

Condemned through Ignorance

Quran Translator attacked for differing with popular myths and agreeing with Lahore Ahmadiyya interpretation

by our own Staff

In its second issue (October 1981), the newly-started magazine *Arabia: The Islamic World Review* published from London, carries a long letter from the eminent scholar and translator of the Holy Quran, Muhammad Asad, clarifying and commenting upon an article about his life and work which appeared in the preceding issue of the magazine. A large part of the letter is devoted to defending some of his interpretations of Quranic verses, as given in his *Message of the Quran*, against their condemnation by members of the *Rabita*, the Muslim World League of Makka. It is to be recalled that the first part of Asad's work, when originally published in 1964, bore the name of the *Rabita* on the title page. When it appeared, there was, it seems, uproar in that body at some of the views expressed in the commentary, which co-incided with the stand-point of the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement on a number of controversial issues between this reform Movement and the "orthodox" scholars (see *The Islamic Guardian*, vol. i, no. 4, for details). No further parts of Asad's commentary were then published, till his complete work was brought out two years ago by some other publisher. Clarifying his relation with *Rabita* with regard to his English translation and commentary of the Holy Quran, Asad writes in his letter:

" . . . my work on the Quran . . . begun in 1960 . . . was never 'commissioned' by anyone. Since the *Rabita* was kind enough to subscribe, before its publication, to a large number of copies, I acknowledged their generous material assistance by placing, in a spirit of gratitude, the name of *Rabita* on the title page".

However, the impression one had had till now was that the *Rabita* had actually published Asad's work in 1964, and had perhaps done so in order to combat the 'effect' of the highly-popular Lahore Ahmadiyya English Quran translation by Maulana Muhammad Ali. Realising too late that Asad had expressed the same views, they recalled the books and had them burnt - or so we have been led to believe.

In his letter, he then gives three examples of those of his interpretations to which "several, although by no means all, of the then members of *Rabita's*

council took exception . . . and condemned the whole work out of hand".
Reproduced below is the relevant extract:

" However, I suppose that the particular statement that I have denied 'angels' has arisen from a total misunderstanding of my note 93 on verses 124-125 of *Āl 'Imrān* which says, literally: '÷ he prophet's allusion to God's aiding the believers with thousands of angels signifies, metaphorically, a strengthening of the believers' hearts through spiritual forces coming from God" (*The Message of the Quran*, p. 86). This, by the way, was exactly the view of the greatest scholar of recent Muslim history, Muhammad 'Abduh, as quoted by me in the above-mentioned note, citing *Al-Manar*.

" Still another member of the *Rabita* objected to my statement that Islam does not permit concubinage. I have explained verse 3 of *An-Nisa'* in my note 4 (on pp. 101-102), giving the considered view of Mufti Muhammad 'Abduh as well. Also, I would refer the reader of my work to note 26 on verse 24 of *An-Nisa'* and, in particular, to the views of Tabari (on the authority of Ibn 'Abbas, Mujahid and others) and, still more prominently, of the illustrious Quran-commentator Razi, who points out that the reference to 'all married women', coming as it does immediately after the enumeration of prohibited degrees of relationship, is meant to stress the prohibition of sexual relations with *any* woman other than one's lawful wife.

" Other persons, again, objected vehemently to my contention (expressed in my commentary) that nowhere in the Quran is to be found a statement to the effect that God raised Jesus *bodily* to heaven (a view which, by the way, was also held by no less a scholar than Muhammad 'Abduh). In my note 172 on verse 158 of *An-Nisa'* (pp. 134-135), I gave my reasons for the interpretation adopted by me. Whether this interpretation is accepted or not, however, the fact remains that it does not in any way offend against the dignity of the Prophet Jesus or against any fundamental Islamic belief. In this connection, I would refer the reader to verse 144 of *Āl 'Imran*, which speaks of *all* apostles before the last and greatest of them all, the Arabian Prophet Muhammad, as having passed away, in other words, as having died physically, as is obvious from the context (see my corresponding note 104 on p. 89 of *The Message of the Quran*).

" Whether one agrees or does not agree with my interpretations of this or that point, we should remember that even the great classical Quran

commentators disagreed on many details, thus increasingly deepening and widening our understanding of the Holy Quran”.

On these three specimen points of interpretation, as well as on the last general point, exactly the same views had been expressed in the Lahore-Ahmadiyya English commentary of the Holy Quran by *Hazrat* Maulana Muhammad Ali, first published as long ago as 1917. And Muhammad Asad too found himself misrepresented and condemned in the same way and in some of the same quarters, as the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement had been for fifty years before him. Incidentally, it is astonishing that, in this letter, a certain politico-religious movement based in Pakistan, which condemns as *kafirs* those who hold the very views that Asad himself has expressed, is described by him as “a positive, legitimate movement in the Islamic context”.

Be that as it may, so far as the interpretations expressed above are concerned, they will go on becoming ever more accepted and prevalent. Even today, almost all Muslim scholars believe them, although very few are as courageous and forthright as Muhammad Asad to invite ferocious opposition by expressing them.



BOOK REVIEW

by *Selim Ahmed, B.A.*

Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini

Translated by *Hamid Algar (Berkeley, Mizan Press, 1981)*

460 pp. 19.95 U.S. dollars.

Newspapers, television and popular magazines in the English-speaking countries continue to present a predominantly unfavourable picture of Islam and the Muslim world. Given the inherent prejudice of these media against Islam, it is vain to expect much sympathetic reporting of any popular movement which, in the name of Islam, does not rest content with a vociferous condemnation of Western values, but acts as effectively against Western influence and control as has the revolutionary movement in Iran led by Imam