



G-10 Markaz Islamabad

Summary of The Book

ISLAM AT THE CROSSROADS

By: Maulana Muhammad Asad

Developed by: Ali Dost & Aimal

Khushal

CSPs Research Team



G-10 Markaz Islamabad

The Book in A Nut-Shell:

In the past, many people have lamented on the lost glory of the Muslims; they have gone on to analyze the causes of decay and prescribe solutions to revive the much-yearned splendor of the lands of Islam. The book 'Islam on the Cross Roads' is one such attempt that intellectually presents the message that the common Muslim cleric conveys simply as the return to the Prophetic system (Nizam-i-Mustafa). One feature that differentiates Muhammad Asad's attempt from the others is the rich perspective he provides as a revert to Islam. Knowing the western mind by birth, Muslim thoughts through travel in Arab and non-Arab lands, and philosophic and psychological views through university like experience, the author presents such a rich work as deserves to be thoroughly read and digested.

The Authors Motivation:

At the time this book was written, colonial powers had subdued the Islamic world politically, economically, and more so intellectually and morally. Missionaries had their reins loose busy proselytizing (converting people to their religion) where once they would not have dared set foot upon. The lands where once children would quote Plato were reduced to a state wherein now only the privileged afforded the luxury of education. Moreover, the instructions imparted for example in British India delineated the merits of cold climate for higher thought or geographical location for progress. Here political systems were juggled with and economic systems crippled under hypocritical dictates on 'free trade'.

In defense of the Muslim faith arose two reactions as evident in British India that of Aligarh and Deoband. One was to follow the path of the Master's glory through reinterpretations of Muslim intellectual legacies and the other was a boycott of every idea foreign to shield the Islamic faith. Muhammad Asad's approach lies in between Aligarh and Deoband: it is neither about conforming to or avoiding the western intellectual framework.



G-10 Markaz Islamabad

About the Author:

Islam as a spiritual and a social phenomenon is still despite all the drawbacks caused by the deficiencies of the Muslims, by far the greatest driving force mankind has ever experienced; and all my interests became, since then, centered around the problem of its regeneration.

It is not written for those with whom Islam is the only one of the many, more or less useful, accessories to social life; but rather for those in whose hearts still lives a spark of flame which burned in the Companions of the Prophet.

Indicative from the above, the unique feature of this work is that it is not for the group of intellectuals who discuss and ponder over an issue merely to satisfy their intellectual pursuits, and nor does the book provide any pretensions for that. This book is as important for the laity as it is for the men of learning. Written with a perspective that draws heavily from philosophy and psychology, the author attempts to immerse the reader in the book to realize and reflect rather than passively read as the reader does with any other book.

The use of various simple Quranic verses and hadith that an Islamic upbringing would entail allows one to appreciate that no complex references are required or dense material needed to answer that big question that troubles us all sometimes: 'What is the meaning of life?' All this coming from the former Leopold Weiss (Maulana Muhammad Asad was a Jew who grew up in Leopold England and converted to Islam, He was handpicked by Jinnah to Head the Department of Islamic Reconstruction) compels one to acknowledge the dedication and conviction which went behind this work. The book attempts to answer three main questions in the light of the purpose indicated above and hence can be divided into three sections. The author addresses the difference between the Islamic and western civilizations, the issue of blindly following the west, and finally the adoption of the Hadith and Sunnah in the quest for the regeneration of Islam. Having introduced the broad theme of the book, one can now critically examine each of the three sections.



G-10 Markaz Islamabad

Section 1: The Differences

There is this inherent tendency in man to neatly bifurcate things in his mind to understand them better. In our context, the Sufis have differentiated between 'Aql and Ishq, or Tolstoy uses the words 'rational' and 'irrational'. To continue with this division the two categories can be classified as material and spiritual or science and religion. And these have been accepted as mutually exclusive concepts, ideas, or notions without ever the thought that there can be a harmonious union of the two seemingly different notions. The author says:

As we don't know anything definite i.e., using scientific experiments and calculations - about the origin of human life and its destinies after bodily death so it is better to concentrate all our energies on the development of our material and intellectual possibilities, without allowing ourselves to be hampered by transcendental ethics and moral postulates based on presumptions which defy scientific proof.

In Physics, there exists the concept of the dual nature of light i.e., light exhibits the properties of matter as well as of waves. So, when the human mind is capable of discerning this duality, then it should not have problems accepting a harmonious balance between the body and the soul. If this harmonious balance is accepted, then one would not have the problems in a practical world that either spiritualism or materialism alone causes. As in university pursuits when one often concludes on paper that both the opposing points of view are to be factored in the explanation, the idea the author has tried to bring home follows the same train of thought. Hence, the distinction borne by Islam is that of this harmonious balance that is lacking in any other philosophy or religion.

Another distinction that is highlighted by the author is the nature of man as in the author's words:



G-10 Markaz Islamabad

Contrary to the Christian idea that man is born sinful, or the teachings of Hinduism that he is originally low and impure -- the Islamic teaching contends that man is born pure.

This is one problem that has occupied the philosophers' minds since time immemorial. They have been framing questions like 'How do we know what is good or for that matter how do we judge or define goodness?' Considering man as a selfish animal, the meaning of life is then constructed and one hears things like the sum total of happiness or maximum utility. Once however the pure nature of man is accepted, then one can easily do away with the mind-boggling original sin as well as self-centered philosophies.

It is interesting to note how aptly the author has raised the concern

For the modern European, the question of meaning and purpose of life has long since lost all its practical importance.... the result is the creation of a human type whose morality is confined to the question of practical utility alone, and whose highest criterion between good and evil is the material success.

Such was the foundation of the Roman Empire and undoubtedly of the contemporary West. Any good is judged on the basis of its utility to the efficient working of the society and hence a demarcation is made between public and private life. In such a world through restrictions like traffic laws are imposed that curb social chaos but no such curbs are allowed for the individual self that is ever prone to moral degeneration. As a consequence, arises the feeling of inner restlessness and unease or insecurity that has plagued the inner Western world though materially they might have touched the stars.



G-10 Markaz Islamabad

Section 2: Following the West

The author has outlined the basic differences between the two civilizations then proceeds to make a case for not following the West blindly. He writes of the animosity created by the Crusades not lessened in the Oriental literature, drawing from psychoanalytic theories. On the Orientalists position on the Islamic world the author writes:

Some of the Orientalists play the role of a public prosecutor bent on securing a conviction; others are like a counsel for the defense who, being personally convinced that his client is guilty, cannot but half-heartedly plead for 'mitigating circumstances'.

The above should serve to make the reader think why not everything written in the Western tradition is of superior value. The novel use of psychoanalytic theory in history to explain the biased approach of the Orientalists and in general that of the Western mind is really worth noting:

The Crusades were decisive because they fell in the period of Europe's childhood -- Like in individuals, so also in nations, the violent impressions of an early childhood persevere, consciously or subconsciously, throughout the later life.

The theme of following the West flows well in the chapter on education as well, where the author highlights the problem of neglect in the Muslim world. He says:



G-10 Markaz Islamabad

It is very unfortunate that our own age-long indifference and negligence, so far as scientific research is concerned, have made us entirely dependent on the European presentation of learning.

Now many people have mentioned that in times of their decadence, Muslims had stopped following God and his Prophet (sws) and in this case the teachings regarding 'Ilm, the very knowledge responsible for the power of the so-called 'green belt' spanning three continents. The absence of the likes of Averroes, Avicenna, or Al Beruni is deeply lamented. However, one needs to bear in mind that the definition of this 'Ilm is questionable in that whether 'Ilm encompasses worldly knowledge or is restricted only to material related to one's salvation. Even if the former were to be accepted as the definition, it must be borne in mind that the great names were exceptions to the rule as were Galileo and Copernicus in their times. Moreover, progress before the Industrial Revolution was never defined in economic terms, as it is defined today, but more in terms of new conquests. Progress was driven by the selfish motives of the emperors ever ready to expand their riches and empires. In such times, a handful of thinkers would just produce treatises that never had any significant influence on growth per capita which was almost stagnant before 1760.

The author uses the words 'neglect' and 'indifference' that require further scrutiny. It would be questionable whether the Muslims did neglect scientific research. Modern scientific knowledge stems from an investment into research that in turn is directed by material interests. Had there been no material interests behind the steam engine and the spinning jenny their invention would have been delayed. Considering the Muslim world, the emperors never patronized any such inventions but rather focused on the fine arts and monuments and to an extent philosophy. Hence though the Muslim world might have produced calligraphers, craft builders, and abstract thinkers, there was no equivalent of say James Watt.

Moreover, in a time of invasions from all sides, libraries being burnt, individual efforts would not have led people far. We know of various Chinese inventions; but if they were never used by the masses as the spinning jenny and the like, no further innovation or technological development would have taken place. Hence, it would



G-10 Markaz Islamabad

not be neglect that had caused our reliance on the West but the series of political events and the incompetence of the ruling class that would be deemed responsible for the decay and eventual reliance on the West. Where, however, neglect does come in as a crucial reason for the ultimate reliance of the Muslims on the West is in the realm of philosophy and moral values. With all inquiry into the religious sciences curbed by the orthodoxy, there spread the malady of intellectual decay which is continuing to this day. New factions, innovations in customs, moral rigidity, and other problems have plagued the Muslim world that might not have happened had religious inquiry been allowed to flourish. Then one would not have required Aligarh or Deoband i.e., confirming Islam to the West or shielding it from Western influences.

Another point to note is that since 1934, things have changed. There has been a wave of decolonization with which the education system is no longer such that teaches of Western superiority, and hence, none of the brainwashing that had plagued impressionable minds before remains in its original form. Rather, at times, the problem takes the opposite turn when time is the vent on studying the composition of the jinn, the distance between the earth and 'Firdaus', and similar futile subjects. It would not do us well to shun Western social sciences altogether as the author mentions. There is much to be learned especially the analytical tools that can only be appreciated through a thorough grounding in such subjects. Gone are the colonial days and with the articles on Western superiority. It is now time to understand the subtler articles from the West, learn their approach, and using those tools attempt comparative studies and hence revive the spirit of inquiry among Muslim minds once again. This would be akin to the approach of those before us who attempted likewise with the Hellenistic subjects.

The author does get somewhat rigid in the flow of the theme of 'not following the West' when he mentions:

By wearing European dress, the young Muslim unconsciously twists his intellectual being in such a way that it ultimately fits the new dress.



G-10 Markaz Islamabad

Perhaps it might be true of that time but is no longer valid a point today. Hence the reader must be careful that since the book was written a long time back, some of the content may not be applicable today. However, what remains strongly valid today are the author's words:

To achieve the regeneration of Islam, the Muslims must, before the adoption of any measures of reform, free themselves entirely from the spirit of apology for their religion.

This is quite true of various people interacting with the West; even the intellectuals who try to sugarcoat Islam as might appeal to the Western mind. An apology is such that it leads the individual to be embarrassed and to eventually doubt his legacy. It is interesting to note the word 'regeneration' for that lies at the heart of the author's work.

Section 3: The Antidote

Having outlined the differences between the Islamic and Western civilizations and thus making a case for not following the West, the author provides the antidote for the regeneration of the Islamic world. The antidote is quite simple as is tritely expressed by Muslim clerics everywhere as the return to the Prophetic system. The problem in the Muslim world is captured as:

The Sunnah remained, for the Sufis, an ideogram of only platonic importance, but with a mystical background; for the theologians and legists, a system of laws; and for the Muslim masses nothing but a hollow shell without any living meaning.

The author emphasizes the importance of the Hadith and Sunnah, mounting a strong defense against the so-called modernists who have developed the tendency to reject Hadith on the grounds of its fallibility, thus directing their lives in a path apart from the Prophetic teachings. While his sincere attempts are to be lauded, yet the difference between Hadith and the Sunnah has to be distinguished.



G-10 Markaz Islamabad

An interesting distinction has been made between reason and rationality. About rationality, the author writes:

It does not content itself with registration and control, but jumps into the field of negative speculation; it is not receptive and detached like pure reason, but extremely subjective and temperamental.

This reminds one that even wrong claims are justified through rationalization; the case of the French philosophers who would advocate equality in their own country would justify all forms of oppression in African colonies. Minds deemed logical fail to recognize that within rationalization lies irrationality that blinds the rational man to his own idiosyncratic and subjective elements. It is for this reason that the author beautifully expresses:

Sometimes we can understand the deepest aim of the Prophet's order, and sometimes only the superficial, immediate purpose. Whatever the case may be, we are bound to follow the Prophet's commands, provided their authenticity is reasonably established. Nothing else matters.¹⁶

Moreover, the above should also enlighten those who are bent upon getting answers to all questions before acting upon their faith. It is good to know the reasons behind particular injunctions but acting upon the injunctions requires sincerity and devotion exclusive from reason. As some say between 'Taqwa and Fatwa choose the former or 'when in doubt apply the principle of prudence'.

Finally, the author elaborates the reasons for the Sunnah in a separate chapter. Adhering strictly to the teachings of the Prophet (sws) curbs the subconscious elements in man and brings him in conformity with the divine teachings thereby submitting himself at all planes of existence to the will of God. As the author mentions:

Haphazard actions and habits are in the spiritual progress of man like stumbling blocks in the way of a racing horse; they must be reduced to a minimum because they destroy spiritual concentration.

It is for this very reason that the Sunnah provides directives to utter small prayers in various actions, important and trivial alike, of one's life or to lower one's gaze in sum to cleanse oneself from material and spiritual impurities. The Sunnah serves to curb man's life in totality, filtering the influences that get imprinted in man's mind



G-10 Markaz Islamabad

and constantly cleansing the mind from wicked thoughts. Islam is a religion where more emphasis is on prevention than cure. Thus, it is for this reason that the social setup has been directed to be such that facilitates the individual to live surrendering himself completely to the divine commandments.

Conclusion

Having read this book, one goes home with numerous thoughts. This man initially being an outsider accepts the Islamic faith and then writes passionately on the regeneration of faith. His views are enriched by the perspective that philosophic thought has provided and are buttressed with many Ahadith and verses of the Book of God, which many Muslims have read or even memorized but forgotten to reflect upon. Though some of the material might not be relevant today as the book was written during the colonial times, yet the whole spirit and theme cannot be neglected. A strong case for acting upon the Sunnah has been made though the book would certainly have been enriched further if questions on the slumber in the Muslim world would have been raised.

We must reflect on what prevents the Muslim from following the teachings of the Prophet (sws) and how can he be awakened to the call of pristine Islam above and beyond mutual differences and selfish interests. How can the renaissance that



G-10 Markaz Islamabad

changed Leopold Weiss's life be enacted in the modern Muslim's life that he might say as Muhammad Asad has said?

It is not a way among others, but the way; and the man who brought us this teaching is not a guide among others, but the guide.