

# Muhammad Asad's The Road to Makkah: A Case Study of Europe's Efforts at Synthesis

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## Abstract

*According to Hegel, history proceeds in such a way that the given order of things (called the thesis) generates a counter-order (called the antithesis.) The counter-order represents a reaction to the order in the way that a counter-culture. The counter-order represents a remedy and correction for ways in which the prevailing order is lacking although it too may be lacking in ways that the prevailing order is not. The synthesis represents a combination of thesis and antithesis in such a way as to transcend both while combining the good points of each and remedying the defects both of status quo and reaction.*

*Key Words:* antithesis, synthesis, spiritual vacuum, resentment, salvation.

## Introduction

The Eastern or Communist bloc represents the antithesis to the thesis represented by the Western bloc or Capitalist nations. The conflict between these two blocs represents the tension between thesis and antithesis that results in a new idea, a synthesis, that incorporates the best aspects of each, rejects the negative aspects, and transcends both systems. When we consider the concept of synthesis between East and West in the context of the relation among religions, there are umpteen instances for that. There are numerous writers too whose works display this sensibility. A travelogue *The Road to Makkah* by Muhammed Asad, *Islam Between East and West*, a work of multidisciplinary scholarship of Alija Izetbegovic and Kristiane Backer's autobiographical work *From MTV to Mecca* are examples.

## THE ROAD TO MAKKAH

The beginning decades of the twentieth century stood in the suggestion of a spiritual barrenness. All of Europe's righteous valuations had become formless under the awful crash of what had happened all through World War One, and no novel set of values was anywhere in sight. An emotion of feebleness and vagueness was in the air as a premonition of societal and scholastic upheavals that made one hesitating whether there could ever a different time be any permanency in judgment and events. Everything seemed to be curving in a shapeless flood, and the religious intolerance of youth could nowhere find a grip. In the nothingness of any unfaltering doctrine of morality, nobody could offer the young people adequate answers to the numerous questions that puzzled them.

Leopold met with the philosophies of the religion Islam and became fascinated towards it and embraced in 1926 and afterwards changed his name to Muhammed Asad. He resigned from his position in the Pakistan Foreign Service in 1952 and determined to write this work. He considers himself a Muslim and by births a westerner. So he was convinced that no other person can so successfully speak on Islam to the westerners like him. The traumatic know-how of the Crusades gave Europe its cultural consciousness and its agreement; but this identical understanding was ordained to supply the bogus shade in which Islam was to become visible to Western eyes. It would seem an satire of the past that the age old Western bitterness against Islam, which was religious in foundation, should still continue subconsciously at a time when

religion has mislaid most of its grasp on the thoughts of the western man. The silhouette of the Crusades hovers over the West to this day and all its reactions towards Islam and the Muslim world tolerate different traces of that die hard ghost.

The work *The Road to Makkah* is the description of his tough journey crossing the deserts and in the mean time he ponders over his past revealing before the readers the stories of his family, the attitude of his parents, his friendship with various rulers of the middle east especially King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud etc. In his journey, he was accompanied by his friend Zayd who is a felicitous combination of purest beduin stock and Najdi town life, having preserved within himself the beduin's sureness of instinct without the beduin's emotional liability and acquired the practical wisdom of the townsman without falling prey to his worldly sophistication.

This journey could be considered symbolic of his journey in search of the new philosophies that of Islam. The hardships that he faces are of course connected to his family background that almost prevented him from embracing a new religion.

During the late summer of 1932, they rode together. His narrative sheds lights on his past, his in depth knowledge of Islam and its principles. It is interesting to note the perspective of a European on an eastern religion. Throughout the pages, one can realise the impression left in the mind of Asad by the new religion. The terms that he uses are typical of the land Arabia and the language Arabic. The word Zayd uses for 'destiny' is qisma- that which is apportioned- better known to the West in its Turkish form, kismet. He says that man always carry their destiny around his neck where ever he may be. The writer recollects the hospitality and graciousness shown by the King.

But still he found his wanderings are not over and that he has still to continue his way and the life which he has chosen is not fully satisfying him and that something lacks in his environment. It was definitely not the intellectual interests of Europe because he has left them behind. Then he was reminded of the words of an old Kurdish nomad: if water stands motionless in a pool, it grows stale and muddy, but when it moves and flows it becomes clear: so, too, man in his wanderings (Asad 48). In these words, he found the justification for his journey. The journey to the land of Mecca was in truth a home coming for him.

Asad reports of a spiritual vacuum that prevailed during the opening decades of the twentieth century. So this instability and insecurity crept into the mind of the people too. After the I World War, the entire Europe lost values also which were no replaced by any new ideas. So whole generation of young people were immersed in doubts and nobody could give them answers to many of the questions that perplexed them. The restlessness grew as the time passed. Moreover after the World War things were no longer right in the broken-up, discontented, emotionally tense and high pitched European world. But he agrees that he was no unhappy, but his inability to share the diverse social, economic and political hopes of those around him grew in time into a vague sense of not quite belonging to them, accompanied, vaguely again, by a desire to belong- to whom? To be a part of something- of what?

Asad recollects his experiences at a Village. The Amir of the village invited them to his home and asked them to consider his home as theirs and have some dates that he offered to them. He was really astonished by the hospitality of the amir. When the old amir talked about the destiy, Asad's memories went far to the previous period of ten years back, at Jerusalem when another poor old man spoke to him to surrender to God which alone can cause one to be at peace and so with one's own destiny. At this juncture, he found common elements in the believes of the West and the East. Even before this, he was educated on the way Muslims prayed by considering Kaaba, God's holy temple in Mecca as the centre. Years later, he realised that his simple explanation had opened to him the first door to Islam.

He was able to trace out the organic coherence of the mind and senses in Arabs that the Europeans had lost. Then he tried to detect the element which made the Westerners to run away from the solemn freedom of life which the Arabs seemed to possess.

His viewpoint is that Islam is not a religion in the accepted wisdom of the phrase, rather a method of life; not so much a organization of divinity as an agenda of individual and social performance based on the realization of God. Nowhere in Quran had that he identified a call for salvation. No sobriety was obligatory to open a concealed gate to cleanliness; for wholesomeness was man's birth right, and offence meant no more than a slip from the inborn, optimistic virtues with which God was said to have gifted each human being. The approach of Islam to the trouble of the spirit seemed to be a deeper than that of Old Testament and had none of the latter's partiality for one particular nation: and its approach to the trouble of the flesh was, unlike the New Testament, powerfully assenting.

The root of the monistic life assertion is to be found in the Islamic view that man's original nature is essential good. Contrary to the Christian idea that man is born sinful or the teaching of Hinduism that he is originally low and impure and must painfully stagger through a long chain of incarnations toward the ultimate goal of perfection, holy Quran says that God created man in a perfect state of purity that may be destroyed only by subsequent wrong behaviour.

His own comments had persuaded him that the mind of the normal Westerner believed a completely misshapen representation of Islam. What he saw in the pages of Quran was not a 'crudely materialistic' world-view, but, on the opposite, an strong God awareness that articulated itself in a reasonable reception of all God-created nature; a harmonious side by side of understanding and corporeal urge, saintly need and communal demand. He believes that the demur of Muslims was not due to any short comings in Islam but somewhat to their own collapse to live up to it. All the way through the entire imaginative epoch of Muslim history during the first five centuries after the Prophet's time, science and knowledge had no better champion than Muslim culture and no home more safe than the domain in which Islam was ultimate.

Asad broods over the present state of the people of the West. Western man has truly given himself to the worship of the Dajjal. He has long ago lost all his innocence, all inner integration with nature. Life has become a puzzle to him. He is isolated from his brother and lonely within himself. He invents everyday new machines and gives each of them something of his soul to make them fight for his existence. But at the same time they create for him ever new needs, new dangers, new fears and an unquenchable thirst for newer yet artificial allies. Western civilisation has not been able to strike a harmonious balance between man's bodily and social needs and his spiritual cravings. It has abandoned its erstwhile religious ethics without being able to produce out of itself any other moral system.

Islam and Christianity advocated and international community of people united by their adherence to a common ideal; but whereas Christianity had contented itself with a mere moral advocacy of this principle, Islam unfolded before the world the vision of a political organisation in which God consciousness would be the mainspring of man's practical behaviour and the sole basis of all social institutions. Thus fulfilling what Christianity had left unfulfilled, Islam inaugurated a new chapter in the development of man; the first instance of an open, ideological society in contrast with the closed racially or geographically limited societies of the past.

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