

IQBAL AND MUHAMMAD ASAD

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ABSTRACT

A cursory look at the corpus of Muhammad Asad's works reveals that most of his writings, particularly penned before 1947, are reminiscent of Iqbal's political and philosophical concepts which made drastic changes in his world-outlook (*Weltanschauung*). He often quotes Iqbal's popular verses in order to substantiate his views, but generally it was the spirit of Iqbal's *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* that profoundly permeated his articles and books.

At the end of November 1932, Leopold Weiss *alias* Muhammad Asad (1900-1992) said farewell to the Saudi Arabian King, Abdul Aziz Ibn-i Saud, kissed his nose-tip and forehead, and embarked for India. His going to India was not a sudden decision, but the voice of an old man in Kurdistan had prompted him to proceed and that voice was:

If water stands motionless in pools, it becomes stale, muddy and foul; only when it moves and flows, does it remain clear.

Asad reached Karachi and after a sojourn there he set out by train for Amritsar where the whole Ghaznawi family of Indian Ahl-i Hadith persuasion (Daud Ghaznawi, Ismail Ghaznawi etc.) was waiting for him impatiently, as stated in the Intelligence Report of the British Government of 1934. The *ulema* of this religious denomination emphasized more on the teachings of the Holy Prophet from the authentic Traditions (*abadith*) transmitted to posterity by his Companions. This line of thought appealed to Asad greatly and made it easy for him to describe himself as belonging to Ahl-i Hadith. Furthermore, the idea underlying the Ahl-i Hadith concept was very close to—almost identical with—the thinking of the so-called ‘Wahhabis’, a school of thought adhered to by a large segment the population of Central and Eastern Arabia, including the House of Ibn Saud. As a result, he could identify himself fully with the religious thinking prevalent in his spiritual home (which was ‘Arabia’), as well as with his new Indian friends.

After spending a few days in Amritsar, Asad rushed to Lahore and he was very much pleased to see the unceasing bustle of this city. Apart from his daily routine tasks, he spared some time for the writing of some long-delayed articles for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, a Swiss newspaper published from Zürich in Switzerland, as he was its special correspondent in this part of the world.

It was probably in the beginning of 1933 that Asad was approached by the Anjuman-i Himayat-e Islam to deliver a public talk on how he had become a Muslim. He accepted the invitation and gave two lectures with certain modifications. In the first lecture, delivered before a congregation of several hundred people in the auditorium of the Muslim High School, he outlined the essential characteristics of the two civilizations facing one another; the civilization of Islam, based on a definite ideology of its own on the one hand, and the pragmatic civilization of Europe born out of the

materialistic premises of Roman culture in conjunction with the medieval Christianity and its dualistic antithesis of flesh and spirit symbolized by darkness and light on the other. In the second lecture he stressed the fact that imitation is a deadly enemy of all creativeness, and that by imitating the aims or even the outward forms and aspects of another civilization the Muslims were, by implication, denying to Islam the role of a culture-producing power and thus the very right to existence. The world of Islam, he said, was now standing at a crossroads, with one road leading to cultural fulfilment and the other to dissolution, and the Muslims still had the chance, though not for very long, to choose the road they were to take.

These two lectures created something of a stir among the Muslim community, first in Lahore and then in Delhi and Aligarh. Finally, he decided upon another course: to elaborate the two lectures more fully and to publish the result as a book. And so came about his first book on an Islamic subject entitled *Islam at the Crossroads* in the beginning of 1934, first in Delhi and then in Lahore.

This most thoughtful and thought-provoking small book of Asad caused quite a stir, especially among the educated Muslims in India. Its readers expressed their positive and negative views. Many of the Western-educated Muslims were shocked by his condemnation of the tendency towards ‘Westernization’ of Muslim society and regarded it as a reactionary attack on all that could be summed up in the term ‘progress’ while many of his conservative readers, including *mullahs*, vehemently criticized his rejection of all *taqlid* and his insistence on the continuous necessity of independent thinking (*ijtihad*) by the Muslims of all times. Iqbal belonged to the first group of its readers who opined:

This work is extremely interesting. I have no doubt that coming as it does from a highly cultured European convert to Islam it will prove an eye-opener to our younger generation.

Since Asad’s arrival in India, he often heard of Iqbal as a philosopher and a poet of great renown, but he had never met Iqbal face to face, because in those days Iqbal was touring various European countries. Their first meeting took place immediately after the publication of *Islam at the Crossroads*, probably in the early months of 1934. During his stay in Lahore, Asad frequently visited the house of Chaudhri Ilahi Bakhsh, an elderly retired Sessions Judge, who one day asked him to come to him in the evening, for, he said, “Dr. Muhammad Iqbal will be here, and I want you to meet him.” So, when Asad entered the living room of Ilahi Bakhsh’s house that evening, he found Iqbal sitting on the carpet, surrounded by about a

dozen men of all ages who listened to his words silently. At that time, he was talking about some ancient phase of Muslim history, comparing that glorious period with the decadence of the present. Suddenly he interrupted himself and turned to Asad: "I have read your *Islam at the Crossroads* and I like what you have written. Only ... I disagree with your call for a new *ijtihad*. In itself, *ijtihad* is certainly salutary and necessary, but it is dangerous at a time of decadence— a time like ours— because it could lead to a chaotic divergence of views about Islam, and so to a still greater disruption of our social fabric."

Asad could not hold himself back and broke with some vehemence into his discourse: "But, Dr. Iqbal, don't you agree that without a new, living *ijtihad* on the part of those Muslims who are able to think for themselves Muslim society is bound to fall deeper and deeper into cultural sterility, without any hope of ever emerging from it? I am convinced that you are mistaken. I am convinced that it is precisely at a time of decadence like ours that we must find the courage to look at our ideology with new eyes, untrammelled by what the earlier generations of Muslims thought about the problems of Islam! No, if we want to survive— survive as a community and overcome our cultural decadence— we must, whether our *mullahs* like it or not, try to exert our *ijtihad* even at the risk of committing errors! We must not be afraid of errors: we must be afraid of stagnation."

The circle of Iqbal's admirers sat as if thunderstruck, visibly shocked at the temerity of a young European converted Muslim who dared to contradict him so openly, so vehemently! One or two of them seemed to protest, but Iqbal's voice silenced them once more. He sat there, softly smiling and finally said: "We should talk about all this on another occasion, my young friend. Will you come to me at my house— perhaps tomorrow?"

And thus began Asad's friendship with Iqbal— a friendship that lasted for the remaining four years of the latter's life, until he died in 1938.

Next day, Asad went to meet Iqbal at his residence on McLeod Road and exchanged views about the different problems of the contemporary Islamic world. By temperament, Asad loved travelling, but Iqbal advised him to put aside his itinerary and devote his innate capabilities for the Islamic resurgence. In the opening section of his spiritual biography entitled *The Road to Mecca*, Asad pays homage to Iqbal in these words:

...after leaving Arabia I went to India and there met the great Muslim poet- philosopher and spiritual father of the Pakistan idea, Muhammad Iqbal. It was he who soon persuaded me to give up my plans of travelling to Eastern Turkestan, China and Indonesia and to remain 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.

One day, sitting on the carpeted floor of Iqbal's study, Asad said: "What the Muslims really need today is a prophet, for only a prophet could arouse them to new life and effort and bring them out of their stagnation...But there cannot be and never will be another prophet after Muhammad— and he is dead and lies in his grave in Medina, and we cannot hear his voice..."

Iqbal interrupted him and said: "But we can hear his voice if we but listen! It is alive, for everyone to hear, even though he himself lies in his grave in Medina...The voice of the Prophet is alive in the *abadith*, the traditions of his sayings which have been transmitted to us, and which we can read in so many authentic compilations."

In this background, Iqbal suggested to Asad to translate *Sabih al-Bukhari* from Arabic to English, as it had never yet been translated in this language. Iqbal also emphatically pointed out the significance of the study of *abadith* and their new philosophical valuation in the conceptual structure of Islam. And so it came about that Asad decided, there and then, to give up his journalistic career for good and to devote himself in the years to come to translating and commenting upon the *Sabih al-Bukhari*. Primarily, he intended to translate the whole Arabic text in forty instalments, but only five fascicules came out between 1935 and 1938. After his release from the internment camp in 1945, its publication was about to be resumed when the holocaust which followed upon the Partition (1947) resulted in the destruction of nearly three-quarters of *Sabih al-Bukhari*. Standing on the bank of river Ravi, he saw a few scattered leaves of manuscripts floating down in the midst of torn Arabic books, and thus perished beyond recall more than ten years of his extensive labour and research.

Iqbal was fully aware of Asad's vast experience of extensive travelling throughout the Muslim world, his proclivities and intellectual attainments and desired to utilize them for the uplift of the prevalent standard of religious teaching in our educational institutions. For this purpose, Iqbal offered him headship of the department of Islamic theology in Islamia College, Lahore. As president of the Anjuman-i Himayat-i Islam, Iqbal made continuous efforts for his appointment in this college. Both corresponded with each other (from June to August 1934) for settling some basic procedural issues. Meanwhile, Nazir Niazi, Iqbal's young associate and Asad's neighbour in Delhi acted the role of middle-man, but finally Asad declined this offer on account of inadequate salary.

Wherever Asad stayed, he remained in contact with Iqbal. When Iqbal fell ill and his physical condition degenerated rapidly, Asad became worried and rushed to Lahore for doing something for his “spiritual father”. He contacted two German physicians, Dr. Selzer and Dr. Kalisch, who had been practicing for a long time in Lahore. With the consent of the patient, he personally brought them to Iqbal’s residence, and they examined him carefully.

At about that time, in 1938, Iqbal’s health began to fail; and one day, suddenly, a friend of Asad came running to him and told him about his death. He was shocked by this shattering news and he saw nothing but darkness. Hastily, he reached Jawid Manzil and stood wordless near Iqbal’s simple bed. Asad saw him lying with closed eyes and an expression of deep peace on his face, as if thinking a lovely thought. His funeral was the most impressive Lahore had ever seen. At least two hundred thousand men— almost the whole adult male population of Lahore— followed the bier, a mile-long cortege that wound its way slowly, for hours, through the narrow streets all the way to the Badshahi Mosque, before which the funeral prayer was held. After Iqbal’s burial, Asad stood near his grave and prayed for him with open hands and tearful eyes.

In one of his unpublished papers, Asad has paid tribute to Iqbal in these words:

The trait which distinguished Iqbal more than anything else was his inner quiet. Here was a man entirely at peace with himself and with God; a man who almost always spoke softly, often with a sweet, slow smile playing around his lips and lighting up his face. Indeed, he liked to smile on the least occasion, betraying a nature without guile and without rancour: and so one could easily understand why so many people regarded him not only with deep respect but also with love. Everyone with whom he conversed was made to feel as if he were the person most important to him in all the world and that was the reason why he was listened to by all who knew him as no other man was listened to in his time.

A cursory look at the corpus of Asad’s works reveals that most of his writings, particularly penned before 1947, are reminiscent of Iqbal’s political and philosophical concepts which made drastic changes in his world-outlook (*Weltanschauung*). He often quotes Iqbal’s popular verses in order to substantiate his views, but generally it was the spirit of Iqbal’s *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* that profoundly permeated his articles and books.

As stated earlier, Iqbal changed Asad’ Bedouin spirit of travelling and set him out on a path that ultimately led him to the revival of all the dormant hopes of Islam, creation of a political entity of people bound together not by common descent but by their common

adherence to an ideology. During the last four years of Iqbal's life (1934-38), Asad frequently visited Iqbal, and they spent many an hour talking about the prospect of Pakistan. They discussed in detail the forms in which the future Islamic State of Pakistan should be organized and the ways and means to persuade the Muslim political leaders to stand up boldly for their common goal. Following Iqbal's advice, he wrote a series of articles about why Pakistan had to be established and had them published in various European newspapers and periodicals. Besides, he delivered some lectures on the subject in Delhi and Lahore. According to him, it had been Iqbal who was the first to formulate, in clear-cut political terms, the idea of an Islamic State in North India and who thus gave it body and life. In fact, Asad devoted all his efforts to bring into reality Iqbal's dream of an ideological Islamic state.

During the Second World War, Asad's Austrian citizenship had him imprisoned by the British Government and the six years (1939-45) he spent in the internment camp made him more conscious of the significance of freedom for all people. No doubt, this incident intensified his aspirations for a separate homeland for the Indian Muslims.

Soon after his release from Purandhar, in the hills near Poona, Asad settled in Dalhousie. From there, he started a monthly periodical named *Arafat* that was primarily a vehicle for his ideas on a fundamental reconstruction of the approach to problems of Shariah. This journalistic monologue of Asad was to be a clarion-call at the critical time of Pakistan Movement. Three months before Pakistan came into being, he wrote an article entitled 'What do we mean by Pakistan?' in which he emphasized the real purpose underlying the future establishment of Pakistan: that purpose did not consist in merely providing more economic opportunities or posts to Muslims, but rather in enabling them to live effectively as Muslims and to realize the spirit of Islam in their political forms, in their law and social institutions. In another issue, publishing less than one month before Independence, Asad authored a lengthy essay under the heading 'Towards an Islamic Constitution', and it was the first attempt ever made to outline the principles which must be incorporated in the constitution of any state that claims to be 'Islamic'. Asad's much thoughtful studies were destined to become the first step in the development of our modern political thought and for this reason he can be rightly called as one of the intellectual co-founders of Pakistan.