MUHAMMAD ASAD

Traditionalist or Modernist?

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This review will consider Muhammad Asad's approach to Islam through an assessment of his published works. The role of the Qur'an and the Sunnah in his understanding of Shari'ah and its place in modern day life will be viewed through his translations, including that of Bukhari as well as his early work, *Islam at the Crossroads*. Through an analysis of such publications his position as a Traditionalist or Modernist and Reformer will be assessed.

His early role in the Middle East, his disillusion with Zionism and gradual acceptance of Islam will be briefly considered before reviewing his work on the early years of Islam through his translation of Bukhari. It was at this time that he became concerned by the rigidity of earlier scholars and conceived that *ijtihād* was of particular relevance in modern society. He was already acquainted with the writings of Ibn Hazm and saw in them a parallel to his own thinking.

He applied this learning to his translation of the Qur'an, to which traditionalists objected, leading to a delay in its publication. His use of reason, scientific knowledge and *ijtihād* were amongst the causes for their opposition, although the personal animosity of Abu'l A'la Maududi is likely to have played a significant part.

The consequences of such thinking led Asad to seek renewal of the *Ummah* and, in *Islam at the Crossroads,* he called for a return to those values which had driven and enlivened the first generation of Muslims and to reject the ideas and concepts that had accompanied colonialism and were now embedded in Westernisation. Only through rejection of a stagnated and out-dated legalistic "Islam" could Muslims live and practice true Islam. The consequences of such a change would lead to the emergence of Islamic states where *ijtihād* could ensure appropriate laws were made to deal with contemporary issues with their constitution based on the Qur'an, the Sunnah and a slimmed down Shari'ah. Sadly, this vision was to be rejected by Pakistan.

So, Asad was neither a Traditionalist nor a Modernist. He was both and, perhaps, his position is best described as being in the Community of the Middle Way.

1. INTRODUCTION

The approach adopted in this review will be to consider the development of Muhammad Asad's approach to Islam through the thoughts and ideas expressed in his published works. It will consider the stance he took on the role of the Qur'an, the Sunnah and their influence on Shari'ah, as developed by scholars. With time, his view about the edifice which they had created became more and more critical. This review will consider how he came to believe that there was a need for an *ijtihād,* which is relevant to present day and future issues. Within his proposals an assessment will be made as to whether Asad was truly a Modernist and Reformer or someone, who was a Traditionalist calling on the *Ummah* to follow principles laid down when the Prophet lived amongst us, rather than be bound by later interpretations.

2. ORIGINS

Muhammad Asad's background is comparable to many western orientalists. Born on 2 July 1900, into a Jewish family, he grew up in Austria and became a journalist with *Frankfurter Zeitung*. In Palestine, he met with the founding fathers of the modern state of Israel and later became a friend and agent for Ibn Saud. The difference lies in the fact that he was a Muslim.

In his autobiography, Asad describes his path to Islam as a journey and this is encapsulated in its title – *The Road to Mecca* (Asad 1954). Perhaps its beginning was in Jerusalem, where he described his encounter with an aged *hajji* amongst the camel and donkey drivers:

> "It somehow disturbed me to see so real a prayer combined with almost mechanical bodily movements …
>
> Years later I realised that with his simple explanation the *hajji* had opened to me the first door to Islam… I began to feel an unwonted humility whenever I saw, as often I did, a man standing barefoot on his prayer rug… and his head lowered, entirely submerged within himself… a man at peace with himself." (Asad 2001: 87–89)

For Asad, this journey would take him from the Arabian Peninsula to India, Pakistan, Portugal and Spain (Asad & Asad 2015: 27–28, 275–276). Along the route he met the Egyptian reformer, Mustafa al-Maraghi (*Ibid.*: 29), and worked with Muhammad Iqbal, amongst others (Asad 2001: 188).

In this review, Asad's status as a modernist reformer or traditionalist will be assessed through his autobiographies, writings on Islam, its role in state governance and his translation of the Qur'an and *Sahih al-Bukhari*. Through consideration of these works it should be possible to give some answer to the question concerning his position on the modernist traditionalist continuum.

3. SAHIH AL-BUKHARI

A year after embracing Islam, during the 1927 *hajj*, Asad met Abd al-Ghani and other Indians, who were prominent in the *Ahl-e-Hadith* movement. At the time he was already:

> "convinced that a mere reliance on the teachings of the early exponents of Islamic thought, the so-called *imams*, was not the right way to a comprehension of the message of Muhammad. What was necessary was a direct independent approach to the Two Sources of Islam – the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet, forthcoming from the authentic Traditions *(ahadith*) transmitted to posterity by his Companions." (Asad & Asad 2015: 68)

These connections led Asad to visit India in 1932. Whilst there, during a conversation, Iqbal drew his attention to the fact that the Prophet still spoke through the hadith and suggested Asad to translate the work of Bukhari so that it could be understood by the wider *Ummah* (*Ibid.*: 70) and feed into a relevant modern Shari'ah. In the preface to his translation in 1938, Asad wrote:

> "A genuine revival of Islam is impossible without an intensive inquiry into its original spirit… We cannot accept the idea that the teachings of Islam could ever be exhausted in all their depth; and no word of anyone below the Prophet can ever be considered to be final." (Asad 2013: vii)

He was clearly of the view that the rigidity of Medieval scholars from the second century onwards was not consistent with the Sunnah and was one cause for the cultural decay of the Muslim world. He rejected the view that the *ijtihād* of earlier scholars was binding on future generations (Dar 2015: 15–23). Although the concept of translating hadith might be seen as taking a traditionalist stance, its purpose clearly was to provide an easy-to-understand translation in contemporary English and thus ensure the community had easy access to the words and advice of the Prophet and so move the *Ummah* forwards and out of stagnation. In other words, his approach to Shari'ah was to base it on the Qur'an and Sunnah and so:

> "to strip it down to its original, very basic essentials, without all the accretions of the many centuries that followed which prevented it from being really workable." (Asad & Asad 2015: 263–264)

Sadly, the only hand-written copy of his translation of Bukhari was destroyed by looting during the interreligious fighting associated with Partition (Asad 2013: Preface to the Second Edition). However, the knowledge gained through this work fed directly into his translation of the Qur'an and his future writings on Islam.

In his approach to legal theory, Asad compared his interpretation to that of the medieval Andalusian jurist, Ibn Ḥazm, and the Ẓāhirī legal school (Linnhoff 2021: 425–443); leaving unregulated any area that revelation had not mentioned. However, Asad never identified himself as a Zahirist; whether because of the possibility of a Sunni backlash or because he simply saw this *madhhab* as being similar, but distinct from his own views (*Ibid.*). However,

it seems likely that the latter view is correct. For example, Talal Asad wrote of his father that:

> "in his own life's work he sought to use the methodology of the medieval Spanish theologian Abu Muhammad Ibn Hazm, he drew often and copiously on the interpretations of the nineteenth-century Egyptian reformer Muhammad Abduh, and again, despite strong disagreement on various points of substance with the fourteenth-century Syrian theologian Taqi al-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya, he attempted, like the latter, to integrate reason (*'aql*), tradition (*naql*), and free-will (*irada*), to form a coherent and distinctive vision of Islam." (Asad 2012: 155–165)

Asad clearly drew on a wide range of sources from which to develop his own thinking.

His view of hadith and their reliability is laid out in *Islam at the Crossroads* (Asad 1934: 113–132). He considered they were accurate recollections of what the Prophet said and did and form the only basis on which to understand the Qur'an and its allegorical meanings. He recognised that there were many spurious hadith, but believed that the approach adopted by Bukhari, Muslim and others ensured that, in general, these had been excluded from their collections. He chose to ignore the criticisms emerging from Western Orientalist thinking. He further believed that the science of hadith analysis ensured such collections were undergoing continuous purification (*Ibid.*: 122). Such a stance is consistent with a Traditionalist viewpoint. Indeed, Asad considered that those who questioned their validity had been influenced by the fact that:

> "many among the present generation of Muslims are ready to adore everything that is Western." (*Ibid.*)

Nevertheless, within this stance his son recognised that:

> "He himself disagreed strongly with many other Muslims about the correct interpretation of Islamic doctrine and practice." (Asad 2012)

> and so all Muslims may be seen as travellers moving towards a deeper understanding of Islam (Alvi & Ahmed 2021: 78–100).

Iqbal described *Islam at the Crossroads* as "an eye-opener to our younger generation" (Amir 2015: 88–102). Indeed, Hofman considered it to be the first critical rejection of Europe and Western ideology and laid the foundations for later work by Qutb (Hofmann 2000: 233 – 247). Although Asad was of the view that "Islam as a spiritual and social institution cannot be improved" (Asad 1934), this did not mean that he did not consider that the narrow-mindedness of the *'lama* (Muslim scholars) had fossilised Islam (Hofmann 2000). These beliefs were further expanded by his comment that for:

> "present-day Muslims the appeal of religion is becoming increasingly theoretical and that less and less individuals are prepared to apply the *principles* of Islam (in distinction from Islamic *slogans*) to their personal behaviour and social endeavours." (Asad 2010: 253–275)

So, Asad articulated his belief that Islam is a religion relevant to today, soundly grounded in principles defined by the Qur'an and explained by the Prophet, but also dynamic in nature and ready to encompass new understanding and discoveries; but always related to daily life and actions, not just words. With such views he is clearly aligned with Al-Afghani, Abduh, Al-Banna, Iqbal, Qutb, and Maududi.

4. TRANSLATION OF THE QUR'AN

Asad spent 17 years working on his translation of the Qur'an (Hofmann 2005: 22–23). His approach was to recognise that the meaning of words have:

> "in the course of time undergone a subtle change in the popular mind and should, therefore, be translated in accordance with the sense given to them by post-classical usage." (Asad 2003: x)

In the Foreword, he acknowledges the contribution of Abduh and agrees that the Qur'an is the best commentary on itself. He also pays tribute to early commentaries, whilst recognising his own approach differed (*Ibid.*: x-xi).

Aspects of this different approach have been recognised by others. For example:

> "The main foundations of his inclusivist approach are found in his exegesis of Qur'an 2:62, which Asad considers to be "the fundamental doctrine of Islam": his rendering of the word "*islami dinan*" in verse 3:85 as "a surrender onto God." Hence, he interprets all other exclusivist verses through this lens and thereby "resolves" the ambiguity that is present in the Qur'anic text. Therefore, Asad can be seen as promoting a pluralist position on the question of the fate of other religions." (Duderija 2015: 289–297)

Such understandings led to difficulties with publication. The *Rabitah al-Alam Islami* (The Muslim World League) had originally been prepared to sponsor publication of *The Message of the Qur'an.* However, objections were raised by followers of Maududi and the League required that it should be able to edit the work (Asad & Asad 2015: 249). Indeed, Maududi's personal antagonism is summarised in a letter he wrote in 1961:

> "I am sorry to say, however, that although in the early days of his conversion, he was a staunch practicing Muslim, gradually he drifted close to the ways of the so-called "progressive" Muslims just like the 'reformed' Jews. Recently his divorce from his Arab wife and marriage to a modern American girl hastened this process of deviation more definitely." (Maududi 1969)

Objections to the translation included Asad's view of the Night Journey as a spiritual rather than physical occurrence, that *jinn* could be elemental forces of nature and wearing the hijab was culturally conditioned (Hofmann 2005: 22). It is likely that Asad's footnote to 24 v31 was one source of their rage:

> "the injunction to cover the bosom by means of a *khimar*... is rather meant to make it clear that a woman's breasts are *not* included in the concept of "what may decently be apparent" of her body and should not, therefore be displayed." (Asad 2003: 602)

As a result of these differences and Asad's refusal to compromise, the first Madinah edition was destroyed and he self-published the translation in 1980 (Hofmann 2005: 23). Another factor likely to have played a part in the stormy reception of the *The Message* was Asad's divorce from his Saudi wife, Munira, and marriage to Pola Hamida (*Ibid.*). Indeed, prior to meeting Pola, Asad had been considering taking a second wife, a concept rejected by Munira (Asad & Asad 2015: 188–189).

In summarising Asad's approach to the translation of the Qur'an, Ahmad and Amir considered that he strove to uphold:

> "the primacy of *'aql* (reason), through its rational exposition and scientific interpretation of the *āyah*. This profound method of rational argument (*al-ra'y*) and explicit use of *ijtihād* implies his substantial effort to revealed intrinsic meaning, and deep-seated spirit of the Qur'an." (Ahmad & Amir 2016: 1117–1120)

However, perhaps this complex background to the translation is best summed up in the words of Talal Asad in *Secular Translations*:

> "in any translation a particular message is selected and some values are dismissed." (Asad 2018)

4. Islam at the Crossroads

The analysis of Islam, which led to *The Message,* began with *Islam at the Crossroads,* which was first published in 1934 (Asad 1934). It highlighted three major challenges to Islam:

1. The existence of pseudo-scholars;
2. Orientalism; and
3. The impact of Western civilization

and suggested that dialogue and Islamization of knowledge might revitalise the *Ummah* (Fatimah & Rahimah 2015).

In 1934, Asad was clearly of the view that:

> "the next stage must be our conscious deliberate following of the *Sunnah* of our Prophet. For *Sunnah* means no more and no less than the teachings of Islam translated into practice." (Asad 1934)

The issue, which is discussed extensively in the book, is how the *Sunnah* of the Prophet can be identified. For example, Asad was of the view that:

> "The impracticable propositions which are today put forward by a self-styled "orthodoxy", as postulates of Islam are in most cases nothing but contentional interpretations of the original postulates on the basis of old Neo-Platonic logic which might have been "modern", that is workable in the second or third century of the *Hijrah,* but is extremely out-of-date now." (*Ibid.*: 161)

Rather, he places reliance on the early hadith collections by Muslim and Bukhari. He indicates that they had:

> "done whatever was humanly possible to put the authenticity of every Tradition to a very rigorous test – a far more rigorous test than European historians usually apply to any historical documents." (*Ibid.*: 120–121)

In *Islam at the Crossroads*, Asad goes into detail as to the accuracy and importance of these early hadith collections and concludes:

> "We should think that the opponents of orthodox thought would be able to bring forward really convincing arguments which would establish once for all, the unreliability of the Traditions ascribed to the Prophet. But this is not the case." (*Ibid.*: 121)

These views were expressed almost a century ago and consequently do not deal with present day studies on the reliability of hadith collections. However, such thinking would place Asad within a Traditionalist school and further support comes from his attitude towards the role of reasoning and rationalism:

> "The role of reason in religious matters is, as we have seen, in the nature of a control – a registration apparatus saying "yes" or "no", as the case may be. But this is not the case with so-called "rationalism". It does not content itself with registration and control, but jumps into the field of speculation; it is not receptive and detached like pure reason, but extremely subjective and temperamental." (*Ibid.*: 136)

Such a characterisation of rationalism is not consistent with its role throughout the history of Islamic theology. Indeed, the approach adopted by Asad in his translation of Bukhari has been considered to have a "rationalist orientation" when compared to more recent and complete translations (Rahman 2022: 57). In his review of English translations of the Qur'an, Lawrence referred to Asad as a "forensic rationalist" (Lawrence 2017: 67). As to whether these descriptions accurately reflect the development in Asad's thinking between writing *Islam at the Crossroads* and his later translations of Bukhari and the Qur'an is open to discussion, but they would suggest that there was a lack of consistency with his earlier opinions. However, there is clear evidence that, by 1938, his approach to issues, such as the Sunnah and its interpretation, had moved towards a Modernist stance. In his introduction to Bukhari, he wrote:

> "but what does "the *Sunnah* rightly understood" mean? Has its interpretation – nay the interpretation of the *Holy Qur'an* itself – been fixed for us, once and for all, at some remote period of the past? This, unfortunately would seem to be the attitude of the vast majority of Muslims. Since many centuries they have ceased to think *independently* about the teachings of Islam." (Asad 2013: vi)

Any assessment of *Islam at the Crossroads* needs to consider its immediate impact in the 1930s. Iqbal believed that:

> "it will prove an eye-opener to our younger generation" (Asad 1934)

and for Pickthall, it was:

> "a notable contribution to what we may call the literature of Muslim regeneration." (*Ibid.*)

This concept of regeneration of the *Ummah* continued to dominate Asad's thinking and writing throughout his life.

5. This Law of Ours

By the late 1940s, Asad's views on the need for Muslims to practise their faith in a contemporaneous setting was unequivocal. He condemned the role of scholars in isolating the faith from the generality of the *Ummah* and the: "the estrangement of the "common man", however intelligent, from the true spirit of the teachings." (Asad 1987: 17)

He compared the situation to:

> "an old-clothes shop where ancient thought garments almost unrecognisable as to their original purport, are mechanically bought and sold, patched up and resold and where the buyer's only delight consists in praising the old tailor's skill." (*Ibid.*: 14)

Rather he stressed the responsibility and need for individuals to make decisions for themselves, based on the Qur'an and the Sunnah and not to depend upon secondary sources and scholars, many of whom he considered to have little understanding of the issues of the present day. In response to these concerns, he put forward three propositions:

1. "The conventional concept of the Shari'ah must somehow be resolved into simplicity." (*Ibid.*: 77) I believe Asad wanted an approach harking back to the Ten Commandments, rather than the complexity of *Halakha.*
2. "The results of *ijtihadi* thought, even of the greatest Muslim scholars, cannot be admitted as being components of the *Shar'i* code" (*Ibid.*)
3. "The scope commonly ascribed to the Shari'ah is far in excess of the scope intended for it by the Law Giver." (*Ibid.*: 78)

These propositions echoed the ideas put forward nine hundred years earlier by Ibn Hazm (Ibn Hazm 1347 AH: 66) and undoubtedly were amongst the causes for Maududi's attitude (Maududi 1969). Both Asad and Ibn Hazm were able to antagonise "scholars and politicians alike" (Laylah 1998: 29).

Asad was strongly of the view that Islam enabled "man to live in spiritual and social security as well as in intellectual and physical dignity" (*Ibid.*: 160). He believed that with revival this beneficial effect would not be restricted to the *Ummah*, but would spread further afield and have a positive influence on other religious communities (*Ibid.*: 161–162). His views on the centrality of Islam to everyday life consequently led him into the area of civil society and its proper governance.

6. ISLAMIC GOVERNMENT

Asad's views on the form in which an Islamic state should develop were influenced by his many discussions with Iqbal about the government of a future Pakistan (Asad & Asad 2015) and those of Ibn Hazm (Asad & von Grunebaum 1961: 13). At the core of any Islamic state should be the principle that:

> "the real *Shari'ah* is extremely concise and, therefore, easily understandable and because it is so small in volume it cannot… provide detailed legislation for every contingency of life." (*Ibid.*: 14)

On this basis he confirmed his view that a modern-day *ijtihād* was needed to develop legislation, which was consistent with the Qur'an and Sunnah, but was relevant to the present and not bounded by earlier interpretations. Such an approach meant that:

> "it will always be subject to amendment by the *ijtihad* by those who come after us that is to say, it can amount to no more than a temporal, changeable law subject to the irrevocable, unchangeable *Shari'ah,* which is self-evident in the *nusus* of *Qur'an* and *Sunnah.*" (*Ibid.*)

These views are consistent with seeing Islam as a dynamic religion, relevant to all time, and his opposition to the stagnation he believed was imposed through construction of a rigid edifice of rules and restrictions, dependent upon the personal interpretation of earlier scholars. He believed it was critically important that any Islamic state provided "justice for Muslims and non-Muslims alike" (*Ibid.*: 99). Linked with this he considered citizens had three cardinal rights:

1. Freedom of opinion,
2. Protection, and
3. Compulsory and free education. (Hasan 1998)

His son, Talal, clarified some of these issues when he wrote:

> "To my father this meant therefore that the tradition of Islam not only urged Muslims to tolerate the followers of all other religions; it encouraged them to consider all as deserving of equal respect. And respect meant being able to listen to what they had to say about their deepest hopes and commitments." (Jinnah 1946)

For Muhammad Asad, as for Iqbal and Jinnah, Pakistan was to be an exemplar for future Islamic states. He had a similar view to that put forward by Jinnah in his speech at Islamia College in 1946:

> "We do not demand Pakistan simply to have a piece of land but we want a laboratory where we could experiment on Islamic principles." (Khan 2022)

This was supposed to be a country, which espoused the principles, which characterised the state of Madina in the time of the Prophet and later were seen in Al-Andalus. Such hopes were recently again expressed by Imran Khan:

> "These principles are unity, justice and rule of law leading to meritocracy, strong moral and ethical foundation, inclusion of all humans in progress and prosperity, and finally, the quest for knowledge." (Asad 2012)

7. CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps, Asad's position is best summarized in his own words:

> "We claimed that Islam is a religion of reason (which, in fact, it is) – and none the less we meekly agreed to, and sometimes even welcomed, suppression of reason by anyone who just happened to be in power: for most of our '*ulama'* were telling us that in matters of religion independent thought is heresy, and that only he can be a true Muslim who blindly repeats the formulas involved in olden days (and evolved by scholars who were human, and therefore liable to err), like a parrot which has learned its lesson once and for all." (Asad 1987: 17)

or summarised more simply:

> ""The door of *ijtihad* will always remain open, because no one has the authority to close it."" (Rahim 1995: 45–46)

Asad placed the Qur'an and the Sunnah at the centre of his life, works and philosophy and so could be considered a traditionalist. However, he wanted to break down the vertical edifice that had been created over the centuries by scholars and which he believed had cause stagnation in the thinking, life, and practice of the *Ummah*. His view that *ijtihād* is open and always will be open, underlined a Modernist approach, so placing him in both camps. Essentially Asad was a man alone and would have considered himself as following the Middle Way, consistent with his translation of Qur'an 2 v143:

"We willed you to be a community of the Middle Way."

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