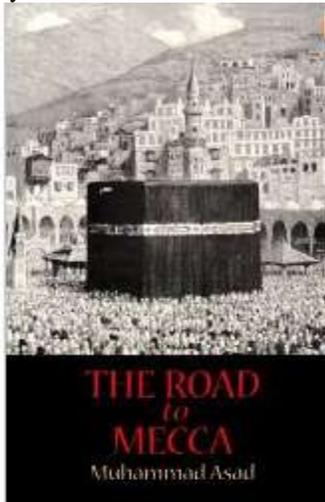


The Road to Mecca: Mohammed Assad

By: Aziz Sibaii*



In the Manitoba Book Club, I had the opportunity to read and analyze a book called "The Road to Makkah". "The Road to Makkah", is a book written by Muhammad Asad an Austrian Jewish who converted to Islam by the end of the 1920's. The book was not only a description for the author's trip to Makkah, but an intellectual, historical, political and novel book that describes the author's feeling of Islam and the Muslim World. Muhammad Asad was a journalist, traveler, philosopher, historian, diplomat, thinker, scholar and a great believer in the religion he decided to convert to. In this book, Muhammad Asad goes over many aspects that are related to the Muslim Nation and their situation. From the eyes of a Western who was immersed in the Muslim/Arab culture, you can read an unbiased version of an outsider view of that region. Muhammad Asad was not like many Westerns Orientalists who wrote books and articles about Islam without fully understanding it.

Muhammad Asad was a Jewish youth who like many other Europeans at that time rebelled against Intuition Religions. He disappointed his father by not continuing his university degree as he his dream was to become a Journalist. He left his town to Berlin to start his life as an independent writer. He struggled between jobs looking to prove himself as a writer. Finally, he reached his goal and became a journalist as he always wished. It was the invitation from his Jewish relative in Palestine that made him leave everything and head toward the Muslim Region. It was a new experience to him. Although was not planned, but that invitation was the turnout of Muhammad Asad's life as he lived in that region for many years of his life. Staying there and observing life and people in the Muslim Region convinced a great German Newspaper to hire him a writer for it. That job encouraged Muhammad Asad to even immerse more in that Muslim Culture willing to understand it deeply.

The book started with the real trigger that made him make that trip to Makkah. Asad was traveling in the Arabian Peninsula when he lost his way and almost died of thirst before he got rescued. His decision that came after that incident was to change his direction to Makkah. Asad didn't know why but he felt that great attraction in going to Makkah. The book was not just explaining his trip to Makkah as this was only part of the story. He nevertheless mixed his story with his past experiences since childhood. He cited how he reached the region and the events that affected his life. In addition to his past experiences, he shared his understanding of Islam and its comprehensive message. He addressed the several stages he went through before he came to the decision to become a Muslim.

In addition to the author points of view on Islam and the world in general, the book talked about many historical events that affected the world which the author faced. When describing historical events in the Muslim region, he was not just citing the events but analyzing them with a clear vision. His analysis took both sides, the side of the elite who made the decisions and the common people whom the decisions were applied upon. Muhammad Asad was a friend of King AbdulAziz Al Suod, the founder of Saudi Arabia, the Shah of Iran, the King of Afghanistan, the founder of the Sonosi movement in Libya and the intellectual founder of Pakistan Muhammad Iqbal. Muhammad Asad was very close to King AbdulAziz during the establishment events of Saudi Arabia. He gained the trust of AbdulAziz despite their views' differences in understanding Islam. When talking about AbdulAziz, Muhammad Asad was very objective in describing his personality. **"He is deeply religious and carries out to the letter every**

formal injunction of Islamic Law; but he rarely seems to give any thought to the spiritual essence and purpose of those injunctions. He performs the five obligations daily prayers with utmost regularity and spends long hours at night in deep devotion; but it never seems to have occurred to him that prayer is only a means and not an end itself...etc”. The author tried his best in these words to describe King AbdulAziz from a close point of view.

Beside historical events and observations, Muhammad Asad gave a lot of great input on many Islamic teachings that he learned and he thought are delightful. The five prayers, fasting, pilgrimage, Ibrahim’s story with Hajar and Ismael, Jihad and its definition, his view of the west rejection of Islam, his view on the ideal Muslim state, the Jinn (the unseen creature), the Palestinian crisis, the Shiaa/Sunni division and a more other sensitive Islamic issues. The author felt free to put his views with no restriction to any traditional teaching he might have faced. He was very straight sometimes in stating some opinions that disagree completely with the Wahhabi ideology, like photography, women education, modernization of the Islamic state and more.

Furthermore, and in a chapter the author named “The Dajjal”, the glittering, the Deceptive One, he described accurately why the westerners are not getting the message of Islam. The Dajjal is the false Messiah that is expected to come one day in the future and deceive people as he is God. He has one eye and people get deceived by his power that make them believe that he is God. Muhammad Asad used the Dajjal as analogy to the world the westerners in general live in. They look upon one side of life only – material progress – and are unaware of its spiritual side. **“.....Its medicine brings life to those who seem to have been doomed to death while its ware and scientific horror destroy life. And its material advancement is so powerful and so glittering that the weak in faith are coming to believe that it is a godhead in its own right; but those who have remained conscious of their Creator clearly recognize that to worship the Dajjal means to deny God..... etc”**. He continued talking about this parabola which he was telling it to a Saudi scholar Sh. Ibn Bulahid who was astonished by such conclusion and was very receptive of it.

The book in general was not of a traditional story book where events are written in series. You will find the author jump between ages. In each chapter he tried to cover two to three period of time; his trip to Makkah, his youth and life in the west and his past experiences with Ibn Saud years ago during the founding of the Kingdom. In addition, of the nicest things in such book, was the use of the Arabic words used by common people over there. He tried his best to write the exact translation of the words used over there. He didn’t just go over them as general idioms used by some other language but he would use them with accurate translation and in context. Also, you will be stroked by the way the author was immersed in the Arabian culture. The author was acting like an Arab and talking like an Arab. He was like a traveler Bedouin who could not stay in one location for a long time. From his picture, you will notice that his figure was more eastern than of a western and that might have even helped him more to be accepted easily in such new society. He married from there twice at least though the marriages were not successful.

Finally, Muhammad Asad reached Makkah. He just couldn’t find the reason for such a trip but it was a great experience to him. By the end of the book, he mentioned his final stages toward embracing Islam. In fact, the first time he realized that he is closer to Islam than anytime before, was when he had this discussion with an Afghani fellow about the loss of the Islamic civilization. The Afghani friend did not hesitate to tell Asad that he is unconsciously a Muslim. Asad was surprised by such observation but that made him think even more of Islam. Asad embraced Islam not because he was affected by few specific teachings but because Islam was the end of his trip toward guidance. Asad left his town looking for a career that also represents his destiny and finally found it when embracing Islam. He went from a Jew born to a religious Jewish family to a typical atheist young man to a pious Muslim who entered Islam with both his heart and intellect. Asad understood Islam and Muslims deeply before taking that serious decision and that helped him a lot to become a scholar and an intellectual thinker for the Muslim nation.

Finally, the book in general was a great book. I would really recommend it not only for Muslims but for Non-Muslims too. The book is a great reference for understanding the message of Islam and its purpose and it might reach the heart of many. The book as I said at the beginning is a book that you will find many kinds of arts and sciences in. It is a book that you will never want to put down upon started reading and I was blessed by reading it.

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