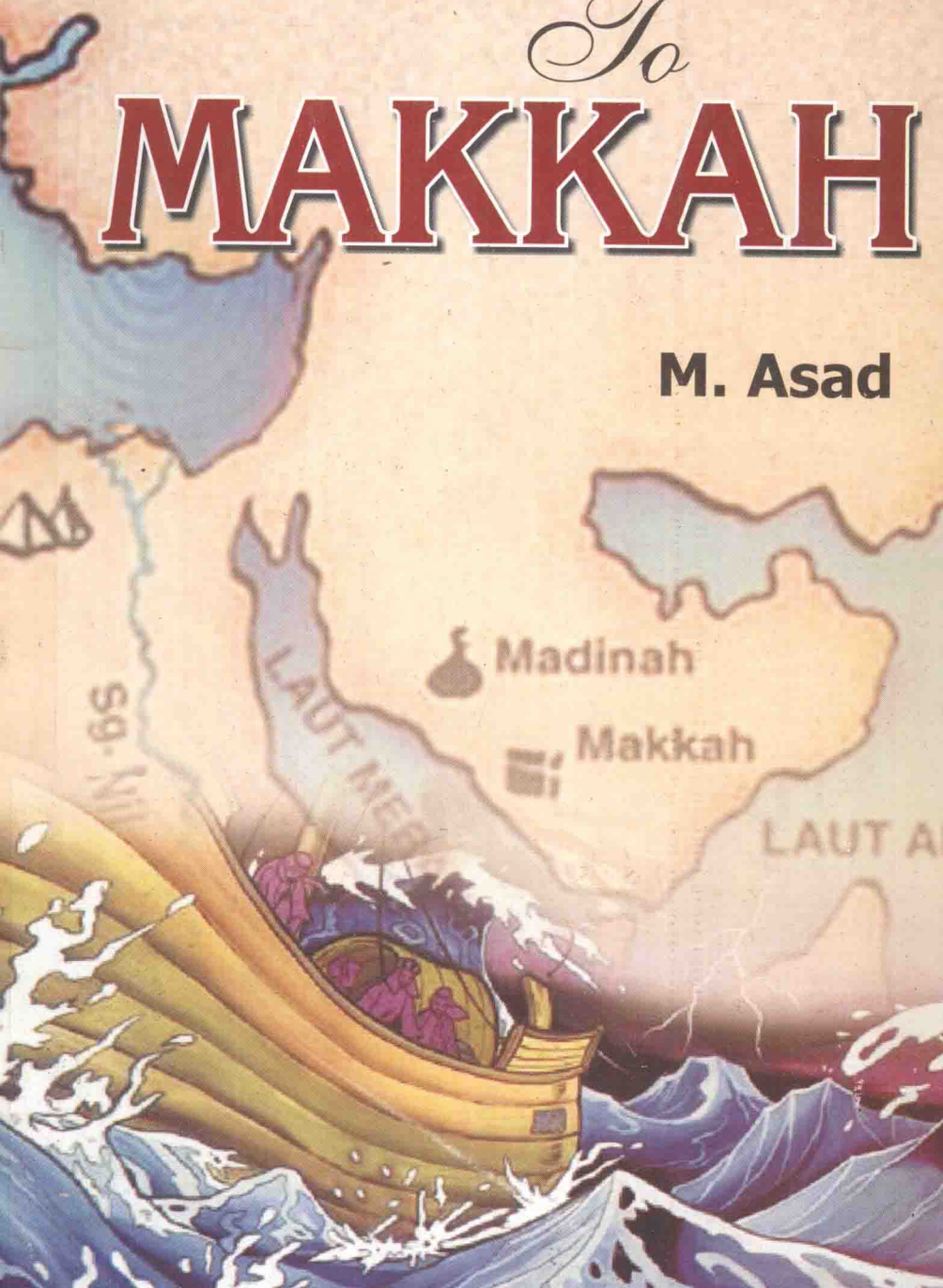


THE ROAD *To* **MAKKAH**

M. Asad



THE ROAD TO MAKKAH

Muhammad Asad

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Phone (O) : 2382550, 2384740

Tele/Fax:23267510 (R) 95120-2413957

e-mail : apd@bol.net.in

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To my wife

POLA HAMIDA

*who through criticism and advice
gave so much of her wise heart to this book
that her name ought to have been inscribed
on the title page together with mine*

GLOSSARY

of Arabic and Persian Terms

SPELLING has been kept as close as possible to the original pronunciation, avoiding, at the same time, all signs and symbols which would unnecessarily confuse the lay reader. Terms which occur in only one place and are explained in the text have been omitted here.

abāya – a wide, woollen cloak worn by Arabs over all their other garments.

agayl – voluntary, irregular troops recruited from Central Arabia for service in Iraq, Syria and Jordan.

al- – definite article ‘the’ used before nouns and many proper names. If the noun begins with the consonant *d, n, r, s, t* or *z*, the *l* of *al* is ‘assimilated’ in sound: e.g., *Ad-Dawish*, *Az-Zuwayy*.

amīr – ‘one who holds authority’, e.g., governor, ruler, commander, etc.

badawi (pl. *badu*) – beduin.

bismillāh – ‘in the name of God’

burnus – hooded cloak worn by North African Arabs and Berbers.

dhow – Latin-rigged sailing vessel largely used in the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf and (mostly under the name *sambūk*) in the Red Sea.

faranji (Persian form, *farangi*) – European.

fellāh (pl. *fellāhīn*) – peasant or farmer.

gallabiyya – long, shirtlike tunic worn in Egypt and some other Arab countries.

hajj – pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the duties enjoined upon every Muslim man and woman able to undertake it.

hājji – one who is making or has made the pilgrimage to Mecca; often used as an honorific title.

haram – ‘sanctuary’, especially the Holy Mosques of Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. (Not to be confused with *harām*, which means ‘forbidden by religion’.)

GLOSSARY

- hazrat* – lit., ‘presence’; term of address roughly equivalent to ‘your Honour’.
- ibn* – son; before a proper name, ‘son of’. Frequently used in conjunction with the name of an ancestor, in which case the combination denotes a family name, or the name of a dynasty, e.g., Ibn Saud, Ibn Rashid.
- igāl* – a ropelike headband encircling the Arabian headcloth. It is usually made of plain black wool, but is sometimes threaded with gilded silver wire.
- ihrām* – white garment worn by men on pilgrimage to Mecca.
- ikhwān* – ‘brethren’, here applied to beduins settled and organized by King Ibn Saud.
- imām* – ‘leader’; more particularly applied to the leader of a congregational prayer, but also to outstanding scholars of earlier times and to the leader of a community.
- inshā-Allāh* – ‘God willing’.
- janāb-i-āli* – honorific term of address used in Persian-speaking countries.
- jard* – a blanketlike woollen wrap worn in western Egypt and Libya.
- jihād* – Holy War in the defence of Islam or Muslim liberty.
- jubba* – a wide, ankle-length mantle worn by many well-to-do city people, and most of the *ulamā*, in Egypt, Syria, Hijaz, Iraq, Iran, etc.
- kaftān* – a long, fitted gown worn throughout the Middle East under a *jubba* or an *abāya*.
- khalīfa* – lit., ‘successor’ or ‘vice-gerent’; usually denoting the head of the Muslim community (‘Caliph’).
- khān* – originally the title of a Mongol prince or lord; nowadays widely used as an honorific designation in Iran, Afghanistan, etc.
- kufiyya* – Arabian men’s headcloth.
- maghrib* – sunset.
- marhaba* – welcome.
- mu’azzin* – caller of the time for prayer.
- mujāhid* (pl. *mujāhidīn*) – one who fights in *jihād*.
- nargīle* – elaborate pipe for smoking tobacco, in which the smoke is filtered through water; in some countries it is also called ‘hookah’.

qahwa – coffee; in Arab countries often applied also to a coffeehouse or a reception room.

rajajil – men-at-arms, usually the bodyguards of a king or *amir*.

riyāl – the basic silver coin in several Middle-Eastern countries.

sayyid – lit., ‘lord’. Frequently used to denote a descendant of the Prophet.

sharīf – same as above. In particular applied to certain Muslim ruling dynasties; in this book to King Husayn, who ruled over the Hijaz from 1916 to 1924, and his descendants, the present dynasties of Iraq and Jordan.

shaykh – lit., ‘old man’; an honorific title widely used to denote tribal chieftains as well as notables and (in Arabic-speaking countries) scholars.

shuyūkh – ‘majestic plural’ of *shaykh*; a designation applied in Central Arabia to the King and, occasionally, to his greatest *amirs*.

sīdī – colloquial for *sayyidī*, ‘my lord’ – an honorific term especially popular in North Africa.

sūra – section, or chapter, of the Koran, which is divided into 114 *sūras*.

ṭarḥūsh – red, brimless hat worn by men all over the Levant.

ulamā – scholars, or learned men. Especially applied to religious scholars, but often used also for those learned in other branches of knowledge.

wādi – river valley or dry river bed.

yā – interjection equivalent to ‘O’ used in direct address (e.g., *yā sīdī*, ‘O my lord’; *yā Allāh*, ‘O God’).

zāwiya – lodge of a religious order or fraternity.

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THE STORY OF A STORY

THE STORY I am going to tell in this book is not the autobiography of a man conspicuous for his role in public affairs; it is not a narrative of adventure – for although many strange adventures have come my way, they were never more than an accompaniment to what was happening within me; it is not even the story of a deliberate search for faith – for that faith came upon me, over the years, without any endeavour on my part to find it. My story is simply the story of a European's discovery of Islam and of his integration within the Muslim community.

I had never thought of writing it, for it had not occurred to me that my life might be of particular interest to anyone except myself. But when, after an absence of twenty-five years from the West, I came to Paris and then to New York in the beginning of 1952, I was forced to alter this view. Serving as Pakistan's Minister Plenipotentiary to the United Nations, I was naturally in the public eye and encountered a great deal of curiosity among my European and American friends and acquaintances. At first they assumed that mine was the case of a European 'expert' employed by an Eastern government for a specific purpose, and that I had conveniently adapted myself to the ways of the nation which I was serving; but when my activities at the United Nations made it obvious that I identified myself not merely 'functionally' but also emotionally and intellectually with the political and cultural aims of the Muslim world in general, they became somewhat perplexed. More and more people began to question me about my past experiences. They came to know that very early in my life I had started my career as a foreign correspondent for Continental newspapers and, after several years of extensive travels throughout the Middle East, had become a Muslim in 1926; that after my conversion to Islam I lived for nearly six years in Arabia and enjoyed the friendship of King Ibn Saud; that 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. To me, as to Iqbal, this dream represented a way, indeed the only way, to a revival of all the dormant hopes of Islam, the creation of a political entity of people bound together not by common descent but by their common adherence to an ideology. For years I devoted myself to this ideal, studying, writing and lecturing, and in time gained something of a reputation as an interpreter of Islamic law and culture. When Pakistan was established in 1947, I was called upon by its Government to organize and direct a Department of Islamic Reconstruction, which was to elaborate the ideological, Islamic concepts of statehood and community upon which the newly born political organization might draw. After two years of this extremely stimulating activity, I transferred to the Pakistan Foreign Service and was appointed Head of the Middle East Division in the Foreign Ministry, where I dedicated myself to strengthening the ties between Pakistan and the rest of the Muslim world; and in due course I found myself in Pakistan's Mission to the United Nations at New York.

All this pointed to far more than a mere outward accommodation of a European to a Muslim community in which he happened to live: it rather indicated a conscious, wholehearted transference of allegiance from one cultural environment to another, entirely different one. And this appeared very strange to most of my Western friends. They could not quite picture to themselves how a man of Western birth and upbringing could have so fully, and apparently with no mental reservations whatever, identified himself with the Muslim world; how it had been possible for him to exchange his Western cultural heritage for that of Islam; and what it was that had made him accept a religious and social ideology which – they seemed to take for granted – was vastly inferior to all European concepts.

Now why, I asked myself, should my Western friends take this so readily for granted? Had any of them ever really bothered to gain a direct insight into Islam – or were their opinions based merely on the handful of clichés and distorted notions that had

been handed down to them from previous generations? Could it perhaps be that the old Graeco-Roman mode of thought which divided the world into Greeks and Romans on one side and 'barbarians' on the other was still so thoroughly ingrained in the Western mind that it was unable to concede, even theoretically, positive value to anything that lay outside its own cultural orbit?

Ever since Greek and Roman times, European thinkers and historians have been prone to contemplate the history of the world from the standpoint and in terms of European history and Western cultural experiences alone. Non-Western civilizations enter the picture only in so far as their existence, or particular movements within them, have or had a direct influence on the destinies of Western man; and thus, in Western eyes, the history of the world and its various cultures amounts in the last resort to little more than an expanded history of the West.

Naturally, such a narrowed angle of vision is bound to produce a distorted perspective. Accustomed as he is to writings which depict the culture or discuss the problems of his own civilization in great detail and in vivid colours, with little more than side glances here and there at the rest of the world, the average European or American easily succumbs to the illusion that the cultural experiences of the West are not merely superior but out of all proportion to those of the rest of the world; and thus, that the Western way of life is the only valid norm by which other ways of life could be adjudged – implying, of course, that every intellectual concept, social institution or ethical valuation that disagrees with the Western 'norm' belongs *ex ipso* to a lower grade of existence. Following in the footsteps of the Greeks and Romans, the Occidental likes to think that all those 'other' civilizations are or were only so many stumbling experiments on the path of progress so unerringly pursued by the West; or, at best (as in the case of the 'ancestor' civilizations which preceded that of the modern West in a direct line), no more than consecutive chapters in one and the same book, of which Western civilization is, of course, the final chapter.

When I expounded this view to an American friend of mine – a man of considerable intellectual attainments and a scholarly bent of mind – he was somewhat sceptical at first.

'Granted,' he said, 'the ancient Greeks and Romans *were* limited in their approach to foreign civilizations: but was not this

limitation the inevitable result of difficulties of communication between them and the rest of the world? And has not this difficulty been largely overcome in modern times? After all, we Westerners do concern ourselves nowadays with what is going on outside our own cultural orbit. Aren't you forgetting the many books about Oriental art and philosophy that have been published in Europe and America during the last quarter-century . . . about the political ideas that preoccupy the minds of Eastern peoples? Surely one could not with justice overlook this desire on the part of Westerners to understand what other cultures might have to offer?

'To some extent you may be right,' I replied. 'There is little doubt that the primitive Graeco-Roman outlook is no longer fully operative these days. Its harshness has been considerably blunted – if for no other reason, because the more mature among Western thinkers have grown disillusioned and sceptical about many aspects of their own civilization and now begin to look to other parts of the world for cultural inspiration. Upon some of them it is dawning that there may be not only one book and one story of human progress, but many: simply because mankind, in the historical sense, is not a homogeneous entity, but rather a variety of groups with widely divergent ideas as to the meaning and purpose of human life. Still, I do not feel that the West has really become less condescending toward foreign cultures than the Greeks and Romans were: it has only become more tolerant. Mind you, not toward Islam – only toward certain other Eastern cultures, which offer some sort of spiritual attraction to the spirit-hungry West and are, at the same time, too distant from the Western world-view to constitute any real challenge to its values.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Well,' I answered, 'when a Westerner discusses, say, Hinduism or Buddhism, he is always conscious of the fundamental differences between these ideologies and his own. He may admire this or that of their ideas, but would naturally never consider the possibility of substituting them for his own. Because he *a priori* admits this impossibility, he is able to contemplate such really alien cultures with equanimity and often with sympathetic appreciation. But when it comes to Islam – which is by no means as alien to Western values as Hindu or Buddhist philosophy –

this Western equanimity is almost invariably disturbed by an emotional bias. Is it perhaps, I sometimes wonder, *because* the values of Islam are close enough to those of the West to constitute a potential challenge to many Western concepts of spiritual and social life?

And I went on to tell him of a theory which I had conceived some years ago – a theory that might perhaps help one to understand better the deep-seated prejudice against Islam so often to be found in Western literature and contemporary thought.

‘To find a truly convincing explanation of this prejudice,’ I said, ‘one has to look far backward into history and try to comprehend the psychological background of the earliest relations between the Western and the Muslim worlds. What Occidentals think and feel about Islam today is rooted in impressions that were born during the Crusades.’

‘The Crusades!’ exclaimed my friend. ‘You don’t mean to say that what happened nearly a thousand years ago could still have an effect on people of the twentieth century?’

‘But it does! I know it sounds incredible; but don’t you remember the incredulity which greeted the early discoveries of the psychoanalysts when they tried to show that much of the emotional life of a mature person – and most of those seemingly unaccountable leanings, tastes and prejudices comprised in the term “idiosyncrasies” – can be traced back to the experiences of his most formative age, his early childhood? Well, are nations and civilizations anything but collective individuals? Their development also is bound up with the experiences of their early childhood. As with children, those experiences may have been pleasant or unpleasant; they may have been perfectly rational or, alternatively, due to the child’s naïve misinterpretation of an event: the *moulding* effect of every such experience depends primarily on its original intensity. The century immediately preceding the Crusades, that is, the end of the first millennium of the Christian era, might well be described as the early childhood of Western civilization . . .’

I proceeded to remind my friend – himself an historian – that this had been the age when, for the first time since the dark centuries that followed the breakup of Imperial Rome, Europe was beginning to see its own cultural way. Independently of the almost forgotten Roman heritage, new literatures were just then

coming into existence in the European vernaculars; inspired by the religious experience of Western Christianity, fine arts were slowly awakening from the lethargy caused by the warlike migrations of the Goths, Huns and Avars; out of the crude conditions of the early Middle Ages, a new cultural world was emerging. It was at that critical, extremely sensitive stage of its development that Europe received its most formidable shock – in modern parlance, a ‘trauma’ – in the shape of the Crusades.

The Crusades were the strongest collective impression on a civilization that had just begun to be conscious of itself. Historically speaking, they represented Europe’s earliest – and entirely successful – attempt to view itself under the aspect of cultural unity. Nothing that Europe has experienced before or after could compare with the enthusiasm which the First Crusade brought into being. A wave of intoxication swept over the Continent, an elation which for the first time overstepped the barriers between states and tribes and classes. Before then, there had been Franks and Saxons and Germans, Burgundians and Sicilians, Normans and Lombards—a medley of tribes and races with scarcely anything in common but the fact that most of their feudal kingdoms and principalities were remnants of the Roman Empire and that all of them professed the Christian faith: but in the Crusades, and through them, the religious bond was elevated to a new plane, a cause common to all Europeans alike – the politico-religious concept of ‘Christendom’, which in its turn gave birth to the cultural concept of ‘Europe’. When, in his famous speech at Clermont, in November, 1095, Pope Urban II exhorted the Christians to make war upon the ‘wicked race’ that held the Holy Land, he enunciated – probably without knowing it himself – the charter of Western civilization.

The traumatic experience of the Crusades gave Europe its cultural awareness and its unity; but this same experience was destined henceforth also to provide the false colour in which Islam was to appear to Western eyes. Not simply because the Crusades meant war and bloodshed. So many wars have been waged between nations and subsequently forgotten, and so many animosities which in their time seemed ineradicable have later turned into friendships. The damage caused by the Crusades was not restricted to a clash of weapons: it was, first and foremost, an intellectual damage – the poisoning of the Western mind against

the Muslim world through a deliberate misrepresentation of the teachings and ideals of Islam. For, if the call for a crusade was to maintain its validity, the Prophet of the Muslims had, of necessity, to be stamped as the Anti-Christ and his religion depicted in the most lurid terms as a fount of immorality and perversion. It was at the time of the Crusades that the ludicrous notion that Islam was a religion of crude sensualism and brutal violence, of an observance of ritual instead of a purification of the heart, entered the Western mind and remained there; and it was then that the name of the Prophet Muhammad – the same Muhammad who had insisted that his own followers respect the prophets of other religions – was contemptuously transformed by Europeans into ‘Mahound’. The age when the spirit of independent inquiry could raise its head was as yet far distant in Europe; it was easy for the powers-that-were to sow the dark seeds of hatred for a religion and civilization that was so different from the religion and civilization of the West. Thus it was no accident that the fiery *Chanson de Roland*, which describes the legendary victory of Christendom over the Muslim ‘heathen’ in southern France, was composed not at the time of those battles but three centuries later – to wit, shortly before the First Crusade – immediately to become a kind of ‘national anthem’ of Europe; and it is no accident, either, that this warlike epic marks the beginning of a *European* literature, as distinct from the earlier, localized literatures: for hostility toward Islam stood over the cradle of European civilization.

It would seem an irony of history that the age-old Western resentment against Islam, which was religious in origin, should still persist subconsciously at a time when religion has lost most of its hold on the imagination of Western man. This, however, is not really surprising. We know that a person may completely lose the religious beliefs imparted to him in his childhood while, nevertheless, some particular emotion connected with those beliefs remains, irrationally, in force throughout his later life –

‘– and this,’ I concluded, ‘is precisely what happened to that collective personality, Western civilization. The shadow of the Crusades hovers over the West to this day; and all its reactions toward Islam and the Muslim world bear distinct traces of that die-hard ghost . . .’

My friend remained silent for a long time. I can still see his

tall, lanky figure pacing up and down the room, his hands in his coat pockets, shaking his head as if puzzled, and finally saying:

'There may be something in what you say . . . indeed, there may be, although I am not in a position to judge your "theory" offhand . . . But in any case, in the light of what you yourself have just told me, don't you realize that your life, which to you seems so very simple and uncomplicated, *must* appear very strange and unusual to Westerners? Could you not perhaps share some of your own experiences with them? Why don't you write your autobiography? I am sure it would make fascinating reading!'

Laughingly I replied: 'Well, I might perhaps let myself be persuaded to leave the Foreign Service and write such a book. After all, writing is my original profession . . .'

In the following weeks and months my joking response imperceptibly lost the aspect of a joke. I began to think seriously about setting down the story of my life and thus helping, in however small a measure, to lift the heavy veil which separates Islam and its culture from the Occidental mind. My way to Islam had been in many respects unique: I had not become a Muslim because I had lived for a long time among Muslims – on the contrary, I decided to live among them because I had embraced Islam. Might I not, by communicating my very personal experiences to Western readers, contribute more to a mutual understanding between the Islamic and Western worlds than I could by continuing in a diplomatic position which might be filled equally well by other countrymen of mine? After all, any intelligent man could be Pakistan's Minister to the United Nations – but how many men were able to talk to Westerners about Islam as I could? I was a Muslim – but I was also of Western origin: and thus I could speak the intellectual languages of both Islam and the West . . .

And so, toward the end of 1952, I resigned from the Pakistan Foreign Service and started to write this book. Whether it is as 'fascinating reading' as my American friend anticipated, I cannot say. I could do no more than try to retrace from memory – with the help of only a few old notes, disjointed diary entries and some of the newspaper articles I had written at the time – the tangled lines of a development that stretched over many years and over vast expanses of geographical space.

And here it is: not the story of all my life, but only of the years before I left Arabia for India – those exciting years spent in travels through almost all the countries between the Libyan Desert and the snow-covered peaks of the Pamirs, between the Bosphorus and the Arabian Sea. It is told in the context and, it should be kept in mind, *on the time level* of my last desert journey from the interior of Arabia to Mecca in the late summer of 1932: for it was during those twenty-three days that the pattern of my life became fully apparent to myself.

The Arabia depicted in the following pages no longer exists. Its solitude and integrity have crumbled under a strong gush of oil and the gold that the oil has brought. Its great simplicity has vanished and, with it, much that was humanly unique. It is with the pain one feels for something precious, now irretrievably lost, that I remember that last, long desert trek, when we rode, rode, two men on two dromedaries, through swimming light . . .