

Converting to Otherness, Islam, Autobiography and Embracing the Other

MAHMOUD ABDEL HAMID MAHMOUD AHMED KHALIFA

Department of Languages and Translation, Taibah University,
Medina, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
mahmeda@taibahu.edu.sa

Published online: 15 August 2019

To cite this article: Khalifa, M. 2019. Converting to otherness, Islam, autobiography and embracing the other. *KEMANUSIAAN the Asian Journal of Humanities* 26(Supp. 1): 151–166. <https://doi.org/10.21315/kajh2019.26.s1.8>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.21315/kajh2019.26.s1.8>

Abstract. For Muhammad Asad, converting to Islam was a matter of continuity not disjunction with his identity as a Jew. The disavowal happened with his identity as a European in a materialistic context. His symbolic battle is launched against his Western heritage with all its attendant anti-Semitism and fascism that claimed the lives of his father and sister. This symbolic battle is clear in his autobiography, *The Road to Mecca* (1954). Islam provided Asad with a space from which he could critique Western modernity which is centred around the material. On the other hand, in her autobiography, *From MTV to Mecca: How Islam Inspired My Life* (2012), Kristiane Backer created a “third space” where she tried to reconcile two selves in one subjectivity. The otherness of Islam is tempered by the internal conversion experience of the new Muslim. So instead of looking at conversion as a radical act that negatively affected her original culture, Backer tried to form some continuity with her past self.

Keywords and phrases: conversion, Muslim autobiography, otherness, third space, spiritual journeys

Introduction

Conversion is essentially a life-changing experience. It changes the convert’s outlook on things. Conversion of a Westerner to Islam is more interesting given the hostile atmosphere created by centuries of misrepresentation of Islam in the West. Yet conversion has its modalities, people convert for different reasons and in different ways. Conversion to Islam is synonymous with a conversion to a different way of living and a change in life style. In his autobiography, *The Road to Mecca* (1954), Leopold Weiss aka Muhammad Asad, a Jewish convert to Islam narrated the journey that took him to Islam. He set a tradition of convert literature which is

reflected in the titles of autobiographies that tow his line. One such autobiography is the one by Kristiane Backer, an MTV celebrity presenter who converted to Islam and wrote an autobiography entitled, *From MTV to Mecca: How Islam Inspired My Life* (2012). Both Asad and Backer offer two distinctive ways of conversion autobiographies. To shed light on that distinction, I am going to use notions as introduced by Wohlrab-Sahr. She explains that the “meeting between Islam and the West results not only in processes of distinction, but also in processes of adoption. Probably the most radical form of adopting the ‘other’ is conversion” (Wohlrab-Sahr 1999, 352). She further elaborates that:

Whereas the syncretistic mode uses religious symbolism in a way that underlines the combination of the old and the new, the mode of symbolic battle stresses conflict and uses religious symbolism to demonstrate radical difference. The cases of symbolic battle are especially rich sources of information about the *crisis experience* [emphasis added] to which conversion is related and the symbolic expression and transformation of this experience by means of a foreign religion. (Wohlrab-Sahr 1999, 353)

The notion of syncretic mode is going to be used to understand Backer’s conversion narrative while the notion of symbolic battle is going to be used to explain Asad’s disavowal of his early self as a European after converting to Islam.

Disillusionment with the Material and Finding True North

Mecca in both autobiographies provides a compass of spiritual true north for both writers. Mecca is experienced both as a metaphorical space of the heart and a real space of spiritual practice. Both Asad and Backer made a journey that had been made millions of time. Mecca is the spiritual destination of Muslims worldwide since the spring of Islam. It is a metaphor of centeredness. Being European hemmed in by the material, both writers tried to centre themselves in a belief system that balanced the material and the spiritual. That new centre initiated a journey of learning and unlearning of belonging and un-belonging that both handled according to their particular historical moment. Asad and Backer converted to a religion that was considered “the other” in Western discourse. However, they chose to cross into that other cultural and religious world that offered a respite from Western materialism. Asad’s autobiographical events took place in the context of two world wars and the feeling of disorientation they produced. The spiritual void that resulted from the shocking massacres and destruction of the Western world pushed Asad to look for spirituality somewhere else. Asad sought a radical break from his Western origins and became a staunch critic of Western materialism. This radical break could only be compared to Malcolm X’s deprecating autobiography of black lives

under America's systemic racism. Asad had done much to propagate Islam by translating Islam to a Western audience. His conversion became an active career of making Islam known in the West. He translated the Qur'an as *The Message of the Qur'an* (Asad 2003). He enacted his Muslim identity everywhere he went. Even his writing of an autobiography was a form of religious invitation to others to embrace Islam. According to Jean Starobinski (cited in Olney 1998, 78):

One would hardly have sufficient motive to write an autobiography had not some radical change occurred in his life—conversion, entry into a new life, the operation of Grace. If such a change had not affected the life of the narrator, he could merely depict himself once and for all, and new developments would be treated as external (historical) events; we would then be in the presence of the conditions of what Benveniste has named history, and a narrator in the first person would hardly continue to be necessary. It is the internal transformation of the individual—and the exemplary character of this transformation—that furnishes a subject for a narrative discourse in which 'I' is both subject and object.

Kristiane Backer, an MTV pop song presenter, experienced a similar spiritual vacuum that led her to look into religion and to explore several religious ideas before embracing Islam. Her conversion, however, offered a softer and more syncretic espousal of Islam, a cautious conversion that tends to reconcile Islam with the West and form a European Muslim identity that reconciled both worlds rather than break away from one to the other.

The concept of "symbolic battle" is going to be used to elaborate Muhammad Asad's conversion. Asad experienced a sort of intellectual and social "crisis experience" in the words of Wohlrab-Sahr. His alienation and doubt about the viability of Western civilisation as a source of moral inspiration had created a void that was filled by his conversion to Islam. In the chapter of his autobiography entitled "Winds", he depicted a situation of deep spiritual crisis. He described the moral vacuum of the West surrounding him as well as being himself in a state of deep social and moral crisis:

They had been strange years, those early twentieth in Central Europe. The general atmosphere of social and moral insecurity had given rise to a desperate hopefulness which expressed itself in daring experiments in music, painting and the theatre, as well as groping, often revolutionary enquiries into the morphology of culture; but hand-in-hand with this forced optimism went a spiritual emptiness, a vague cynical relativism born out of increasing hopelessness with regard to the future of man. (Asad 1954, 70)

World War One left the Western world in a state of moral shock which Asad condemned as the outcome of a materialist world that had succumbed to moral relativism. The crisis of the war seemed to have affected everybody and Asad himself was no exception. Asad, in embracing Islam was essentially in a life quest for a moral and ethical world that was lacking in the rapidly changing moral landscape of Europe after the first war. In *The Road to Mecca*, he registered the general frustration of his times:

Ethical frustration was evident in the all-round lack of agreement about the meaning of good and evil ... the insatiable carving after power and pleasure had, of necessity, led to the break-up of Western society into hostile groups armed to the teeth and determined to destroy each other whenever and wherever their respective interests clashed. (Asad 1954, 71)

He looked outside Europe for a solution to these moral depredations. He started his symbolic battle that was dramatised in his autobiography where Islam offered a solution to those troubles. Asad upheld a Manichean view of Islam and the West. He embraced not only Islam but the very Arabic culture and identity from which Islam rose to prominence. He immersed himself in the world of Islam and the Arabs. According to Wohlrab-Sahr: "To conceptualize conversion as a form of symbolic battle takes into account that the identity transformations connected with it are more than just situational adjustments that can easily be revised; they are permanent forms of transformation that imply the rejection of former commitments" (Wohlrab-Sahr 1999, 355). The identity transformations of Asad were reflected in his wholehearted embracing of Islam. His was a conversion that took him away from his Western surroundings and right into the heart and birthplace of Islam. He gradually turned into a full-bloodied Muslim embracing Islam wholeheartedly with his Western identity pushed to the background. He took part in the *jihad* against the Italians in Libya out of a desire to advance the cause of the Muslim world. His Western memories of childhood and adulthood fade into nothingness as his Arab Muslim present occupied more space and took over more ground:

I am no longer a stranger: Arabia has become my home. My Western past is like a distant dream—not unreal enough to be forgotten, and not real enough to be part of my present ... Oddly enough, the urge to wander that has made me so restless for the greater part of my life (I am a little over thirty two now) and lures me again and again into all manner of hazards and encounters, does not stem so much from a thirst for adventure as from a longing to find my own restful place in the world—to arrive at a point where I could correlate all that might happen to me with all that I might think and feel and desire. And if I understand it rightly, it is this longing for inner discovery that has driven me, over the

years, into a world entirely different, both in its perceptions and its outer forms, from all to which my European birth and upbringing had seemed to destine me. (Asad 1954, 24)

Identity for Asad became a matter of choice. He discovered Islam on the way to self-discovery and all that inability to reconcile himself with his Western identity and his desire for discovery led him to a spot where he could reconcile his soul and body. The material and the spiritual come together in a new formation. Islam offered the ultimate unity he was looking for between body and soul. That same desire for the ultimate meaning of life in an empty material world motivated Kristiane Backer even though her autobiography was written almost a century after Asad's autobiography. Yet both shared the same adventurous and questioning soul. Unlike that of Asad, Backer's conversion was not the result of any cataclysmic events such as World War One. However, the genesis of her conversion started with a similar crisis of the soul. Although Backer had achieved a great success as a pop song presenter and seemed to have enjoyed a celebrity status, she felt "empty" having been brought up in an atmosphere where religion was not important and amounted only to a childhood residue:

All I knew was that in my world, there was neither God nor peace. I had no connection with religion as such, and God meant little more to me than distant childhood memories. My parents had just got divorced, and I felt as though I was emerging from some kind of *existential crisis* [emphasis added]. If I was honest with myself, I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt inner peace, even though I had all the success a young person could have wished for. Deep down I felt empty and a bit lonely, and I thought that what I needed was a partner. But the truth was that no human being could have filled my inner void. (Backer 2012, 44)

Backer was not impressed by the materialisation of the spiritual and its transformation in the Capitalist scheme. She explained that: "What I found off-putting in the States, though, was the commercialisation of Christmas – they began playing carols and Christmas ads on TV as early as September" (Backer 2012, 24).

In her milieu, Backer worked with people steeped in the material world who tried through material means to keep a sort of eternal appeal and beauty. Backer depicted an important opposing image between "so many women and even some men in showbiz and London society would go under the knife – have 'boob jobs', liposuction or collagen and Botox injections. Surely, surgically altering their bodies to conform to a certain image that the media had created seemed to be a sign of grave insecurity", and a spiritual path "no surgeon, toxin or technology in the world can prevent the passage of time. That much I knew. Only in Paradise are we

said to be forever young and only our soul is everlasting, therefore it made sense to work on beautifying that were one should beautify his soul instead” (Backer 2012, 100).

She was looking around for the spiritual in life and that was why she tried many spiritual paths before converting to Islam. In one instance she said that:

On one occasion I helped out in a second-hand bookstore that stocked a lot of beatnik literature. As payment I was given a tattered old book with gold binding called *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, a masterpiece of Persian literature. I didn’t realize at the time that there was something prophetic about this gift. (Backer 2012, 25)

A turning point took place when she met Imran Khan, the world-famous Pakistani cricket player. He took her on a tour of Pakistan and introduced her to Islam through the Sufi tradition that took her on a new spiritual path:

“The material world is not all that exists,” Imran said. “There is something more important that is not really tangible but is definitely there. In the East people were very open to the spiritual dimension and they even experienced it, whereas in the West it is more or less buried.” I was intrigued. Spirituality had always interested me: I just didn’t know anything about it. I remembered that when I’d met the singer Terence Trent d’Arby, he’d said that spirituality meant a lot to him. The remark had stuck in my mind and I’d wondered what he actually meant, but never had a chance to ask him. (Backer 2012, 55)

Both Asad and Backer expressed a disillusionment with the Western consumerist way of life and look for spirituality. As the narrative moved forward, there was a disenchantment with the West. Self-telling was a means by which converts endowed their experience with meaning, giving it a real shape that bolstered their identity. Asad’s telling of his life story was identity forming. In his essay, “Religious Conversion as Narrative and Autobiography”, Bruce Hindmarsh argued that:

Muhammad Asad might well have become and remained a devout Muslim without writing his autobiography, but it is clear nonetheless that the narrative recounted in *Road to Mecca* was essential to his religious identity and vocation. His autobiography does not, that is, simply recount his past; it also tells us who he is now. As Augustine realized long ago, memory is one of the deepest parts of a human person, and it is there that the religious conversion may take root most profoundly as this experience is prayerfully mulled over and re-examined all one’s life. Conversion and conversion narrative are both likewise religious events. (Hindmarsh 2014, 357)

Far from being a leisurely retrieval of the past, Asad's autobiography is a form of initiation into the new religion and a statement of self-identity that basically embraced Islam. The autobiography confirmed his identity as a Muslim. His spiritual journey drowned his past self. Augustinian autobiography was similarly a break with the pagan past and a turn towards Christianity from the overly materialist Roman and Greek philosophies and ways of life. Yet, Asad's autobiography lacked the confessional nature which was very much the outcome of Christianity's practice of confession.

The Bridge-BUILDER: A Cross-Cultural Believer

This idea of a European Muslim identity is propounded extensively in the works of Professor Tariq Ramadan. In his book, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, he accounts for variations in practising Islam in terms of 'urf:

For example, one could investigate further the areas of custom and culture, because these concern Western Muslims very directly. The methodological distinction between religious practice and social affairs, like the difference in nature, as far as the basis of reference is concerned, between universal principles and historical; temporal models, brings out another demarcation—that which distinguishes between the religious judgment and its cultural garb. Al-urf, custom, has been considered one of the sources of law in the sense that all that is recognized as “established for the good” (maruf) in a given culture (and that is not in contradiction with any prohibition) is, in practice, integrated into the local Islamic sphere of reference. (Ramadan 2004, 36)

This integrative strategy reconciles Islam with Western principles that do not contradict Islam's main tenets. This sets well with the attempts by Kristiane Backer to build bridges and reach compromises between her European identity and Muslim identity. Backer went through a gradual embracing of Islam. Her view of religions was not oppositional but ecumenical. Truth, she had come to appreciate, was not monopolised by one religion. All religions according to Backer, were versions of the same truth:

Later, I thought to myself that the different religions were all facets of the same truth: different windows through which we all look at the same sky, or, to use a German saying, different jugs with which we fetch water from the same well. (Backer 2012, 180)

What was particularly challenging was her Western context where she was challenged to reconcile Islam and Western culture: her Western background versus her newly gained religion. Conversion to Islam involves a radical change to

Western mores regarding relations between the sexes, sartorial requirements and a different comportment in terms of social behaviour. But there was always some Muslim scholar she met, who would help her resolve some of the contradictions through a somewhat liberal interpretation of Islam from simple issues such as dress codes to reconciling Islam with the notion of democracy. A middle way had to be found if she were ever to achieve the required balance between her European identity and Islamic identity. A syncretic formation that sought reconciliation with her European identity rather than entering a conflictual phase of sorting out her identity was taking shape:

But I really wanted to speak to this scholar for personal reasons. As a European Muslim I was still trying to reconcile these two identities of mine that sometimes seemed to be at odds with one another. How should I balance my life as a member of London society with being a Muslim? This was just one of the issues I needed to work out. Most non-Muslims seemed to believe it was a losing battle. (Backer 2012, 192)

This syncretic formation is clear in trying to create a Muslim European identity one that is hyphenated though. Practising Islam in a Western context required a new vision and a European community of believers. Backer found in Bosnia the model where Muslims practised Islam in a Western context and was a “natural part of everyday life” (Backer 2012, 149).

Once back in London I needed time to process my experiences. The trip to Bosnia had given me plenty of food for thought and affected me deeply. I wanted to get involved, do something to help. And I felt a growing need to meet more European Muslims with whom I could share my thoughts and experiences. What I liked in Bosnia was that Islam was a natural part of everyday life. People understood each other without needing to resort to lengthy explanations. In one way we were all on the same wavelength – they looked like me and felt like me. They were European Muslims. (Backer 2012, 194)

Backer rejected any exclusive discourse regarding religious faith. As she tended to accept devout people who belonged to other religions. She had encounters where she was appalled at the exclusionary discourse of religious people: At her father’s home back in Germany, Kristiane was fasting and that coincided with Christmas. She had a conversation with her father about religion and he told her about her mother and grandmother who were very religious and church goers. He was not interested in religion, yet he advised her to visit the same church which her grandmother used to go to in case she wanted to know more about her grandparents. When she went to the church, coincidentally, “The vicar gave a sermon about fasting in solidarity”. She approached him and mentioned the fact

that she happened to be fasting as a Muslim; but “his face clouded over. Rather than seeing the common ground between our respective religions, he said anyone who heard Jesus’s message but chose not to follow him as their lord was damned” (Backer 2012, 237–238). Another challenge to her ecumenical and syncretic view of religion came from her first Muslim teacher who explained to her that Islam had made all previous revelations that came before it obsolete. Backer wondered:

I really couldn’t imagine that those people, including my friends who were Catholics, were destined for Hell. From then on I never went back to her. I left the priest feeling disappointed and annoyed. Does it matter if people fast for the sake of God in Ramadan, Yom Kippur or Lent? (Backer 2012, 238).

In an end note, however, she shared with her readers some of the Islamic arguments in favour of her ecumenical view. She quoted authorities regarding the fate of those who did not embrace Islam:

Past prophets and realised souls within the religions revealed to those prophets could be called ‘Muslim’ as well because they had surrendered themselves to God. The Muslim believer can thus be open to the wisdom and beauty of other faiths, together with their adherents, while at the same time inviting everyone to embrace Islam based on its very inclusivity. (Shah-Kazemi 2010, quoted in Backer 2012, 441–442)

She quoted authorities arguing that Islam was an ecumenical religion that rather than excluded other religions, it included them. In short, Islam is an all-inclusive religion.

Homecoming of the Heart

The depredations of World War One was in the background of the narrative. The fall of the old value system had caused a moral vacuum for Asad who was looking for the meaning of a “good life”. The metaphor of home-coming was constitutive of his quest that was solved by Islam. It reflected a biographical theme of alienation from Western materialism and lack of spirituality. As a former Jew, converting to Islam was a matter of continuity not disjunction with his identity as a Jew. The disjunction happened with his identity as a European in a materialistic context. His symbolic battle was launched against his Western heritage with all its attendant anti-Semitism and fascism that claimed the lives of his father and sister. This symbolic battle was clear in his books. Right at the beginning of the autobiography, Asad reflected a similar desire:

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. (Asad 1954, 2)

This losing of one's identity into another is the result of the convert's desire to find an alternative way of life that would satisfy his spiritual desire. His autobiography reflects a desire to "obsessively work to conform [his] their self-representation to particular identity frames. We can read from these tensions and contradictions in the gaps, inconsistencies, and boundaries breached within autobiographical narratives (Anderson 2011, 40).

Asad's conversion to Islam allowed him to enact an earlier and pristine Jewish identity which was reflected in his superimposition of the Biblical narrative in some of his observations. For example, on his way to Mecca along with Zayed, Muhammad Asad saw Arabian women at a water well which triggered in his mind the Biblical story of the servant of Isaac wanting to find a wife for his master. Distant Biblical past was evoked by these Arabian women who helped him drink from the well. Past and present became one through the Biblical memory of the author/narrator:

And he said, "o Lord God of my master Abraham, I pray Thee, send me good speed this day, and show kindness unto my master Abraham. Behold, I stand here by the well of water; and the daughters of the men of the city come out to draw water. Let it come to pass that the damsel to whom I shall say, 'Let down thy pitcher, I pray thee, that I may drink,'—and she shall say, 'Drink, and I will give thy camels drink also' .. let the same be she that Thou hast appointed for Thy servant Isaac; and thereby shall know that Thou hast showed kindness unto my All master". (Asad 1954, 43)

The metaphor of homecoming of the heart is an important one in understanding the spiritual journey of Asad. Islam served as a mirror that reflected his desire to go back to an original identity of being Jewish. He travelled back into the time of tribal Jewish heritage. This was very clear in his recurrent references to his Jewish

heritage. Islam was a continuation of an earlier identity, his identity as a Jew. Asad's journey into Arabia and Islam was one of a quest for an authentic identity that lied deep down in other lands. His deep roots went back millennia into the times of the Hebrew tribes. Islam offered that authenticity and spiritual continuity which he was unearthing. The Western world was for him a world that offered little by way of spirituality. As a Jew he must have experienced a state of otherness in the Western context. Islam offered him a way of distinction from the West. He found a home among Arabs who were closer to his ancestry than was the modern-day West with all its relativisation of values: "My coming to this land: was it not, in truth, a home-coming? Home-coming of the heart that had espied its old home backward over a curve of thousands of years and now recognizes this sky, my sky, with painful rejoicing?" (Asad 1954, 49). He further elaborated emphasising his fascination and attempt at assimilating Arab and Islamic cultures:

How could it be otherwise? Ever since I came to Arabia I have lived like an Arab, worn only Arab dress, spoken only Arabic, dreamed my dreams in Arabic; Arabian customs and imageries have almost imperceptibly shaped my thoughts; I have not been hampered by the many mental reservations which usually make it impossible for a foreigner—be he ever so well versed in the manners and the language of the country—to find a true approach to the feelings of its people and to make their world his own. (Asad 1954, 49)

Asad viewed conversion to Islam as a radical act of leaving his Western identity behind and exchanging it for an Arab identity. Unlike Backer, Asad dwelled more on the differences that divided Islam and the West rather than what connected them.

The thought of embracing Islam was like the prospect of venturing out onto a bridge that spanned an abyss between two different worlds: a bridge so long that one would have to reach the point of no return before the other end became visible. I was well aware that if I became a Muslim I would have to cut myself off from the world in which I had grown up. No other outcome was possible. One could not really follow the call of Muhammad and still maintain one's inner links with a society that was ruled by diametrically opposed concepts. (Asad 1954, 308)

In his book *The Fear of Freedom* (2001), Erich Fromm makes a very strong argument for the material as the ultimate purpose for individual life: "What is good or bad for man is not a metaphysical question but an empirical one that can be answered on the basis of man's nature and the effect certain conditions have on him" (Fromm 2001, 229). Fromm reflected the material spirit of the times where any ideal or metaphysical claim must be subdued to man's positivist needs for

“man is the centre and purpose of his life” (Fromm 2001, 228). Fromm summarised the very arguments that made the West less appealing to Asad. Asad realised, long before, that such a positivistic argument reflected only one side of man. Neither material affluence nor instrumental reason made people happier.

An Islamic Critique of Modernity

Asad’s chapter entitled, “The *Dajjal*” (the Anti-Christ) uses the word *Dajjal* in a new sense. He saw the West as an incarnation of the *Dajjal*, the anti-Christ who played God and convinced people through some miracles that he was God. The West had achieved technological and scientific advancements and forgot God: “All that I can tell thee is that the world of the *faranjis* has become the world of the *Dajjal*, the Glittering, the Deceptive One. Hast thou ever heard of our Holy Prophet’s prediction that in later times most of the world’s people would follow the *Dajjal*, believing him to be God?” (Asad 1954, 292), Asad said addressing his Saudi friend, a religious scholar. In his long talk, Asad used a Muslim parable taken from one of Prophet Muhammad’s traditions about the one-eyed *Dajjal* who would come near the end of times and ask people to worship him as a God. To convince people, the *Dajjal* would bring about miraculous things: “He would fly around the earth in days, would make treasures of gold and silver suddenly appear from underground, would cause rain to fall and plants to grow at his command, would kill and bring to life again” (Asad 1954, 293). Those who have a weak faith would follow the *Dajjal* but those who are strong in faith would see his falsehood written on his forehead as the denier of God.

This metaphor of the *Dajjal* was used as part of Asad’s symbolic battle against his earlier self to further confirm his commitment to Islam and lay bare the foundations of Western materialism. The *Dajjal* is the West:

It is one-eyed and concentrates only on the material totally ignoring the spiritual: ... Western man has truly given himself to the worship of the *Dajjal*. He has long ago lost all innocence, all inner integration with nature. Life has become a puzzle to him. He is sceptical, and therefore isolated from his brother and lonely within himself. (Asad 1954, 294)

The Western man defeats his loneliness by seeking more control of nature, “The rapidity of modern technological progress is a result not only of a positive growth of knowledge but also of spiritual despair” (Asad 1954, 294). The one-eyed monster described by Asad was capable of extreme evil which proved all the more effective through the use of modern technological advances attended by instrumental reason. Instrumental reason divorced from any moral claims only led to the Holocaust. Zygmunt Bauman has argued that:

The most shattering of lessons deriving from the analysis of the ‘twisted road to Auschwitz’ is that – in the last resort – *the choice of physical extermination as the right means to the task of Entfernung was a product of routine bureaucratic procedures* [italics in original]: means-ends calculus, budget balancing, universal rule application. To make the point sharper still – the choice was an effect of the earnest effort to find rational solutions to successive ‘problems’, as they arose in the changing circumstances. It was also affected by the widely described bureaucratic tendency to goal-displacement – an affliction as normal in all bureaucracies as their routines. The very presence of functionaries charged with their specific tasks led to further initiatives and a continuous expansion of original purposes. (Bauman 1989, 17)

Furthermore, there was an event that took place in the passage *Dajjal* which was a metaphor for materialist post-war West and its rejection of spirituality. On a train in Germany along with his wife, Elsa, Asad was intrigued by the unhappy faces he saw on the subway: for although they were from the affluent and comfortable middle class yet their faces betrayed sadness and dissatisfaction with life. Speaking of one passenger on the train, Asad commented:

He appeared to be worried: and not merely worried but acutely unhappy, with eyes staring vacantly ahead and the comers of his mouth drawn in as if in pain—but not in bodily pain. Not wanting to be rude, I turned my eyes away and saw next to him a lady of some elegance. She also had a strangely unhappy expression on her face. (Asad 1954, 309)

This pain that seemed to be general in the faces of the well-off people seen by Asad on the subway confirmed his conclusions about the spiritual void of the Western world. Material affluence seemed to have little effect on people. “You are right. They all look as though they were suffering the torments of hell”, Asad’s wife commented (Asad 1954, 309). The pursuit of material affluence did nothing to make them happy. Without the spiritual side of life, life is a pursuit of hell. This observation was food for thought for Asad who has not yet decided to become a Muslim. It was a real epiphany. Later that day when he returned home he had his mystical revelation: He looked at his desk on which a copy of the Qur’an lay open and he reached to put it away, accidentally his eyes fell on the open page and he read it:

*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, but if you 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.*

(Qur'an 102:1, quoted in Asad 1954, 310; italics in original)

Asad was stunned by what he had read and hands the Qur'an to Elsa: "Read this, is it not an answer to what we saw in the subway?" (Asad 1954, 310). Asad solved this problem of the futility of pursuing the material by reference to the Qur'an. The abovementioned verses from the Qur'an bear the biographical theme he was focused on: that of the centeredness of the West around the material which was the main reason he was striving to find the spiritual outside that world. Islam satisfied his desire for the balance between the spiritual and the material.

Islam provided an escape from the West and its materialism as it provided the Romantics before with an escape from the social mores of the West. In his explication of the verses in his book, *The Message of the Quran* (2003), Asad elaborated his biographical theme: "The frustration, unhappiness and confusion which an overriding, unrestrained pursuit of 'economic growth' is bound to bring—and has, indeed, brought in our time—upon a mankind that is about to lose the remnants of all spiritual religious orientation." (1109).

Like Malcolm X, Muhammad Asad was dealing with major oppositions between the balance offered by Islam between the physical and spiritual, and Western emphasis on the pursuit of material satisfaction. Yet unlike Malcolm X, Asad became a Muslim after a long winding journey into the Islamic world. He was aware that the present state of Muslims was far from idealistic. Yet, Islamic ideals that did not separate between the physical and spiritual appealed to his biographical theme of not being at ease in an ever increasingly materialistic civilisation.

Conclusion

To conclude, if Islam had provided Malcolm X with "an idealistic or visionary frame of reference that liberated him from the racist assumptions of his society of which he was a victim" (Elmessiri 1990, 69), it had as well provided Muhammad Asad with a moral vision that integrated the mundane and the sacred in one religion. It had also well provided him with a site outside the confines of the West

from which he could critique the materialism and lack of spiritualism in the West. On the other hand, Kristiane Backer, as a convert, created as it were a “third space” where she tried to reconcile two selves in one subjectivity. The otherness of Islam was tempered by the internal conversion experience of the new Muslim. So instead of looking at conversion as a radical act that disavowed the original culture of the convert, Backer tried to form some continuity with the original community of the convert. In his own way, Asad who lost members of his family in the Holocaust distanced himself from such a cross-cultural endeavour. The instrumental reason of Western modernity has led to the Holocaust. The only solution, according to Asad, was to embrace the real humanistic culture of Islam which connected man to God and the spiritual: a culture and a religion that opposed the Western culture that made the Holocaust possible. That said, Asad dedicated his life as a cultural broker between Islam and the West which revealed a strong desire to bring Islam to a Western audience.

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