated *The Message* to 'people who think'. The importance of using one's own faculties to understand the divine text, a fact emphasised in the Quran itself, was a theme Muhammad Asad returned to again and again.

Without *ijtihad*, (creative interpretation) Asad was convinced Muslims would find it difficult, if not impossible, to practise Islam in their lives. "They would become intellectual prisoners of others who were themselves prisoners of the past and had little to contribute to the resurgence of the faith in the modern world. It was only through *ijtihad* that Muslims could grow, change and develop in accordance with the needs of the time and the growth of man's experience, while always remaining true to the Quran and the practices of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ)," he wrote. This was not to deny the importance of religious scholars, only that Muslims were obligated to

understand their faith as best as they could. "Every Muslim ought to be able to say 'The Quran has been revealed for me,'" he said in an interview. He was fond of quoting the Prophet (ﷺ), "If you use your reason and turn out to be wrong, God will still reward you. And if you are right, you will be doubly rewarded." And so, "The door of *ijtihad* will always remain open," he used to say, "Because no one has the authority to close it." As Islam enters the most critical phase of its development in the West, Muhammad Asad's legacy assumes an urgency no thinking Muslim can afford to ignore.

Muhammad Asad approved of the peaceful yet vigorous activism of American Muslims in defending the tenets of their faith and in striving to bring a balance to American society. He abhorred extremism in all its forms. 'And thus We have willed you to be a community of the Middle Way' was a Quranic verse he quoted often, explaining that in Islam, there was no room for revolution, only evolution.

Muhammad Asad stood alone among contemporary Muslims for his extraordinary understanding of and contributions to, Islam. With his command of the English language, his knowledge of the Bible and biblical sources, as well as Jewish history and civilisation, Muhammad Asad was uniquely privileged to communicate to Muslim and non-Muslim readers the essence of Islam in its historical and timeless context.

But beyond words and books, Muhammad Asad wanted to see living Islam flourish in the modern world. Although distressed by the sad state of the Muslim world and its passivity, he remained optimistic to the end that a new generation of Muslims eventually would rise to make this dream a reality.