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The Ideological Journey of Muhammad Assad (Leopold Weiss) from a Secular to An Islamic State

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Abstract

Muhammad Assad, with his earlier name Leopold Weiss (1900-1992) was an Austrian convert from Judaism to Islam in 1926. After conversion he devoted his whole life for the revival of Islam. This research explores Muhammad Assad's conceptual pathway of shift, from living in a secular environment to idealize an Islamic state. With a qualitative approach, this study analyses the basic question of what ideological back-ground led him to change his political religion. The study finds that Weiss started moving away from his parent's religion, in his late teens. Amongst the crucial debates of religion, science and secularism, during his stay at Vienna University, he could not satisfy his spiritual need and intellectual thirst. Consequently, Leopold Weiss became fed-up with the purely secular state theory. Before, 1926 as he embraced Islam, formally, his political thought migrated from secularism to a religious state, finding his ideals in an Islamic State.

Keywords

Secular Theory, Intellectual Thirst, Conceptual Pathway, Conversion to Islam, Islamic State.

Introduction and the Back-ground

Allama Muhammad Assad, earlier Leopold Weiss (1900-1992) is considered a

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well-known Western Muslim religio-political thinker of the twentieth century. He He established his credentials as a journalist, writer, linguist, political thinker, diplomat and Islamic scholar. Among the Muslim socio-political intellectuals, his personality and thought are being made the subject of detailed study in the East and the West alike.

Leopold Weis, born into a Jewish rabbinical family on July 2, 1900, in L'viv Ukraine. He was brought in an environment where Talmud was recited day and night. However, in his teens, he secretly studied the curriculum of the Enlightenment-based educational system (Humanistic Gymnasium.) and eventually declared a rebellion against becoming a rabbi.[1]

Though, Assad acknowledged that his parents were not strictly religious. However, they considered all religions to be valid. He studied sacred literature and explored its complexities.[2] Moreover, Asad stated:

> "Especially, he did not reconcile with the moral principles of the Bible, it seemed to him that the God of the Hebrew Bible and Talmud was a tribal deity, busy shaping the destiny of a particular nation. A God who was the creator and sustainer of all creation and mankind, only met the needs of the 'chosen people'! Weiss's studies led him to move away from Judaism and to understand the primary purpose of religion."[3]

During his university study at Vienna, he began studying chemistry and physics as well, with stars like Nobel laureate, physicist Erwin Schrödinger, but left to satisfy his spiritual thirst. The mental turmoil remained the same. This was an era when unprecedented visions were common. The voices of Austrian joints of Psychology and Philosophy, like Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler and Wittgenstein resonated throughout the world.

These thinkers were significantly influencing many aspects of life and thought. Although Weiss was impressed by the originality of these important spirits, even here their great results left him unsatisfied.[4] After becoming a journalist, he traveled extensively, spoke with many Muslim scholars, and met with several regional heads of state.[5]

Weiss's understanding of Islam gradually increased through the study of scriptures, history, and the people he met during his travels to different countries. Asad continued to study Islam and found answers to all the doubts and uncertainties that had been troubling and unsettling him for years. On his return to Berlin from the East, Asad married a woman named Elsa. Asad embraced Islam in Berlin.

Leopold's Conversion in His Own Narrations

Leopold Weiss, after becoming Muhammad Assad described the event of his conversion to Islam in these words:

> "One day - it was September 1926 - Elsa and I were travelling in the Berlin subway in an upper-class compartment. My eye happened to fall on a well-dressed man, apparently a well-to-do businessman... Prosperity had come to the fore in those days...

> But when I looked at his face, it seemed to me that he was actually looking worried. And not just worried but deeply unhappy, I looked away. Moving away, I saw a beautiful woman near him. She was also a face, with a strangely unhappy expression on her face... And then I began to look around at all the other faces in the compartment, unrelated faces, well-dressed... In almost every one of them I could discern a hidden expression of sadness... I had never seen faces around me so unhappy before, I mentioned it to Elsa.... Then she turned to me in surprise and said: 'You? You're right. They all look as if they are in torment. Hell... I wonder, do they know what's happening to them? I knew they didn't think so, otherwise they couldn't have moved on. They're wasting their lives like this... Living without any purpose beyond the desire to raise their own standards without any binding truth, without any hope other than to have more possessions, more gadgets and perhaps more power... When we got back home, I glanced at my desk. On it was an open copy of the Holy Quran, which I had been reading earlier. Mechanically, I picked up the book to put it away, but as I was about to close it, my gaze fell on the open page in front of me, and I read:"[6]

أَلْهَىٰكُمُ ٱلتَّكَاثُرُ۔ حَتَّىٰ زُرْتُمُ ٱلْمَقَابِرَ۔ كَلَّاسَوْفَ تَعْلَمُونَ۔ثُمَّ كَلَّا سَوْفَ تَعْلَمُونَ۔ كَلَّا لَوْ تَعْلَمُونَ عِلْمَ ٱلْيَقِينِ۔لَتَرَوُنَّ ٱلْجَحِيمَ۔ثُمَّ لَتَرَوُنَّهَا عَيْنَ ٱلْيَقِينِ۔ثُمَّ لَتُسْـَٔلُنَّ يَوْمَئِذٍ عَنِ ٱلنَّعِيمِ۔ [7]

> (You are obsessed by greed for more and more. Until you go down to your graves. Nay, but you will come to know! 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.) [8]
>
> He goes on narrating:
>
> "I sought out a Muslim friend of mine (Dr. Abdul Jabbar Khairi), an Indian who was at that time head of the small Muslim community in Berlin, and told him that I wanted to embrace Islam. He stretched out his right hand toward me, and I placed mine in it and, in the presence of two witnesses, declared: "I bear witness that there is no God but God and that Muhammad is His Messenger."[9]

Martin Kramer, an American-Israeli academic with a focus on the Middle East, written an essay on Muhammad Assad entitled as '*The Jewish discovery of Islam*'. He has stated:

> "As yet, however, there is no biography of Asad, and considerable obstacles await all who would attempt one. The most formidable of these is that the principal source for Asad's life remains Asad. No doubt this obstacle might be overcome, and this essay makes use of several additional sources for Asad's life."[10]

Weiss concluded:

> "The abysmal state of the Muslims could not be attributed to Islam, as its Western critics claimed, but to a misreading of Islam. When properly interpreted, in a modem light, Islam could lead Muslims forward, while offering spiritual sustenance that Judaism and Christianity had ceased to provide. Weiss spent the better part of the next two years travelling through Syria, Iraq, Kurdistan, Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, growing ever more fascinated by Islam in its myriad forms."[11]

Assad's View about Islam

Muhammad Assad described the moment when Islam echoes in his mind and reflect towards a straight path of God. He stated:

> "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. This, I saw, was not the mere 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...."[12]

With such mental and spiritual qualities, he reached in Berlin Islamic Society, declared his adherence to Islam and was named Muhammad Asad.[13] An American magazine, the sub-section of which is published from Saudi Arabia, has mentioned this mental and spiritual journey of Allama Asad as follow:

> "Two roads diverged in Berlin in the 1920s: a well-worn one to the West, the other, rarely traveled, to the East. Leopold Weiss, a gifted young writer, traveler and linguist with a thorough knowledge of the Bible and the Talmud and with deep roots in European culture, took the road eastward to Makkah."[14]

Assad's interests took on a new dimension, after accepting Islam. He started exchanging ideas with the leaders of the Islamic world and the Islamic movements. His religious and political thought focused the problems faced by the Muslim Ummah, formulating a plan of action for the revival of Islam. He devoted all of his remaining life for revival of Islam, as he expressed:

> "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."[15]

Furthermore, Asad acknowledged:

> "I had no illusions as to the present state of affairs in the Muslim world. The four years I had spent in those countries had shown me that while Islam was still alive, perceptible in the world-view of its adherents and in their silent admission of its ethical premises, they themselves were like people paralyzed, unable to

translate their beliefs into fruitful action.[16]

During his stay in the Middle East, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran and central Asia, Muhammad Asad keenly observed the wisdom of Islam. With each passing day, Asad's interest in Islam deepened and the answers to the scattered thoughts and vague questions in his mind became clear, as he narrates:

> "But what concerned me more than the failure of present-day Muslims to implement the scheme of Islam were the potentialities of that scheme itself. It was sufficient for me to know that for a short time, quite at the beginning of Islamic history, a successful attempt had been made to translate that scheme into practice; and what had seemed possible at one time might perhaps become really possible at another."[17]

According to Muhammad Asad, "Islam, as a spiritual and social phenomenon, is still greatest driving force mankind has ever experienced. Islam is 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 the flame which burned in the hearts of the Companions of the Prophet - the flame that once made Islam so great as a social order and a cultural achievement".[18]

Asad pointed out that teachings of Islam not only provide spiritual guidance for whole community, but also social and political phenomenon for Ummah. These features distinguished Islam to Christianity as a whole. There are few things, if any, which bring men so close to one another as praying together. This, I believe, is true of every religion, but particularly so of Islam, which rests on the belief that no intermediary is necessary, or indeed possible, between man and God.[19] Further he explains:

> "None need be 'ordained' for the service of God: the religious teachers and leaders of the Muslim community are simple men who enjoy a reputation (sometimes deserved and sometimes not) for erudition in theology and religious law.[20] We believe that Islam, unlike other religions, is not only a spiritual attitude of mind, adjustable to different cultural settings, but a self-sufficing orbit of culture and a social system of clearly defined features." [21]

Muhammad Assad described: "Muslims, have to discover the motive forces of both civilizations - the Islamic and that of the modern west - and then to investigate how far a cooperation is possible between them. And as the Islamic civilization is essentially a religious one, we must, first of all, try to define the general role of religion in human life".[22] He further explained:

> "What we call the "religious attitude" is always based on the belief that there exists an all-embracing, transcendental moral law, and that we human beings are bound to submit to its commands. But modern Western civilization does not recognize the necessity of man's submission to anything save economic or social or national requirements".[23]

Asad's teachings were deeply rooted in the Quran and the Prophet. His thinking was strictly religious and anti-secular in his implementation, logically

coherent. He stated:

> "Islam did not seem to be so much a religion in the popular sense of the word as, rather, a way of life; not so much a system of theology as a program of personal and social behavior based on the consciousness of God".[24]

Muhammad Asad elaborated that Islam does not mean a set of specific acts of worship, but also leads to a path towards God with moral consciousness and ethical values. This moral consciousness attributes the relation of Man with God, and Man to man, by developing a sacred and spiritual link, that makes the whole social fabric connected.

Muhammad Assad, found a different ideology radiating in Qur'anic verse, that seemed him more spiritual and consoling, as compared other creeds and dogmas as he writes:

> "Nowhere in the Koran could I find any reference to a need for 'salvation' (like Christianity). No original, inherited sin stood between the individual and his destiny - for, nothing shall be attributed to man but what he himself has striven for."[25]

This very concept is soothing to the mind, that one is free from other legacies and burdens. Everybody is bound to his own responsibility and right; especially the right of being pure and clear: "No asceticism was required to open a hidden gate to purity: for purity was man's birthright, and sin meant no more than a lapse from the innate, positive qualities with which God was said to have endowed every human being. but in time I began to understand that if man were indeed an integral unity of body and soul - as Islam insisted, he was - no aspect of his life could be too 'trivial' to come within the purview of religion."[26]

What Assad found different from other religions was Islam's universality and comprehensiveness. To him, Islam was more a program and a course of action for personal and collective behavior than a theological system. "Material prosperity, it said, is desirable but not an end in itself: and therefore, man's appetites, though justified in themselves, must be restrained and controlled by moral consciousness."[27]

The teachings of Islam guarantee the right to approach equal opportunities for all in the society. It is not only to fulfill the spiritual needs, but also it continues to deliver the social, economic and political order, for individual and collective level.

Islam and the West in Secularism

Muhammad Assad clearly explained the phenomenon of Islam in west at religious, moral and social level. He further argued that, "the fact remains that all that is real today in Western ethics and world-view is directly traceable to the old Roman civilization. As the intellectual and social atmosphere of ancient Rome was utterly utilitarian and anti-religious - in fact, if not by open admission so is the atmosphere of the modern West."[28]

Assad's critique of Western civilization, further explored that "it did not strictly deny God, but has simply no room and no use for Him in its intellectual system. It has made a virtue out of an intellectual difficulty of man - his inability to

grasp the totality of life."[29] Therefore, he concluded that:

> "The Western mind is, in principle, inclined to exclude God from the sphere of practical consideration. It has become almost axiomatic among many educated people that religion ought not to interfere with political life. And, while the principle of "secularism" is automatically identified with "progress," every suggestion to consider practical politics and socioeconomic planning under the aspect of religion is dismissed out of hand as reactionary or, at best, as "impractical idealism."[30]

According to him, the situation analysis proved that "modern "secular" state had no stable norm by which to judge between good and evil, and between right and wrong. It was the vivid result of denying Divine realities. The only possible criterion to be relied upon was the "nation's interest." But in the absence of an objective scale of moral values, different groups of people—even within one nation—may have, and usually do have, widely divergent views as to what constitutes the nation's best interests."[31]

Assad did not agree with the idea of secularism as it deny the intrrelation between religion and state. Religion is a private matter. The idea of secularism excludes the religion from state and politics. In secularism, the religious norms were impractical in the political sphere.

Assad explored as a logical consequence of secularism, "none of the existing Western political systems, was able to transform that chaos into something resembling order; simply because none of them has ever made a serious attempt to consider political and social problems in the light of absolute moral principles." [32]

According to him, "it was the religion alone that can provide such a law and, with it, the basis for an agreement, within any one group, on a moral obligation binding on all members of that group."[33] Assad further explained the necessity of relationship of religion and state, as:

> "It is reasonable, therefore, to presume that a state built on the foundations of religion offers an infinitely better prospect of national happiness than a state founded upon the concept of a "secular" political organism; provided, of course, that the religious doctrine on which such a state rests—and from which it derives its authority —makes full allowance, first, for man's biological and social needs, and, second, for the law of historical and intellectual evolution to which human society as a whole is subject."[34]

The Islamic laws, derived from Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) only to guide Ummah. These laws are the building blocks of a society and without their implementation we cannot overcome the materialistic chaos in the society.

Asad's Viewpoint on Church and State Relationship

The Western history elaborately speaks about the the relationship of Church and State. In the history of Middle Ages, when the Church was supreme in its power at governmental level, West had no vitality and no role whatsoever in

the realm of scientific research. Even though it loses all its connection with the civilizations of Rome and Greece out of which European culture had once originated. Man's power rebelled again and again against the church but no vein.
Allama Muhammad Assad, therefore has given a deep analysis about it as:

> "The history of the Middle Ages is full of that bitter struggle between the genius of Europe and the spirit of the Church. The Church - whether Catholic or Protestant did not really give up any of its mental acrobatics, its incomprehensible dogmas, its world-contempt, and its unscrupulous support of the powers-that-be at the expense of the oppressed masses of humanity: it merely tried to gloss over these grave failings and to explain them away by means of hollow assertions."[35]

Furthermore, he stated:

> "No wonder then that, as the decades and the centuries advanced, the hold of religious thought grew weaker and weaker in Europe until in the eighteenth century the predominance of the Church was definitely swept overboard by the French Revolution and its socio-political consequences in other countries.[36] "After a period of enlightenment, European thinkers instinctively shrank back from the conception of God as presented in the teachings of the Church: and as this was the only conception to which they had been accustomed, they began to reject the very idea of God and, with it, of religion itself."[37]

Muhammad Asad pointed out the following reasons that what caused church-state relationship anti-religious and how secularism succeeded:

> "Its present materialistic conception of life is Europe's revenge on Christian "spirituality" which had gone away from the natural truths of life. … I have only tried to show' three of the reasons, perhaps the main reasons, why that civilization is so thoroughly anti-religious in its conceptions and methods: one is the heritage of Roman civilization with its utterly materialistic attitude as regards human life and its inherent value."[38]

Assad's Model of an Islamic State

Muhammad Assad tried to formulate the Model of an Islamic state based on foundations of Divine principles of Qur'an and Sunnah. His model creates interest to study it because he has a total secular environment, where he was brought up and was educated in a non-religious rather anti-religious philosophy.
He has explained that the very first and main objective of an Islamic state is to provide an outline according to Qur'an and Sunnah. He stated:

> "If we examine objectively the political ordinances of Qur'an and Sunnah, we find that they do not lay down any specific form of state: that is to say, the shari'ah does not prescribe any definite pattern to which an Islamic state must conform, nor does it elaborate in detail a constitutional theory. He was convinced that

> the political law emerging from the context of Qur'an and Sunnah is, nevertheless, not an illusion. It is very vivid and concrete inasmuch as it gives us the clear outline of a political scheme capable of realization at all times and under all conditions of human life."[39]

Assad emphasized:

> "A truly Islamic state—that is, a state based (in distinction from all other existing political groupmates, not on the concepts of nationality and race but solely on the ideology of Qur'an and Sunnah."[40]

It becomes clear, that he was truly impressed by the teachings of Islam and after his conversion to Islam he tried hard to make understand and implement the teachings of Islam. He wanted to implement the theory of Divine Law in State and society practically.

The concept of sovereignty of Almighty is one of the fundamental concepts in an Islamic state. "Having accepted Islam as a Divine Ordinance, there can be no question of their being endowed with sovereignty in their own right. So, the real source of all sovereignty is the will of God as manifested in the ordinances of the shari'ah."[41]

According to him, "the state can rightly be described as "God's vice-gerent on earth"—at least in that part of the earth which falls under its factual jurisdiction."[42] The shari'ah refrains deliberately from providing detailed regulations for all the manifold, changing requirements of our social existence. The need for continuous, temporal legislation is, therefore, self-evident."[43] And that continuity carries on through Shura principle.

Applicability of divine legislation is necessary for the establishment of an Islamic state. Assad explained: **"**An Islamic state must have at its disposal a code of the shari'ah which (a) would be generally acceptable to all its Muslim citizens without distinction. It would bring out the eternal, unchangeable quality of the Divine Law in such a way as to demonstrate its applicability to all times and all stages of man's social and intellectual development."[44]

Conclusion

- Allama Assad's ideological journey from a secular state to an Islamic state, was a well thought and well-read journey. The main drive was his intellectual and spiritual thirst, and the leading force was his anxiety of soul to access Almighty Allah.
- Muhammad Assad has been a true journalist, a curious traveler, social critic, linguist, a political thinker, religious reformer, diplomat, translator and an excellent researcher. Islam made him chosen to the service of God and humanity.
- After becoming a conscious Muslim, became the torchbearer of the greatness of Islam, with vision for the contemporary Islam far beyond the present. On all issues affecting Muslims - religious, jurisprudential and political – he developed the most convincing arguments, about Islam and Society.

- To establish an Islamic State in a secular world, became his dream; he considered this ideal as a fruit of his efforts. In the same journey he became an ambassador of Pakistan, even before it came into being. He was awarded the certificate of First Citizen of Pakistan.
- As a token of his ideological journey, Assad presented Islam as an ideology of inner satisfaction and eternal success. Allama Muhammad Asad rendered innumerable services to Muslims with his brilliant writings on Islam in the modern era. His invaluable writings are a living proof of his great and everlasting love for Islam. He devoted his whole life for the revival of Islam.
- His journey gave the message to his earlier homelands, that the greatest means of changing the societies was Islam that brings revolution through a social evolution. Islam as a religion provides God's consciousness, spiritual socio-political moral values. It harmonizes with human nature, without any suppression of its worldly desires.
- Muhammad Assad urged that adoption and applicability of Divine legislation is necessary in the Islamic State. Shari'a provides us the basic fundamental principles, but also refrains deliberately a detailed prescription in every matter of life.
- He also concluded that modern forms of government must be contested according to Qur'an, Seerah and Shari'a. Assad presented his model of Islamic state following the tenets of Islam and also suggested the proposed phenomenon of Islamic legislation in state.

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