Muḥammad Asad (1900-92) has emerged as one of the towering personalities among the Muslim intellectuals of the twentieth century. His personality and thoughts are increasingly being subjected to detailed studies in the East and the West alike. Europeans call him ‘The most influential European Muslim of 20th century’. Muslims in the East look up to him to see how a man of his status, who though hailed from the West embraced Islam, lived in the Muslims countries, learned Muslim languages and turned out to be in the vanguard of change in the condition of Muslim societies in accordance with the imperative of their faith. The man lived both in the West and in the East and has left a rich legacy of his intellectual contributions, among them his magnum opus, ‘The Message of the Qurʾān – Translated and Explained (1980)’.

Some people have been working on his biography very meticulously and preparing thesis in Universities entitling them for Ph. D. degrees. Islamic Studies [37:3 (1998)], Islamabad, Pakistan, informs about Dr. Muzaffar Iqbal, a member of the editorial board of the journal, working on a research project “Muḥammad Asad: A Biography.” Leading Pakistani daily ‘Jung’ carried an article which highlighted the features of a proposed Ph. D. thesis of a Pakistani scholar on the biography of Asad. Murad Hofmann is all praise for a research work done on the biography of Muhammad Asad in German language. He says; “Until recently there was no comprehensive biography of this illustrious man. This lacuna has been solidly filled, if only partially, i.e. up to his official conversion to Islam in 1926 in Berlin and 1927 in Cairo.”

Many important dimension of his early life have been highlighted in the thesis which has now been published as a book, particularly the factors which could be regarded as the formative influences. Murad has given a gist of these in his review article and hoped
that the book is translated into English ‘to allow access of the many admirers of Asad, particularly in India, Pakistan, Britain and the United States, to the only period during which Asad published in German almost exclusively.’

Ismā’īl Ibrāhīm Nawwāb, an outstanding scholar and eminently able writer of Saudi Arabia, a country where Asad spent many years of his youth, has written a very long article on Asad. In the article the author looks at Asad and his works analytically followed by an anthology of extracts compiled and edited from his writings from 1934 to 1987.

Dr. Murad Hofmann presents his interesting and critical study of Asad and his thought. He shares many things with Asad – native language, reversion to Islam based on study and reflection and exposure to contemporary Muslim society and writings in two major European languages – English and German – which have significantly contributed to a better understanding of Islam.

Murad introduces, perhaps for the first time in English, Asad’s first work in German, Unromantisches Morgenland (‘The Unromantic East’). Written at the very young age of 22, it reveals something of Asad’s outstanding literary talent, his acuteness of observation and richness of imagination, and last, but not the least, his strong love for the Arabs – some of the characteristics which came out so forcefully in some of his later writings especially in The Road to Mecca.

There are numerous articles written by learned men and women across the globe about Asad’s life, personality and thought for various reasons. Jews too have their interest in writing about Asad, a person born in a Jewish family. We have Martin Kramer, ‘The Road from Mecca: Muhammad Asad (born Leopold Weiss)’, in The Jewish Discovery of Islam: Studies in Honour of Bernard Lewis, ed. Martin Kramer
The current of history seems to be in support of more thorough studies on Asad, his personality, thought and works, which, it is hoped, shall sharpen our understanding of him and his works. For the present study, where Asad is studied as a Qur’ānic translator and exegete, we need to have a sketch of his biography, formative influences, his thoughts and his works.

**Early Years: Formative Influences**

Mohammad Asad was a reverted Jew, named Leopold Weiss at birth. He was no ordinary revert. Asad not only sought personal fulfillment in adopted faith. He tried to affect the contemporary Islamic scene, as an author, activist, diplomat, and translator of the Qur’ān. Mohammad Asad died in February 1992 at the age of ninety one, so that he may be said to have paralleled the emergence of every trend in contemporary Islam.\(^\text{10}\)

Leopold Weiss was born on 12 July 1900, in the town of Lvov (Lemberg) in eastern Galicia, then a part of Habsburg Empire (Lvov is today in Ukraine). By the turn of the century, Jews formed a quarter to a third of the population of Lvov, a town inhabited mostly by Poles and Ukrainians. The Jewish community had grown and prospered over the previous century, expanding from commerce into industry and banking.

Weiss’s mother, Malka, was the daughter of a wealthy local banker, Menahem Mendel Feigenbaum. The family lived comfortably, and wrote Weiss, lived for the children.\(^\text{11}\)
From Weiss's own account, his roots in Judaism were deeper on his father's side. His paternal grandfather, Benjamin Weiss, had been one of a successor of Orthodox rabbis in Czernouitz in Bukovina. Asad remembered his grandfather as a white-bearded man who loved chess, mathematics and astronomy, but who still held rabbinic learning in the highest regard, and so wished his son to enter the rabbinate. Weiss's father, Akiva, did study Talmud by day, but by night he secretly learned the curriculum of the humanistic gymnasium. Akiva Weiss eventually announced his open break from rabbinic's, a rebellion that would presage his son's own very different break. But Akiva did not realize his dream of studying physics, because circumstances compelled him to take up the more practical profession of a barrister. He practiced first in Lvov, then in Vienna, where the Weiss family settled before the First World War.

Asad testifies that his parents had little religious faith. For them, Judaism had become, in his words, "the wooden ritual of those who clung by habit-and only by habit- to their religious heritage." He later came to suspect that his father regarded all religion as outmoded superstition. But in deference to his family tradition and to his grandparents - "Poldi" to his family- was made to spend long hours with a tutor, studying the Hebrew Bible, Targum, Talmud, Mishna and Geimarra. "By the age of thirteen", he attested, "I not only could read Hebrew with great fluency but also spoke it freely." He studied Targum "just as if I had been destined for a rabbincal career", as he could "discuss with a good deal of self assurance the differences between the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds." He also had delved in the intricacies of Biblical exegesis: The Targum.
Nonetheless, Asad developed what he called “a supercilious feeling” towards the premises of Judaism. While he did not disagree with its moral precepts, it seemed to him that the God of the Hebrew Bible and Talmud “was unduly concerned with the ritual by means of which His worshipers were supposed to worship Him.” Moreover, this God seemed “strangely preoccupied with the destinies of one particular nation, the Hebrews”, Far from being the creator and sustainer of mankind, the God of the Hebrews appeared to be a tribal deity, “adjusting all creations to the requirements of a ‘chosen people’.” Weiss’s studies thus led him away from Judaism, although he later allowed that “they helped me understand the fundamental purpose of religion as such, whatever its form.”

Fourteen year Asad ran away from school and tried unsuccessfully to join the Austrian army to fight in the First World War; no sooner had he been finally officially drafted, then has juvenile expectations of military glory faded with the collapse of the Austrian Empire. In 1918, Asad entered the University of Vienna. He pursued philosophy and the history of art. Günther has established that in addition to art and philosophy, Weiss pursued chemistry and physics – with star like Erwin Schrödinger, Noble prize winner in 1933. But these studies failed to quench his spiritual thirst and he abandoned them to seek fulfillment elsewhere. Days were given to the study of art and philosophy and nights were spent in cafes, listening to the disputations of Vienna’s psychoanalysts. “The stimulus of Freud’s ideas was as intoxicating to me as potent wine.” Nights were given to passions (“I rather gloried, like so many others of my generation, in what was considered a ‘rebellion against the hollow conventions’”). Vienna at that time was one of the most intellectually and
culturally stimulating European cities. It was the engine of burgeoning and interrelated, new, glittering perspectives on man, language and philosophy. Not just its academic institutions, but even its cafes reverberated with lively debates centered on psychoanalysis, logical positivism, linguistic analysis and semantics. This was the period when the unprecedented views and distinctive voices of Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler and Ludwig Wittgenstein filled the Viennese air, echoing round the world with a profound momentous effect on many aspects of life and thought. Asad had a ringside seat on these exciting discussions; though he was impressed by the originality of those pioneering spirits, their major conclusions left him unsatisfied.\textsuperscript{19} Political trends before and shortly after the First World War like anti-Semitism, Zionism, exoticism and anti-rationalism would have definitely evoked responses from Asad.

Günther recalls that Theodore Herzl and Asad were similar in being Austrian, assimilated Jews, and journalists. However, while Herzl indulged in Marxism and Zionism, a secular version of the arrogant doctrine of “God’s Chosen People”, Asad rejected Zionism as a racist aberration. He knew after all first hand that Palestine was not a “land without people.” We ought to remember that the German literary genius, Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926), at that time was at the peak of his fame as a trend-setter. Many a German soldiers in the First World War had gone to battle with Rilke poems in his pocket. Young Leopold Weiss would naturally have been impressed by Rilke’s penetrating, spiritualistic lyricism. The amazing thing is that young Weiss, born to be a master, showed neither indebtedness to Rilke nor Rilkian mannerism. His literary skills, so clear in his original English and German
Versions of *The Road to Mecca*, obviously were already mature in 1922.\textsuperscript{20}

Asad left Vienna in 1920 and traveled in Central Europe, where he did “all manner of short-lived jobs”\textsuperscript{21} before arriving in Berlin. Here, he ingeniously secured entry in the world of journalism, when his determination led him – a mere telephonist working for a wire service – to a scoop that revealed the presence in Berlin of Maksim Gorky’s wife who was on a secret mission to solicit aid from the West for a Brobdingnagian famine ravaging Soviet Russia.\textsuperscript{22}

At this stage, Asad, like many of his generation, lived in the dark depths of agnosticism, having drifted away from his Jewish moorings despite his rigorous religious studies. He left Europe for the Middle East in 1922, where he came to know and like the Arabs and was struck by how Islam shone on their everyday life with existential meaning, spiritual strength and inner peace.\textsuperscript{23}

He now became – at the incredibly young age of 22 a correspondent for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* one of the most prestigious newspaper of Germany and Europe. As a journalist, he traveled extensively, intermingled with the common man, held discussions with the Muslim intelligentsia, and met several regional heads of state, in “the countries between the Libyan desert and snow covered peaks of Pamirs, between the Bosporus and the Arabian sea: \textsuperscript{24} Palestine, Egypt, Transjordan, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan.

Researchers on Asad almost seem to be unanimous in their conclusion that earlier years of Asad’s life were so full of events,
rupture and even contradictions that one may wonder whether all these belonged to a single human life only.\textsuperscript{25}  

**Asad Embraces Islam**

During his travels and through his readings, Asad’s interest in, and understanding of, Islam, its scripture, history and peoples increased, but, being agnostic, he could not accept that God spoke to and guided man via revelation. Back in Berlin from the Middle East, and now married, all his doubts were cleared in a spiritual, electrifying epiphany – reminiscent of the experience of some of the earliest Muslims – which he narrated in striking passage that he wrote some thirty years after this turning-point in his life:

One day – it was in September 1926 – Elsa and I found ourselves traveling in the Berlin subway. It was upper-class compartment. My eye fell casually on a well-dressed man opposite me, apparently a well-to-do-businessman, with a beautiful briefcase on his knees and a large diamond ring on his hand. I thought idly how well the portly figure of this man fitted into the picture of prosperity which one encountered every where in Central Europe in those days: A prosperity the more prominent as it had come after years of inflation, when all economic life had been topsy-turvy and shabbiness of appearance the rule. Most of the people were now well-dressed and well fed, and the man opposite me was therefore, no exception. But when I looked at his face, I did not seem to be looking at a happy face. He appeared to be worried: and not merely worried but acutely unhappy, with eyes staring vacantly ahead and the corners of his mouth drawn in as if in pain – but not in bodily pain. Not wanting to be rude, I turned my eyes away and saw next to him a lady of some elegance. She also had a strangely unhappy expression on her face, as if contemplating or
experiencing something that caused her pain; nevertheless, her mouth was fixed in the stiff semblance of a smile which, I was certain, must have been habitual. And then I began to look around at all other faces in the compartment – faces belonging without exception to well-dressed, well-fed people: and in almost every one of them I could discern an expression of hidden suffering, so hidden that the owner of the face seemed to be quite unaware of it.

That was indeed strange. I had never before seen so many unhappy faces around me: or was it perhaps that I had never before looked for what was now so loudly speaking in them? The impression was so strong that I mentioned it to Elsa; and she too began to look around with the careful eyes of a painter accustomed to study human features. Then she turned to me, astonished, and said: ‘You are right. They all look as though they were suffering torments of hell ... I wonder, do they know themselves what is going on in them’?

I knew that they did not – for otherwise they could not go on wasting their lives as they did, without any faith in binding truth without any goal beyond the desire to raise their own ‘standard of living’, without any hopes other than having more materials amenities, more gadgets and perhaps more power...

When we returned home, I happened to glance at my desk on which lay open a copy of the Koran, I had been reading earlier. Mechanically, I picked the book up to put it away, but just as I was about to close it, my eyes fell on the open page before me, and I read:

“You are obsessed by greed for more and more until you go down to your graves.”
Nay, but you will come to know!
And Once again: Nay, but you will come to know!
Nay, if you but knew it with the knowledge of certainty,
You would indeed see the hell you are in.
In time, indeed, you shall see it with the eye of certainty,
And on that day you will be asked what you have done
with the boon of life."

For a moment I was speechless. I think that the book shook in my
hands. Then I handed it to Elsa. ‘Read this. Is it not an answer to
what we saw in the subway’?

It was 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: for although it had been placed before
man over thirteen centuries ago, it clearly anticipated something
that could have become true only in this complicated, mechanized,
phantom - ridden age of ours.

At all time people had know greed: but at no time before greed had
outgrown a mere eagerness to acquire things and become an
obsession that blurred the sight of everything else: an irresistible
craving to get, to do, to contrive more and more – more today that
yesterday, and more tomorrow than today: a demon riding on the
necks of men and whipping their hearts forward toward goals that
tauntingly glitter in the distance but dissolve into contemptible
nothingness as soon as they are reached, always holding out the
promise of new goals ahead – goals still more brilliant, more
tempting as long as they come within grasp: and that hunger that
insatiable hunger for ever new goals growing at man’s soul: Nay,
if you knew it you would see the hell you are in...
This I saw, was not the were human wisdom of a man of a distant past in distant Arabia. However wise he may have been, such a man could not by himself have foreseen the torment so peculiar to this twentieth century. Out of the Koran spoke a voice greater than the Voice of Muhammad... All doubt that the Qur‘an was the book revealed by God vanished. He went to the leader of the Berlin Islamic Society, declared his adherence to Islam, and took the name Muhammad Asad.

Asad Migrates to the Muslim World

Thus it was that Asad became a Muslim in 1926 and migrated to the Muslim World but the psychological and emotional dimensions of Asad’s migration were even more important than the physical ones. Asad’s wife Elsa reverted to Islam a few weeks later, and in January 1927 they left for Makkah, accompanied by Elsa’s son from her previous marriage. On arrival Weiss made his pilgrimage; a moving passage at the end of The Road to Mecca describes his circumambulation of Ka‘ba. Tragically, Elsa died nine days later, of a tropical disease, and her parents reclaimed her son a year later. Asad regarded Islam not as religion in the conventional, or Western, sense but as a way of life for all times. In Islam he found a religious system and a practical ideology for everyday living that were harmoniously balanced. “Islam appears to me like a perfect work of architecture. All its parts are harmoniously conceived to complement and support each other; nothing is superfluous and nothing lacking; and the result is a structure of absolute balance and solid composure.”

The range of his interest in the Muslim World was as varied as the reach of his travels in the land of Islam and he found a way of infusing a visionary’s magnificence into writing that looked at and
beyond contemporary Islam. His interest in Islam and its followers persisted throughout his life and deeply coloured his treatment of all issues touching the Muslims – religious, juristic and political – and he had highly persuasive arguments for his views. Though he was always ideologically and emotionally committed to the Muslims, his attitude towards them remained sympathetic without being sycophantic, intelligently critical but never condescending. Above all, Asad was deeply dedicated to the teachings of the Qur’an and the Prophet, tenaciously independent in his thinking, fiercely anti-secular in his orientation, rigorously consistent in his logic and always impatient with extremist thought and behaviour.²⁹

When he returned to the Middle East following his embracing Islam, Asad spent almost six years in Arabia, where he was received warmly, almost daily, by the legendary king ‘Abd Al-Aziz Ibn Sa‘ūd (d. 1953), the founder of modern Saudi Arabia.³⁰ He spent considerable time in the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah, where he studied Arabic, the Qur’an, the Hadīth, or the traditions of the Prophet and Islamic history. Those studies led him to “the firm conviction that Islam, as a spiritual and social phenomenon, is still, in spite of all the drawbacks caused by the deficiencies of the Muslims, by far the greatest driving force mankind has ever experienced”³¹ and from that time, his interest was “centered around the problem of its regeneration.”³² His academic knowledge of Classical Arabic – made easier by familiarity with Hebrew and Aramaic, sister Semitic languages – was further enhanced by his wide travels and contacts in Arabia with Bedouins.³³

While in Saudi Arabia, Asad took two major adventurous trips. One was when he went on a clandestine mission to Kuwait in 1929, to trace the funds and guns that were flowing to Faysal Al-
Dawish, a rebel against Ibn Saʻūd’s rule. Asad determined that Britain was behind the rebellion, and wrote so for the foreign papers; much to Ibn Saud’s satisfaction. About the second, Asad says that he went on a secret mission to Cyrenaica on behalf of the Grand Sanusi, Sayyid Aḥmad (1873-1932) then in exile in Saudi Arabia, to transmit plans for continuing the anti-Italian struggle to the remnant of the Sanusi forces. But the mission, in January 1931, was a futile one: Italian forces crushed that last of the Sanusi resistance later that year.

Asad also began to settle down. He married twice in Saudi Arabia: first in 1928 to a woman from the Mutayr tribe, and in 1930, following a divorce, to Munira, from a branch of the Shammar. They established a household in Medina, and she bore him a son, Talal. Meanwhile Asad got disenchanted with Ibn Saʻūd. Asad had shared the hope that Ibn Saʻūd would “bring about a revival of the Islamic idea in its fullest sense.” But he “had done nothing to build up an equitable, progressive society.” Asad’s final verdict was that Ibn Saʻūd’s life constituted a tragic waste.”

**Iqbal Invites Asad to Stay in India**

To study Muslim communities and cultures further east, such as those of India, Eastern Turkistan, China and Indonesia, Asad departed Arabia for India in 1932. Asad began with a ‘lecture tour’ to India. According to British intelligence sources, Asad had linked up with an Amritsar activist, Isam‘īl Ghaznavi, and intended to tour India “with a view to get in touch with all important workers”. Asad arrived in Karachi by ship in June 1932, and left promptly for Amritsar. There and in neighboring Lahore, he involved himself with the local community of Kashmiri
Muslims, and in 1933 he made an appearance in Srinagar, where an intelligence report again had him spreading Bolshevik ideas.\textsuperscript{37}

For Asad, the real attraction of Kashmir would have resided in its predicament as contested ground, where a British backed maharaja ruled a discontented Muslim population. Beginning in 1931, Kashmiri Muslims in Punjab organized an extensive agitation in support of the Muslims in Kashmir. Hundreds of bands of Muslim volunteers crossed from Punjab into Kashmir, and thousands were arrested. By early 1932, disturbances had subsided, but the Kashmir government remained ever-weary.\textsuperscript{38} Just what Asad did in Kashmir is uncertain. But on learning of his presence, the Kashmir government wanted him “externed”, although the police had no evidence to substantiate the intelligence report, and there appeared to be legal obstacles to “externing” a European national.\textsuperscript{39} With or without such prompting, Asad soon retreated from Kashmir to Lahore.

There he soon met the celebrated poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), himself of Kashmiri descent, the towering Muslim thinker of the modern era. Iqbal persuaded Asad to change his plans and stay on in India “to help elucidate the intellectual premises of the future Islamic state which was then hardly more than a dream in Iqbal’s visionary mind.”\textsuperscript{40} Asad soon won Iqbal’s admiration and wide public acclaim among educated circles with the publication of a perceptive monograph on the challenges facing modern Muslims. But Asad’s freedom was curtailed when the Second World War broke out in 1939. Ironically, though he had refused to accept a passport from Nazi Germany after it had annexed in 1938 and insisted on retaining his Austrian citizenship, the British Raj imprisoned him on the second day of the War as an “enemy alien” and did not release him till its end in 1945.\textsuperscript{41} He
was the only Western Muslim among the three-thousand-odd Europeans rounded up for internment in India, the large majority of whom were sympathizers of Nazism or Fascism; some have thought that the British authorities' harsh behaviour to Asad was due to their irritation with the a European who always sided with the Indian Muslim community.\textsuperscript{42}

\textbf{Asad in the Service of the Emerging Muslim State of Pakistan}

He moved to Pakistan after its creation in 1947, and charged by its Government with setting up a Department of Islamic Reconstruction whose task was to formulate the ideological foundations for the new state. Later he was transferred to the Pakistan Foreign Ministry to head its Middle East Division, where he endeavored to strengthen Pakistan’s ties to other Muslim countries. He capped his diplomatic career by serving as Pakistan’s Minister Plenipotentiary to the United Nations.\textsuperscript{43} He resigned this position in 1952 to write his autobiography, a work of stunning ingenuity and unrivalled literary effect.\textsuperscript{44}

\textbf{Asad Passes Away}

After writing this book, he left New York in 1955 for other places and finally settled in Spain. He did not cease to write. At eighty, after an endeavor which lasted seventeen years, he realized his life’s dream, for which he felt all life till then was an apprenticeship: a translations and exegesis, or \textit{tafsir}, of the Qur’ān in English. He continued to serve Islam till his death in Spain in February 1992.
Chapter-2

[To the righteous God will say]

"O soul at Peace! Return to thy Sustainer,
Well-pleased, well-pleasing!
Enter thou then, among my servants!
Yea, enter thou My paradise!"45

With his death passed a journalist, traveller, social critic, linguist, thinker, reformer, diplomat, political theorist, translator and scholar dedicated to the service of God and humankind and to leading the good life.

But death will not be the final chapter in Asad’s close relationship with the Muslims: his luminous works remain a living testimony to his great enduring love affair with Islam.46

Asad Represents a New Phenomenon

Asad, in fact, represents an outstanding example of a new phenomenon of modern times: the reversion to Islam, on both sides of the Atlantic, of several Western writers and intellectuals to Islam and their passionate commitment to its vision and way of life. The circumstances and particulars of their entering the fold of Islam may vary, but there are usually three over-arching reasons common to them: a belief in the divine origin of the Qur’ān and in the Prophethood to Muḥammad (S) and Islam’s message to lead the good life. Their act of faith has shown to a wider Western public that, contrary to the misperception that it is a quaint, fanatical religion followed by wild natives in remote regions, Islam’s message and teachings are relevant to, and appropriate for, reasonable and thoughtful people in the most advanced areas of the world. Equally significant, it has also demonstrated that, at least among some fair-minded Westerns the centuries-old barriers of
false images of Islam which went up with the Crusades are falling down. This phenomenon is all the more remarkable in that often these reverts find their way to the Muslim faith via a very unlikely path: literature on Islam and Muslims produced in European languages mostly by orientalists the majority of whom cannot be accused of being friendly to Islam; actually, some are orientalists themselves. Also, most of these reversions have taken place while Western powers were exercising their full political and military might in Muslim lands.

The appeal of Islam to Western elites has not been confined to any one country. To mention just a few names: from Great Britain have come, among others, Lord Stanley of Alderley, an uncle of Bertand Russel, the eleventh Baron Headley (Umar Al-Farooq), a member of the house of Lords and an activist believer, Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, a superb novelist and, later, a translator of the Qur’ān, Martin Lings (Abū Bakr Siraj Al-Dīn), a perceptive scholar of mysticism, and Charles Le Gai Eaton, a talented exppositor of Islam; from France: René Guénon (Abd Al- Wahid Yahyā), an expert in metaphysics, comparative religion and esotericism; Vincent Mansour Monteil, an Orientalist, and Maurice Bucaille, an author; from Germany: Murad Wilfried Hofmann, a diplomat and writer; from Austria: Baron Umar Von Ehrenfels, an anthropologist; from Hungary: Abdul Karim Germanus, an orientalist; from Switzerland: Frithjof Schuon, described by T.S. Eliot as the most impressive writer in the field of comparative religion he has ever encountered, and patrician German Swiss Titus (Ibrahim) Burckhardt, a scholar of mysticism and the son of sculptor Carl Burckhardt; from North America: Thomas Irving (Al-Hajj Ta’lim Ali), an Islamic scholar and translator of the Qur’ān, Hamid Algar, British-born distinguished academic with
special interest in Islam, Margaret Marcus (Maryam Jameelah), a writer, Cyril Glassé, author of Islam works, Jeffrey Lang, a mathematician and writer on Islam, and Michael a poet, a novelist, a writer of travel books.  

**Asad’s Unique Place**

What is the place of Asad in the long list of distinguished reverts from the West in the 20th century? The contribution made by each individual in the backdrop of the peculiar circumstances of Islam and the Muslims in the 20th century shall have to be evaluated. For some Asad stands head and shoulders above all other Western English-Writing reverts: “He rose to unparalleled eminence among Western Muslims because none has contributed more than Asad to elucidating Islam as an ideology and conveying its quintessential spirit in contemporary terms to Muslims and Non-Muslims alike... with brilliant writings on Islam and with wide ranging services to the Muslims, sometimes rendered at great personal sacrifice.” For a correct appreciation of Asad’s work, we have to see it against the backdrop of his first encounter with the Muslim World.

**Declining Muslim World**

Asad’s introduction to the Muslim World took place when he visited a turbulent, fearful Middle East in the wake of First World War. For the previous two centuries, an ascendant Europe had remade the map of the Muslim world from the shores of Morocco on the Atlantic in the west to the fertile countryside of Mindanao in the Pacific in the east, and from the mountains of Daghestan in the north to the coconut-palm-fringed beaches of the Maldives Islands in the Indian Ocean in the south. Its military, political,
cultural and economic onslaught on the sea had blown up like a hurricane. The glory of the Mughals of India and Safavids of Persia had passed away; the back of the once-formidable Ottoman state had been broken; the Caliphate – an institution which, though reduced in status, still enjoyed popular support – had been abolished. The Muslims lagged behind the West in the educational, industrial and technological and scientific fields. As the first decades of the twentieth century wore on, they felt at bay. They were deeply divided, disheartened and humiliated. They had been so weakened that some quarters even harbored designs to ring down the last curtain on Islam as a religion and civilization.3

Cross-Currents in the Muslim World

During the earlier decades of 20th century, these momentous changes had loosened a storm of new values, concepts and social stresses on the Muslim world; of unprecedented violence and scope, it threatened to sweep away the very foundations of Muslim society. Many Muslims still cherished traditional Islamic values. Yet, a broad spectrum of competing, confusing trends appeared in the Islamic World as the influence of the West had left few Muslim countries untouched. There were movements in support of religious reform which had their roots in Muslim tradition. Muḥammad ‘Abduh of Egypt (d. 1905) and Iqbal (d. 1938) represented this trend in the early twentieth century and their influence remains strong and alive. But there were also advocates of the newly imported ideas of westernization, nationalism, and secularism who looked to the West for inspiration. The spearheads of these ideologies were Kemal Ataturk (d. 1938) of Turkey and Reza Shah of Iran (d. 1944). As it was not possible to square the antipodal ideas of the traditional Islamic reformers with those of
the advocates of westernization and secularism, a complete rupture between them was soon fairly fully established.\textsuperscript{51}

**Asad Recognizes his Primary Goals**

In this situation of the Muslim world, Asad saw it as his destiny and duty to critically examine the causes of the decline of the Muslims as well as the forces and the problems pressing them and to wake them from their slumber. Driven by the zeal of a reformer, Asad tried to bridge the gap between the traditional and the modern worlds. He was repelled by what he saw as the religiously and socially disruptive newfangled ideas spreading in the Islamic World: westernization, secularism, nationalism and materialism. Like other writers and thinkers who had in them “a spark of the flame which burned in the hearts of the companions of the Prophet”,\textsuperscript{52} he responded to the challenge to reconcile religion and modernization and to produce what some call “a wide-ranging synthesis of Islam, modernity, and the needs of the society of the day.”\textsuperscript{53}

Asad lived in an era of immense social, intellectual and political creativity. While most other reformers shook the Muslim World with the thunder of their spirits, power of their charisma and strength of their popular support, he was an intellectual who did not belong to any organization. Asad’s obvious virtues, those which no reader can fail to see immediately, are depth of knowledge, clarity of reasoning and the meticulous exposition and dissection of arguments, even when he accepts their conclusions. It is his peculiar achievement that, with high virtuosity and great passion, he contrived to make a coherent whole of his diverse concerns.\textsuperscript{54}
Asad’s Intellectual Fortes

Definitely the primary sources of Asad’s inspiration were the Qur’ān and the traditions of the Prophet (S). But he could not fail to be impressed by ‘Abduh and Iqbāl and other thinkers who had earlier diagnosed the ills of the Muslim society and prescribed a similar remedy for it. A vigorous promoter of Muslim ideology and values and a precursor of those Muslims who were proud of their identity and wanted to preserve it in a changing, tumultuous world. Asad instilled in his public new confidence in the power and future of Islam. To do all this, he used a powerful tool: his pen.

The reach, range, depth and relevance of what he penned were immense. Asad’s writings on Islam and the Muslims extend over half a century, from the 1920s to the 1980s. His writings include: Unromantisches Morgenland (ca. 1925); Islam at the Crossroads (1934); Șaḥīḥ al-Bukharī: The early years of Islam (1935-1938), an annotated translation; The Road to Mecca (1954); The Principles of state and Government in Islam (1961); The Message of the Qur’ān (1964-1980), an interpretation of, and a commentary on, the Muslim Holy Book; and This Law of Ours and Other Essays (1987). Between 1946 and 1947 he also brought out a journal, Arafāt: A Monthly Critique of Muslim thought.

Asad’s first book was written in German language and carried his original name Leopold Weiss, Unromantisches Morgenland55 – Aus dem Tagebuch einer Reise –Frankfurt: Societāts – Druckerei G.M.B.H. – 1094.

It was written at the end of 1922 for the publishers Frankfurter Zeitung, which was then and continues to be even now the most
prestigious German journal. Weiss wrote this book at the tender age of 22. Together with the paintress Elsa Schiemann, who would be his first wife, between March and October of that year he had visited Palestine, Transjordan (‘Amman, with only 6000 inhabitants), Syria, Egypt (Cairo and Alexandria), Turkey (Smyrna, just burnt down, and Constantinople) as well as Malta. The book is illustrated by 59 black - and - white photographs which are now of great historical importance. The sources of the photographs are not mentioned.  

This small diary of just 159 pages amazes one in several ways. Most surprising, however, is the young author’s talent as a writer, in particular his powerfully evocative, yet lyrical descriptions of countryside, moods and people; they are often startling but never banal. The colour of light, for instance, may be “shell-like”, travelers may be “silent, as if wrapped up in the great landscape.” Forms and movements can be of an “intoxicating uniqueness” and “wind like a breath without substance.” In Jerusalem, he found “little air to breathe” and “a yearning for terror.” Here, like no where else, Weiss “heard history roar by” and walked on ground so soft that his “feet took comfort from walking.”

Weiss, even then, was enamoured of, and most romantically infatuated with, almost everything Arab. He portrays himself as an uncritical, unconditional admirer of the Arab race and culture. For him, the “Arabs are blessed” (44) and archetypically graceful. In his view, it was “a wonderful expression of the widely alert Arab being” that it “does not know of any separation between yesterday and tomorrow, thought and action, objective reality and personal sentiment” (77). The Arabs, according to him “always identify with the simple things happening out of nowhere (and are therefore free of tragedy and remorse)” (86). They lead “a
wonderfully simple life that in a direct line leads from birth to death” (91).\(^{58}\)

After talking to leading figure of Transjorden Weiss, in his idealization of the Arabs, indulged in prophetic lyrics: “You are timeless. You jumped out of the course of world history... You are the contemporary ones until you will be invested by Will, and then you will become bearers of the Future. Then your power will be dense and pure...” (93).\(^{59}\)

There is nostalgia in the air when Weiss admires the Arabs because “their lives flow with the naïveté of animals” (127). Even while in Istanbul, he regretfully sighs: “Oh, my Arab people”! (153). One more quote would suffice: “During several months, I was so impressed by the uniqueness of the Arabs that I am now looking everywhere for the strong centre of their lives... recognizing the eternally exciting, the stream of vitality, in such a great mass, in so strange a nation” (133). Against that astonishingly affinity with all things Arab – but surprisingly not Islamic! – the young Weiss, in the book’s ‘introduction’, muses: “in order to understand their genius one would have to enter their circle and live with their associations. Can one do that?"\(^{60}\)

Asad is one of those Westerners who, with extraordinary effort, tried to turn into a real Arab. Like all the others, he became a virtual Arab for the simple reason that neither a civilization (Islamic), nor a nation (Turkey), nor an individual (after about the age of about 16) can fully assimilate any other culture to the point of erasing the previous one. Cultural transmigration was, and is a futile attempt. Yet Muḥammad Asad, fuelled by his youthful infatuation, was perhaps closer than anybody else to becoming a “real” Arab.\(^{61}\)
Unromantisches Morgenaland reveals young Asad's ideas about Zionism prior to his embracing Islam. For him, Zionism had entered into an unholy alliance with Western powers and thereby became a wound in the body of the Near East. However, Weiss, otherwise quite far-sighted, expected Zionism to fail because of the "sick immorality" of its Israel project (33). He considered the very idea that the plight of the Jewish people could be cured through a homeland, without first healing the malady of Judaism as such, as a sick one. The Jews, so thought Weiss, had not lost Palestine without reason. They had lost it for having betrayed their moral commitment and their God. Without reversing this disastrous course, it was useless to build roofs in Palestine. Weiss, still declaring himself to be a Jew (45), did not reject Judaism but political Zionism (56), and did so less on political than on religious grounds.  

There is another major insight to be gained from Asad's first-book: his virulent cultural criticism of the Occident as spent, decadent, exploitative (capitalist) and mindlessly consumerist. Weiss does not indicate in any way that World War One had just taken place. But he betrays some of the cultural contempt typical of the pre-war intellectuals and of their longing for what is "natural", risky and existential when complaining "how terribly risky is the absence of risk." For him, the Europeans had become spiritually sluggish, "clinging to things", and losing their instincts as well as their "rope-dancing" vitality (5). Indeed, he contemptuously contrasts liberal utilitarianism against an Orient that is about is to "regain form its own self what is grand and new" and "allows individuals the freedom to live a life without borders" (74). With regard to the young Soviet Union Weiss, like many others at the time, even dares to speak with a positive note
and mentions the possibility of the "liberation of the entire world" (77).\footnote{63}

Thus, \textit{Unromantisches Morgenland} reveals Leopold Weiss as a poet, a lover (of Arabia), an anti Zionist, and a moralist. What amazes one in all these respects is the authority with which he speaks as a political pundit, making bold forecasts. Being a gifted amateur, he successfully poses as an accomplished \textit{expert} on Near Eastern affairs in general. Obviously still a beginner in Arabic in spite of his Hebrew background, Weiss mentions only to one single occasion where he used an interpreter, as a back-up (92). In so posturing Weiss showed himself, so gifted that one would hesitate to accuse him of imposture.\footnote{64}

There is one last amazing thing that we find, or rather do not find, in Asad's earliest book: Islam is virtually absent. The only time when it is mentioned, Asad dismisses it as being non-essential for their genius because that is "rooted in its blood" (91) – a statement somewhat smacking of racist Arabophilia. Thus, while holding many promises, the book did not foreshadow Asad's reversion to Islam.\footnote{65}

The editors of the \textit{Frankfurter Zeitung} immediately recognized the promise of the greatness of the author. So it was only logical for them to order another travelogue from him. Weiss accepted the assignment, received the money, but was unable to deliver (and was fired). However, only two years after the appearance of \textit{Unromantisches Morgenland}, in 1926 in Berlin,\footnote{66} he became a Muslim.\footnote{67}
Islam at the Crossroads

Asad’s first publication as a committed Muslim was *Islam at the Crossroads*, published in 1934. It heralded the arrival of a brilliant English-writer revert with a bold, dynamic vision. A man unafraid of controversy, he had one single, enduring, driving goal: to help bring back the Muslims to the two original sources which were the foundation of their spiritual and temporal greatness, the Qur’ān and the Sunnah, the practice of the Prophet – “the only binding explanation of the Qur’ānic teachings.”

The book did not claim to give a comprehensive answer to the many ailments that had weakened and destabilized the Muslim World. Raising the banner of revolt against the intellectual, social and political challenge posed by an ever-expanding Western Weltanschauung, the primary aim of *Islam at the Crossroads* was to warn the Muslims against blindly imitating Western values and mores, which Asad thought posed a mortal danger to Islam. It had an authentic Iqbāli spirit, and was an incisive, sweeping – and, often, a startling but refreshing – response to a tide which had long flowed in favour of Western cultural and political hegemony. Moreover it vivified a debate in progress on two of the fundamental concerns which exercised Muslim reformers: the perplexing problems of westernization and Muslim revival and the extent to which it was necessary for Muslims to follow the West’s ways in order to achieve progress.

Asad’s Emphasis on the Qur’ān and Sunnah

He exposed adherence to the teachings of the Qur’ān and the Sunnah without which he thought Islam and Muslim Civilization could not survive. He says in *Islam at the Crossroads*: “Many
reform proposals have been advanced during the last decades, and many spiritual doctors have tried to devise a patent medicine for the sick body of Islam. But, until now, all has been in vain, because all those clever doctors – at least all those who get a hearing today – have invariably forgotten to prescribe, along with their medicines, tonics and elixirs, the natural diet on which the early development of the patient had been based. This diet, the one which the body of Islam, sound or sick, can positively accept and assimilate, in the Sunnah of our Prophet Muḥammad."70 "The Sunnah", he emphasizes is the key to the understanding of the Islamic rise more than thirteen centuries ago; and why should it not be a key to the understanding of our present degeneration? Observance of Sunnah is synonymous with Islamic existence and progress. Neglect of the Sunnah is synonymous with a decomposition of and decay of Islam. The Sunnah is the iron framework building, and if you remove the framework can you be surprised if it breaks down like a house of cards?"71 

The salience of the Sunnah for Muslims is stressed in many places in Islam at the Crossroads. One such example is: “The term Sunnah is used in its widest meaning, namely, the example of the Prophet has set before us in his attitudes, actions and sayings. His wonderful life was a living illustration and explanation of the Qur’ān, aid we can do no greater justice to the Holy Book than by following him who was the means of revelation.”72 

He was receptive to the Muslims being open to the world, but insisted on their maintaining their spiritual and cultural identity. "A Muslim must live with his head held high," he writes in his book. "This does not mean that Muslim should seclude themselves from the voices coming from without. One may at all times receive new, positive influence from a foreign civilization without
necessarily abandoning his own. An example of this kind was the European Renaissance. There we have seen how reading Europe accepted Arab influences in the matter and method of learning. But it never invited the outward appearance and the spirit of Arabian Culture, and never sacrificed its own intellectual and aesthetic independence. It used Arab influences only as a fertilizer upon its own soil, just as the Arabs had used Hellenistic influences in their time. In both cases, the result was a spiritual enrichment, a strong, new growth of an indigenous civilization, full of self-confidence and pride in itself. No civilization can prosper, or even exist, after having lost this pride and the connection with its own past.73

Asad was always steadfast in his beliefs. But in fairness to him, it should be mentioned that, while he held steadfastly to his beliefs, his views mellowed with time. In a later edition of Islam at the Crossroads, he softened his occasional astringent stance on several issues he had raised some four decades earlier.74

**Widespread Impact of Islam at the Crossroads**

*Islam at the Crossroads* contributed to the breaking up of the ice of *anomie* and malaise prevalent in the Muslim world at the time. It received great critical acclaim and was commercial success, which cannot be said of all of Asad’s books. But it can safely be said that it is one of Asad’s works on which his fame will rest. Iqbāl – who outshone all other Muslim thinkers of the twentieth century – called it an eye-opener. It is perhaps Asad’s most widely read and translated book. Its immaculate Arabic version done by ‘Umar Farrukh (d. 1987), a prominent Labanese scholar and introduced by eminent Mustafā al-Khalidi, had a wider readership than the original, which itself has been reprinted
fourteen times. Interestingly like *citizen kane*, which was a young Orson Welles’ seminal screen masterpiece, *Islam at the Crossroads* catapulted Asad to great fame at the start of his productive career; and like the classic film, the brilliant critique of the westernization movement was an act that was hard for its author to follow. But other writing themes and achievements backoned the young Asad.

*

**Ṣaḥīḥ ʿAl-Bukhārī**

After *Islam at the Crossroads*, Asad focused his attention on one of the earliest and most enduring of his concerns as a reformer: “to make real the voice of the Prophet of Islam – real, as if he were speaking directly to us and for us: and it is in the *ḥadīth* that his voice can be most clearly heard.” Like other Islamic reformers, he thought that knowledge of the traditions of the Prophet- which complement and amplify the Qur’ān – was necessary for “a new understanding and a *direct* appreciation of the true teachings of Islam.”

Infact, he had been preoccupied with the Prophet’s *Sunnah*, or way of life, from his Madīnah days. Toward this end, and with the encouragement of Iqībāl, he attempted a task that till then had never been undertaken in English. This was the translation of, and commentary on, the Prophet’s authentic traditions as carefully and critically compiled in the ninth century-over a period of sixteen years- by the greatest traditionist al-Bukhārī (d. 870). Between 1935 and 1938, Asad published the first five of forty projected installments of al-Bukhārī’s celebrated work under the title, *Ṣaḥīḥ ʿAl-Bukhārī: The Early Years of Islam*. But due to his internment during the second World War, the destruction of the manuscripts of his annotated rendering in the chaos that followed the creation
of two nation-states India and Pakistan and the press of other intellectual activities, he was unable to complete the publication of this work,\textsuperscript{79} esteemed by many Muslim to be second only to the Qur'\textasciitilde{\textsuperscript{a}}n in importance. Years later he described the sad scene of the end of his loving effort to make the Prophet's voice heard and understood in English: "With my own eyes I saw a few scattered leaves of those manuscripts floating down the river Ravi [now in Indian Punjab] in the midst of torn Arabic books- the remnants of my library-and all manner of debris, and with those poor, floating pieces of paper vanished beyond recall more than ten years of intensive labour."\textsuperscript{80}

But the years spent on this undertaking were not spent in vain; on the contrary they were, as Asad himself recognized, a preparation for a greater task that was awaiting him.\textsuperscript{81}

The book contains the historical passages normally found in Vol.I, Book 1 ("How Revelation Began"), and Vol. V, Book 57, ("The Merits of the Prophet's Companions") and book 59 (\textit{al-Magh\textasciitilde{\textsuperscript{a}z\textasciitilde{\textsuperscript{i}}}: Military Campaign). However, Asad committed the last 29 sections of Book 57 to a new book called "How Islam Began".\textsuperscript{82}

This was a part of his attempt to re-order al-Bukh\textasciitilde{\textsuperscript{a}r\textasciitilde{\textsuperscript{i}}}'s material according either to subject matter (i.e. personalities) or chronology or both, an approach that ran his into objections. After all al-Bukh\textasciitilde{\textsuperscript{a}r\textasciitilde{\textsuperscript{i}}} \textit{S\textasciitilde{\textsuperscript{a}h\textasciitilde{\textsuperscript{i}}h}, had been read and re-read and even committed to memory by so many Muslims since its collection in the third century A.H the nine century C.E.\textsuperscript{83}

Equally important were Asad's detailed and extensive notes - an ideal way to make the \textit{ah\textasciitilde{\textsuperscript{a}d\textasciitilde{\textsuperscript{i}}th} come alive. It is the very thoroughness and lucidity of this commentary which one later
finds again in Asad's *The Message of the Qur'ān*. Typical for instance, is Asad's treatment of conflicting reports on 'Umar ibn al-Khattāb's reversion to Islam (168). He reconciles these reports by suggesting that 'Umar's reversion “was probably not the result of one single experience.”

With his extensive notes on parts of the *Sunnah* Asad followed up his views—first expressed in *Islam at the Crossroads*—that not *Fiqh* but the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* must be refocused on the centre-pieces of Islam. With his work on the *Ṣaḥīḥ*, by giving the entire corpus of *Ḥadīth* a fresh credibility and respectability, Asad countered the dangerous tend to turn Islam into merely some form by a vague and amorphous deism. It was a major effort indeed. Ever since, indiscriminate assaults on the *Sunnah*, as mounted by Goldziher and later by Schacht, look some what inept.  

*The Principals of State and Government in Islam*  

A book of 107 pages only has become an essential foundation of further efforts to rejuvenate Islamic jurisprudence and to develop a much needed Islamic theory of state. Originally, research on this book was prompted by the need to develop an Islamic constitution for the new Islamic Republic of Pakistan: to base a society not on race or nationality but solely on the “ideology” of the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah*. The book therefore reflects some of the intoxicating awareness that the Muslim world might have, now again, “a free choice of destiny.”

Asad was aware that Islamic history could not provide models that could be copied directly. The confederation of Madīnah was set up under very peculiar circumstances; it was also unique in so far as
it was being ruled over by a messenger of God. Islamic history has ever since been characterized pretty much by despotism.

The ideas of Nizām al-Mulk (d. 1092) and al-Māwardī (d. 1058) could not serve as the blue-prints of an Islamic community in the industrial age.

Asad therefore keenly felt the need to make a clear distinction between the relatively small set of divine norms governing state and government, found in the Qur’ān and Sunnah which alone deserve the name of the Shari‘ah. As for fiqh, i.e. enormous body of rules derived from the Qur’ān and the Sunnah, it was essentially man-made notwithstanding the fact that its ultimate sources were rooted in Revelation.88

“An Islamic state”, Asad posits in The Principles of State and Government of Islam, is not a goal or an end in itself but only a means the goal being the growth of a community of people who stand up for equity and justice, for right and against wrong—or, to put it more precisely, a community of people who work for the creation and maintenance of such social conditions as would enable the greatest possible number of human beings to live, morally as well as physically, in accordance with the natural Law of God, Islam.89

Asad held that modern and future Muslims had considerable flexibility to deal creatively — through ijtihād, independent thinking with an ever-changing world and its attendant challenges. But he believed that it was incumbent upon them when carrying out ijtihād to be bound at all times by the two fundamental sources of Islamic law: the Qur’ān and the Sunnah. He believed that in all matters which were clearly enjoined by the Shari‘ah, sovereignty
belonged to God alone, but in most other areas, such as the form of the political system to be adopted, God in His Wisdom gave the believers the right, and imposed on them the duty, to exercise their reason to arrive at the appropriate decision for their time by mutual consultation. Asad laid great emphasis on the Quranic principle of consultation; he gave no quarter to totalitarian systems of government, which he thought were pernicious and anti-Islamic.

The Road to Mecca

The Road to Mecca, revealed the gems of literary talent in the secret casket of Asad’s genius.

In The Road to Mecca, published in 1954, Asad offers us nearly 380 enthralling pages which revolve around the only love that captivated him for life: Islam. His story is “simply”, he says, “the story of a European’s discovery of Islam and of his integration within the Muslim community”.

He wrote it in response to those of his Western colleagues in New York who had been baffled by his reversion to Islam and identification with the Muslims. “Serving as Pakistan’s Minister Plenipotentiary to the United Nations, I was naturally in the public eye and encountered a great deal of curiosity among my European and American friends and acquaintances. At first they assumed that mine was the case of a European ‘expert’ employed by an Eastern government for a specific purpose, and that I had conveniently adapted myself to the ways of the nation which I was serving; but when my activities at the United Nation made it obvious that I identified myself not merely ‘functionally’ but also emotionally and intellectually with the political and cultural aims
of the Muslim World in general, they became somewhat perplexed.\textsuperscript{92}

But what a rich story and how marvelously told! It covers Asad’s life from his beginning in Lvov in 1900 to his last desert journey in Arabia in 1932. It treats of vast themes: a journey in space and in spirit, an exploration of vast geographical distance and of the deep interior recesses of a man’s psyche.\textsuperscript{93}

\textit{The Road to Mecca} gives us a rounded portrait of a restless man in search of adventure and truth. It is part spiritual autobiography, part summary of the author’s intuitive insights into Islam and the Arabs, part an impressive travelogue. Spiced with a virtuosity of literary technique, a perfect prose style fashioned for the purpose, and a European storyteller’s urbane sensibility and infused with a genuine sympathy for the world it describes, \textit{The Road to Mecca} often eclipses the classic travel books on Arabia: those of Charles Doughty, Richard Burton, T.E. Lawrence, Freya Stark and Wilfrid Thesiger.\textsuperscript{94}

Punctuated with abundant adventure, moments of contemplation, colorful narrative, brilliant description and lively anecdote, \textit{The Road to Mecca} tells a story that on all counts is gripping but which necessarily suffers in a skeletal condensing. It tells of the upbringing of Muhammad Asad in his homeland as Leopold Weiss, an Austrian Jew who was descended of orthodox rabbis, of his University days in Vienna, of musings on the human condition in the West; of wonderings across central Europe in search of a fulfilling life; of gate crashing into the world of journalism in Berlin, of his extensive travels all over the middle East, of soul-stirring visits to Jerusalem and Cairo; of working as a correspondent for one of the most prestigious German newspapers;
of falling in love with Islam and the Arabs; of momentous reversion to the Muslim faith and becoming Muḥammad Asad, of sojourning in Arabia for six years and being the guest of king ʿAbd al-ʿAziz, the monarch who coalesced once-warring tribes into a unified, peaceful Kingdom; of living like an Arab, wearing only Arab dress, speaking only Arabic; dreaming dreams in Arabic, of traveling with the Bedouin; of studying Islam's scripture and history in the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah; of going on pilgrimage; of encounters with people belonging to every stratum of society—the simple man in the street, the sophisticated intellectual, the shrewd merchant and the powerful head of state, of going on a hazardous secret mission to Italian-occupied Cyrenaica to contact and assist ʿUmar al-Mukhtar (hanged by the Italians in 1931), the warrior—hero of the country's freedom movement. And, throughout, there are two motifs which are embroidered on every panel of this wonderfully crafted tapestry: a deep faith in God and an overwhelming love for the Arabian Prophet.⁹⁵

Above all, The Road to Mecca tells a human story of a modern man's restlessness and loneliness, passions and ambitions, joys and sorrows, anxiety and commitment, vision and humanness. Its author comes out as brilliant, exciting, lively, full of penetrating observation, immense charm, and tremendous zest for life and deeply held religious beliefs. Significantly, he triumphantly achieves his purpose in writing. The Road to Mecca: none can read it without getting a better appreciation of Islam. Resigning as Pakistan's ambassador to the United Nations in order to devote himself to writing this book, he became an ambassador of Islam to the West— and to many alienated intellectuals and youths in Muslim lands.⁹⁶
This book is interesting at any point of entry. Like any classic, *The Road to Mecca* has passages which never lose their flavour, despite repeated reading. *The road to Mecca* covers Asad’s life till the point of his departure from Arabia to India in 1932.

His readers were left with a thirst for the remainder of his autobiography. He did start working on a sequel, *Homecoming of the Heart*, which promised to unfold the rest of his active and fruitful life, but it was unfinished at the time of his death.\(^97\)

**Assessment of *The Road to Mecca***

The merits of *The Road to Mecca* were widely recognized when it appeared. *The Times Literary Supplement* said, “History tells us of many European converts to Islam, some of whom have risen to high place and power in the lands of their adoption... But it is rare to find a convert setting out, step by step, the process of his conversion and doing this, moreover, in a narrative of great power and beauty... His knowledge of Middle Eastern peoples and of their problems is profound; indeed in some respects his narrative is at once more intimate and more penetrating than that of Doughty.”\(^98\) The reviewer of the *Christian Science Monitor* wrote: “[This] book is one which has burst with strange and compelling authority upon the small fraternity of Westerners who know Arabia... a book trenchant with adventure magnificently described, and a commentary upon the inner meaning of Arab and Moslem life, helpful to all who would achieve a more accurate understanding of the Arabs and their lands.”\(^99\) A very rare and powerful book, raised completely above the ordinary by its condor and intelligence... And what we gain in a cultural reorientation which should permanently affect our view of the world”, said the *New York Post*.\(^100\)
It seems to be the latest book of Asad. In fact, however, it consists in part of some of his oldest writings. It is a collection of some of the essays that were first published in 1946 and 1947 in his “one-man journal”, Arafāt – A Monthly Critique of Muslim Thought – which appeared for just a few years from Lahore. In the meantime, Asad had developed an intellectual affinity to Ibn Hazm of Cordova (d. 1064) who, like himself, had battled against all that goes beyond Qur’ān and Sunnah.

Asad’s struggle to delineate the boundaries between Shari’ah and Fiqh appears in an intensified form in this book. Asad derives home the point that the “real” Shari’ah must be identified (and possible codified). Backed by Ibn Ḥanbal, Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Ḥazm, he takes the uncompromising stand that nothing merely based on ijmā or qiyyās – qualifies to be reckoned as a divine norm. On the basis of the Qur’ān and Sunnah alone – a new ijtihād was needed in order to develop a modern fiqh, responsive to contemporary issues. This modern fiqh should be much simpler than the highly complex traditional one; Asad hastened to add, of course, no results of the new ijtihād could be admitted as forming part of the Shari’ah either; otherwise modern fuqahā would repeat the mistake of their ancestors: to petrify their jurisprudence.

This Law of Ours is of particular interest to Pakistani Muslims, especially its chapter “What do we mean by Pakistan?” of which a sub-section is entitled “Evasion and self-deception.” It includes seven moving radio-addresses given by Asad to his Pakistani fellow citizens. He looked beyond official declarations of Islamism when he stated: “Neither the mere fact of having a Muslim majority, nor the mere holding of governmental key
positions by Muslims, nor even the functioning of the personal laws of the *Sharī'ah* can justify us in describing any Muslim state as an "Islamic State" (109). He made it clear that neither the introduction of *Zakāt*, nor outlawing *ribā*, nor prescribing *hijāb* or administering *hudūd* punishments *in and by themselves* will do the trick of turning a country into an Islamic one. For that, so Asad felt, there is only one way: to bring about "a community that *really* lives according to the tenets of Islam" and presently "there is not a single community of this kind in sight (14)."

It is an observation such as these that we encounter for the first time Muḥammad Asad, expressing bitter feelings about the ground realities of the world of Islam.105

Asad was too cautious and scrupulous a thinker to propose a programme of reform built on the *Sharī'ah* without constant refinement and attention to recalcitrant, practical detail and without voicing his views vigorously. "Simply talking about the need for a ‘re-birth’ of faith is not much better than bragging about our glorious past and extolling the greatness of our predecessors", he says in *This Law of Ours and Other Essays*. "Our faith cannot be born unless we understand what it implies and to what practical goals it will lead us. It will not do us the least good if we are glibly assured that the socio-economic programme of Islam is better than that of socialism, communism, capitalism, fascism, and God knows what other ‘isms’... We ought rather to be *shown* in unmistakable terms, what alternative proposals the *Sharī'ah* makes for our society is, what views it puts forward with regard to individual property and communal good, labour and production, capital and profit, employer and employee, the state and individual: what its practical measures are for the prevention of man’s exploitation by man for an abolition of
ignorance and poverty; for obtaining food, clothing and shelter for every man, woman and child...”

In another place, he returns to a central theme, the harmonious interaction between body and soul and between faith and deeds, which was one of the main reasons he was attracted to Islam: “this religion of ours would not be God’s Message to man if its foremost goal were not man’s growth towards God: but our bodies and our souls are so intertwined that we cannot achieve the ultimate well-being of the one without taking the other fully into account. Specious sermonizing about ‘faiths’ and ‘sacrifice’ and ‘surrender to God’s Will’ cannot lead to the establishment of true Islam on earth unless we are shown how to gain faith through a better insight into God’s plan, how to elevate our spirit by living a righteous life, and how to surrender ourselves to God by doing His Will as individuals and as a community, so that we might really become ‘the best community that has ever been brought forth for [the good of] mankind’ (Surah 3: 110).”

The Message of the Qur’ān

This represents magnum opus of Asad’s work. The present work is specially focused on this work and shall be dealt with in the following chapters.

Asad’s Views on Leading Muslim Reformers

Asad highlighted the necessity of a dynamic approach to solving the problems of the Muslims by the use of ijtihād based on the two ultimate authorities in Islam, The Qur’ān and the authenticated traditions of the Prophet. He argued passionately that following this rugged path was the only way to ensure a successful revival in the Muslim world. In his insistence on the recourse to independent
thinking he drew inspiration from such luminaries of the classical, medieval and modern periods as the second Caliph ‘Umar Ibn Al-Khattāb (d. 644), ‘Ali Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064), Fakhr Al-Dīn Al-Rāzī (d. 1210), Taqi Al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328), Ibn Al-Qayyim Al-Jawziyyah (d. 1350), Jamāl Al-Dīn Al-Afghānī (d. 1897) and Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905). He was deeply respectful of the achievements of the great scholars of the past, but was critical of blind deference to individual opinions which according to Islamic principles cannot be regarded as infallible. He thought that all qualified Muslims were entitled and enjoined to exercise their judgment on a wide range of societal issues that arise in every age and had not been determined by divine revelation or authentic prophetic traditions. In support of his position, Asad would frequently cite the prophetic tradition that, if one exercised his judgment and was right, God would reward him doubly, but if he turned out to be wrong, God would still give him a reward. Today, many distinguished scholars endorse the concept of *ijtihād* enthusiastically.\(^{109}\)

Asad’s disenchantment with secularism and materialism was the child of his very intimate, personal experience of the west. This disappointment was deeply felt, searchingly scrutinized and trenchantly expressed. The impact of his devastating iconoclastic critique of these trends reoriented many away from defeatism to pride in their Muslim identity and heritage. Asad’s cautionary and trailblazing examination of the debilitating effects of secular and materialistic thought on society has led to the appearance of several excellent studies on the subject. Also, the predictions Asad made some sixty-five years ago on the effect of this thought on Muslims have not been wide of the mark.\(^{110}\)
Apart from very brief period when he was part of a team, Asad always worked on his own. Though he held several leaders of modern Islamic reform movements in high esteem, he was too independent a thinker not to question their intellectual and political currency: he did not grind anybody’s ideological or political axe. He never belonged to any organized movement, nor did he wish to form a socio-political organization to promote his reformist ideas. Part of this aversion of his was because Asad had little sympathy for the intolerance that often accompanies group partisanship; probably, he also felt that the consuming demands of organizational efforts had detrimental effects on creative writing. But because he was, and remained an intellectual and never became an activist or a founder of a party, he did not leave any disciples who could carry on and develop his thought.\textsuperscript{111}

For the reasons just mentioned, Asad kept aloof from affiliating with the mainstream movements working for the common goal of Islamists: the resurgence of Islam. He, however, knew and respected the leaders of the major Islamic organizations and maintained amicable personal relation with them. He paid tribute to them when the occasion called for it but also spoke up in their defence or cried in lamentation whenever misfortune touched any of them. For example, though he disagreed with “certain points” of the Jamā‘at-e-Islami’s programme, he thought of it as “a positive, legitimate movement.” He considered the Jamā‘at’s founder, Sayyid Abū ‘l-A‘lā Mawdūdī (d. 1979) “not only a great Islamic scholar but also dear personal friend of many years’ standing.” He adds: “Although – as is clear from his and my writings – we did not concur on all points, our goal and objective was always the same: a deepening of the Islamic faith and Muslim culture.” He also had great affection and admiration for Ḥasan Al-Bannā (d.
1949), who launched in the late 1920’s the Arab world’s most powerful Islamic movement, *Al Ikhwān Al-Muslimūn*. He considered Al-Bannā “truly the greatest spiritual guide of our time, although his thoughts and his programme have often been deliberately misrepresented, in the Muslim world as well as in the West.” Asad denounced strongly the execution of the gifted writer and Qur’ān commentator Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) by Egyptian President Jamāl ‘Abd al-Nāsir (d. 1970) whose “mindless and ferocious persecution of the Brotherhood” was behind this heinous act, which violated the lowest standards of decency and justice and stunned the entire Muslim World. “... I mourned his death as did every believing Muslim...”

**An Estimate**

Muhammad Asad has emerged as one of the most influential writers of 20th century Islamic literature in English. Likewise his readership is across all the major continents of the world. His writings have covered large areas: travel and autobiography, *Sunnah* and *Shari’ah*, jurisprudence and Qur’ānic exegesis, secularism and Westernization, political theory and constitutional law. While posterity shall definitely reexamine his position on such varied issues and re-consider their relevance to their situations, it shall very much study the methodology Asad adopted for studying the basic sources of Islam – Qur’ān and *Sunnah*, and also the Islamic history, culture and civilization. It is worthwhile to study the views of the contemporary scholars and thinkers on Asad and his contributions. Hence a separate chapter is devoted to such opinions in this work. Asad’s *magnum opus*, *The Message of the Qur’ān*, too is worth a detailed study in order to appreciate how a leading figure of 20th century looks at the last revealed message which continues to be the ultimate source of Divine
guidance for all those truth seekers who are sincere in their search.

Asad in his formative years had been under the influence of western ideas and western sciences, including philosophy, history of art, chemistry and physics. He was particularly influenced by the then emerging psychoanalysis. He had been exposed to the writings of German literary genius Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926), whose penetrating, spiritualistic lyricism seems to have greatly influenced Asad's writing in German and English. Surprisingly, Asad never acknowledged it nor showed any ineptness to Rilke or Rilkian mannerism. He had been taught Hebrew and learned Talmud and its Exegesis. This would have tremendously helped him to learn Arabic (also a Semitic language) and the Qur'ān (which is the upholder of the essence of earlier versions of Revealed Books) and its Exegesis.

While Asad in his early years seems to be very virulent in attacking the Western civilization and praises Arabs profusely, his later attitude-mellowing down his criticism of the West and being critical of the Muslims' (Arabs included) current behaviour pose serious questions to the maturity and consistency of his views and certainly traits of his personality.

Ideas, however, great they may be, cannot be totally divorced from the personality who propounds them. Though Asad's ideas too have been and continue to be subjected to thorough studies more and more today, his personality too is equally approached for better understanding.

Asad in quite right in emphasizing the crucial importance of Islam's basic sources—the Qur'ān and Sunnah—in the resurgence
of Islam and the need for fresh *ijtihād*, but he seems to belittle the importance of the tradition, which has been one of the most important medium of conserving and preserving and the development of Islamic culture and civilization upto this day. And also rather ensures its continuity and development in the days to come!

In this post-modern period, how would one look at the attempts, however sincere they might have been, of reconciling the modernism with Islam – which may be a contradiction in basic terms. However, the million dollar question remains! What intellectual formulations can there be, which are in consonance to the very spirit of the Revealed paradigm of knowledge and cure the contemporary malady of the modern man and takes him to the path of Divine scheme? The answer lies in our better understanding of our present maladies and the worth of the tradition. That may pave the way for our future course of thought and action!
Endnotes


4 The Ph. D. thesis has now been published as a book in German language *LEOPOLD WEISS ALIAS MUHAMMAD ASAD – VON GALIZIEN NACARABIEIN* 1900-1927. Its author, Austrian anthropologist and ethnographer Günter Windhager has conducted a meticulous research on Asad’s earlier years through his Arabian ------ (1900-1927). The book carries an introduction by Andre Ginorich and is published by Böhlan verlag, Wien, Austria – 2002, pp. 230 (PB).

5 Ibid., p. 35.


9 Ibid.

10 Martin Kramer, ‘The Road from Mecca: Muḥammad Asad’ (born Leopold Weiss), in *the Jewish Discovery of Islam: Studies in Honour of Bernard Lewis*, ed. Martin Kramer (Tel


14 Ibid., pp 55-56.

15 Nawwab, op. cit, p. 156.


17 Ibid., pp. 58-59.

18 Ibid., p. 60.

19 Nawwab, op. cit, p. 156.

20 Murad Hofmann, n. 5, p. 234.

21 Asad, Mecca, p. 62.

22 Nawwab, op. cit, p. 157.

23 Murad Hofmann is of the view that Asad was initially enamoured of and most romantically infatuated with, almost everything Arab. And through Asad’s earlier writings one could not foresee his reversion to Islam a few years later. He has quoted Gunther, Asad’s German biographer, as having the same conclusion about Asad’s earlier interaction with the Arabs. See Murad, n. 5, pp. 234-35.

25 Murad Hofmann in review article on Gunther's book on Asad.

26 The Qur'an, 102:1-8. The translation of the short Sūrah that appeared originally in The Road to Mecca, in 1954 was later improved by Asad in his The Message of the Qur'ān. The present version is a synthesis of the best of both renderings, (Nawwab, op. cit, fn. 9).

27 Asad, Mecca, 308-310.

28 Asad, "Foreword", Crossroad, 11.

29 Nawwab, op. cit, p. 159.

30 Asad, Mecca, 1.

31 Asad, "Foreword", Crossroads, 12.

32 Loc. cit.

33 Nawwab, op. cit, p. 160.


36 “History sheet of Herr Leopold Weiss Alias Mohammad Asad Ullah Vyce. An Austrian convert to Mohammedanism”, prepared by the Intelligence Bureau of the Government of India, included in letter from E.J.D. Colvin, Political Secretary, His Highness' Government Jammu and Kashmir (Jammu) to Lieut. Col. L.E. Lang, Resident in Kashmir (Sialkot), 30 January 1934, India Office Records, R/1/1/4670 in The Road to Mecca, Asad dates his last Arabian journey to
the late summer of 1932, which would place his final arrival in India at a later date than June. Quoted by Kramer, op. cit, fn. 24.

37 Britishers, during those days were obsessed with Bolsheivic ideas; CID report of 20 November 1933, India Office Records, R/1/1/4670


39 Lieut. Col. L.E. Lang, Resident in Kashmir (Sialkot) to B.J. Glancy, Political Secretary, Government of India, foreign and Political Department (New Delhi), 31 January 1934, India Office Records, R/1/1/4670. Quoted by Kramer, op. cit, fn. 27.

40 Asad, Mecca, 2

41 Asad, “Author’s Note.” This Law of Ours and Others Essays (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1993), 1, (First published 1987).

42 Nawwab, op. cit, p. 160.

43 Asad, Mecca, 2

44 Nawwab, op. cit, p. 161.

45 The Qurʾān, 89:27-30, as rendered by Asad in The Message of the Qurʾān and revised by Nawwab, op. cit, p. 161

46 Nawwab, op. cit, p. 161.

47 Nawwab, op. cit, p. 162-62.

48 Nawwab, op. cit, p. 162.

49 Nawwab, op. cit, p. 162-63.

50 Ibid., p. 163.

51 Ibid., p. 163-64.
52 Asad, "Foreword", *Crossroads*, 12.

53 Nawwab, *op. cit*, p. 164; It is a moot question whether Islam and modernity can be reconciled. And if any so called synthesis is attempted at, what result would be expected from that (AMK).

54 Ibid.

55 “Unromantic Orient.”

56 Murad Hofmann, n. 3 pp. 233-34

57 Ibid., p. 234

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid

60 Ibid., pp. 234-35.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid., 235-36

65 Ibid.

66 In 1927, Asad married Elsa in Cairo and formally confirmed his reversion to Islam there

67 It is to the credit of Murad Hofmann that he presented important dimensions and excerpts from Muhammad Asad’s first book in English language otherwise has hitherto remained un-translated

68 Asad, *Crossroads*, 85

69 Nawwab, *op. cit*, pp. 165-166.

70 Ibid., p. 85

71 Loc. cit

72 Asad, *Crossroads*, 83.

73 Ibid., 79-80.

74 Nawwab, *op. cit*, p. 167.

76 Nawwab, op. cit, p. 167.


78 Loc. cit.


80 Loc. cit.

81 Nawwab, op. cit, p. 168.

82 Murad, n. 3, p. 239

83 Ibid

84 Ibid

85 Ibid


87 Murad, op. cit, p. 240.

88 Ibid

89 Asad, The Principles of State and Government in Islam, new eds. (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980), 30 (First Published 1961).


91 Asad, Mecca, 1.

92 Loc. cit.

93 Nawwab, op. cit, p. 169.
After Asad’s death, Pola Hamida Asad wrote that the sequel to *The Road to Mecca* was only partially completed by him and that she herself would complete it. It would be called *Home-Coming of the Heart*, “a title which he himself suggested” Ḥasan Zillur Rahīm, “Muḥammad Asad: Visionary Islamic Scholar”, *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, September 1995, p. 46.


*Blurb of Mecca*, 1993 reprint, Quoted by Nawwab, *op. cit*, p. 175.


Gibraltar: Dar Al-Andalus, pp. 195.

Murad, n. 5, p. 241.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Gibraltar: Dar Al-Andalus, 1980, 999pp. (large format).


Ibid., pp. 187-88.

Ibid., p. 188.