Drawing Boundaries in Conversion

Muhammad Asad's *The Road to Mecca* as a Spiritual and Sociopolitical Narrative

Stefan van der Hoek

Abstract

This article examines Muhammad Asad's *The Road to Mecca,* first published in 1954, through the lens of conversion narratives and boundary-drawing discourses. Asad's autobiography recounts a spiritual journey from a Jewish upbringing in Europe to embracing Islam in the Middle East, presenting religious transformation not as a sudden epiphany but as a gradual, reflective process of learning and enlightenment. The analysis of this specific conversion narrative explores three types of boundary-drawing between the 'West' and 'Islam' by intertwining personal experiences, collective identities, and stereotypes with broader critiques of Western society. Asad's depictions of the Islamic world, especially his romanticized view of Bedouin life and his critique of Zionism, modernity, and colonialism, reflect both classic orientalist topics and a reverse-orientalist stance. This article considers the implications of framing conversion as a progressive realization and the ways this rhetoric aligns with academic conversion theories. It further investigates Asad's presentation of his pre-conversion attitudes as entirely negative and post-conversion as idealistic and salvific, contributing to a discourse of self-othering that embraces his new identity as an Islamic intellectual and diplomat. The findings suggest that Asad's approach constructs a dichotomy between *the West* and *Islam*, offering new insights into the dynamics of conversion narratives and their role in shaping socio-religious identities.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel untersucht Muhammad Asads *The Road to Mecca*, erstmals veröffentlicht 1954, aus der Perspektive von Konversionsnarrativen und Diskursen der Grenzziehung. Asads Autobiografie schildert eine spirituelle Reise von einer jüdischen Kindheit in Europa hin zur Annahme des Islams im Nahen Osten und präsentiert religiöse Transformation nicht als plötzliche Erleuchtung, sondern als einen allmählichen, reflektierten Prozess des Lernens und der Erkenntnis. Die Analyse dieses spezifischen Konversionsnarrativs beleuchtet drei Arten der Grenzziehung zwischen dem „Westen" und dem „Islam", indem persönliche Erfahrungen, kollektive Identitäten und stereotype Vorstellungen mit weitergehenden Gesellschaftskritiken des Westens verflochten werden. Asads Darstellungen der islamischen Welt – insbesondere seine romantisierende Sicht auf das Beduinenleben sowie seine Kritik an Zionismus, Moderne und Kolonialismus – greifen sowohl klassische orientalisierende Motive als auch eine gegenläufige, reverse-orientalistische Haltung auf. Der Artikel reflektiert die Implikationen einer Konversion, die als fortschreitende Erkenntnis gerahmt wird, und untersucht, inwiefern diese Rhetorik mit akademischen Konversionstheorien übereinstimmt. Darüber hinaus wird analysiert, wie Asad seine vorislamische Haltung ausschließlich negativ und seine nach der Konversion idealistisch und heilsspendend darstellt – ein Beitrag zu einem Diskurs der Selbst-Othering, in dem er seine neue Identität als islamischer Intellektueller und Diplomat affirmiert. Die Ergebnisse legen nahe, dass Asads Darstellung eine Dichotomie zwischen *dem Westen* und *dem Islam* konstruiert und neue Einblicke in die Dynamik von Konversionsnarrativen und deren Rolle in der Herausbildung sozio-religiöser Identitäten bietet.

1 Introduction

The Road to Mecca by Muhammad Asad is an autobiographical work first published in 1954 and narrates the spiritual journey of Asad, who was born as Leopold Weiss in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire into a Jewish family. Weiss rejected Judaism and converted to Islam in 1926, adopting the name Muhammad Asad (Linnhoff 2021, 426). The book *The Road to Mecca* reflects the author's inner transformation and his experience as a Muslim and a traveler (Schlosser 2009); it is written in a non-linear style and features several breaks where past events and present experiences are skillfully interwoven. Asad dedicated the book to the memory of the »Martyr King« Faysal (Asad 2004 [1954], V), with whom he shared a deep and longstanding friendship. In the years following its release, the book was received and acknowledged both in *the West* and *the Islamic world* (Payne 1954; Eaton 1985, 60) and is still appreciated as a bridge between cultures and religions (Hoffmann 2001, 21; Hoenger 2010, 9). Drawing on his personal experiences and travels, Asad offers Western readers nuanced insights into the Islamic world, while simultaneously calling on Muslims in the Arab world to recognize and uphold the spiritual and moral core of their tradition. While some readers interpret *The Road to Mecca* as a bridge-building narrative aimed at fostering understanding between *the West* and *Islam* (Payne 1954; Eaton 1985), Asad's son, Talal Asad, rejected this view. He emphasized instead that his father was »less concerned with building bridges and more with immersing himself critically in the tradition of Islam that became his tradition, and with encouraging members of his community« (Asad 2011, 156).

In contrast to Talal Asad's interpretation, I argue that Muhammad Asad's autobiography reflects not only an internal engagement with Islamic tradition but also an endeavor to connect cultural and religious worlds through personal transformation. The narrative presents itself as a conversion story that indeed bridges Judaism and Islam, as well as the European and the Arab worlds. Drawing on philosopher Charles Taylor's concept of identity as shaped by »inescapable frameworks«—the moral and cultural horizons within which individuals define themselves—Asad's journey articulates a new self through such an inescapable framework, in which he reshapes his moral orientation by adopting Islam. Taylor emphasizes that individuals construct their identities by locating themselves in a moral space defined by what they recognize as »the good« (Taylor 1989, 27). In Asad's case, the movement toward Islam represents not merely a rejection of his European-Jewish upbringing but the creation of a coherent moral horizon that reconciles diverse cultural and spiritual elements. Similarly, Asad's Qur'anic commentary, *The Message of The Quran* (1980), echoes these epistemic and ethical boundaries when he presents Islam not simply as a religion but as a rational and ethical totality that resists Western compartmentalizations of the sacred and the secular (Asad 1980, 4). This perspective mirrors his

personal transformation from a Jewish European intellectual to a Muslim thinker who redefines spiritual truth as a form of total life-orientation—what Taylor describes as a newly adopted inescapable framework (Taylor 1989, 27).

The main thread of the story is Asad's journey to Mecca, which symbolizes his spiritual quest for truth. In doing so, he retrospectively reflects on his childhood and youth in a Jewish Ashkenazi family, his career as a journalist, his intellectual engagements with *Western civilization* and celebrities, and finally his encounters with Islam (Asad 2004 [1954], 297). Drawing on his journalistic experience—including his work for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*—Asad weaves personal reflections with nuanced ethnographic observations. Through his experiences and observations in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iraq, Asad gradually distances himself from *Western civilization* and begins to question critically his Jewish and Western identity, culminating in his conversion to Islam. In this process, he engages in what linguist Svonkin terms spiritual self-othering. A process in which a person reflects on their own identity from the perspective of the cultural or spiritual *Other* to achieve a profound, transcultural self-empowerment. This approach serves as a central methodological framework for analyzing hybrid identity narratives and spiritual transformations in literary texts (Svonkin 2010, 167). Self-othering describes therefore a move in which an author attempts to kill off his former identified self »and adopt a subaltern alter-ego, a marginalized series of fragmented identities, or an operatic, syncretic, hybridized identity, in order to create a sense of poetic freedom at the margins—a sort of ›margin-envy‹ at work« (Svonkin 2010, 167). This linguistic and narrative strategy allows Asad to reposition himself, ultimately enabling him to view and criticize *the West* as a unified and external entity from a reflective distance. By assuming this new vantage point, Asad not only criticizes Western materialism and spiritual emptiness but also constructs an alternative moral and religious framework in which he employs recurring motifs—such as authenticity, desert spirituality, and communal devotion—that continue to resonate as powerful cultural stereotypes within the Arab world. Asad recounts his encounters with noble Bedouins, monarchs, and religious leaders across the region, as well as his meetings and dialogues with colonial and deceitful Jewish communities in Palestine.

The book reflects Asad's biographical transformation and reveals narrative patterns typical of European travel literature in *the Orient* during that period, such as found in Bell's *The Desert and the Sown* (1907) and Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926). Like Bell and Lawrence, Asad uses vivid and romanticized imagery to portray the deserts, cities, and communities of the Arab world, often contributing to an exoticized literary construction of *the Orient* (Said 1979, 101). His descriptions echo the fascination earlier European travelers held toward Islamic societies and landscapes.

However, unlike Bell and Lawrence—who, despite their sympathies, remained fundamentally external observers—Asad undergoes a transformation. He does not merely admire or politically engage with the Arab world; rather, he *negates* his former European identity and reconstitutes himself through conversion, thus enacting a dialectical identity shift. In this regard, Asad's narrative exceeds the typical framework of other European travelogues by embodying a deeper philosophical and spiritual metamorphosis. His journey represents not only a geographical exploration but also a reconstruction of selfhood across cultural, religious, and civilizational boundaries that sets *The Road to Mecca* apart from most contemporaneous travel literature.

Despite or perhaps because of his deep knowledge and identification with Islam, Asad depicts the Arab world in a way that emphasizes a romantic longing for simplicity and spiritual purity. His puritanical portrayals of the Bedouins reflect the Orientalist image of the »noble savage« living in harmony with nature, reminiscent of the accounts and travel reports of other European observers from that time (Blainey 1988). However, a central motif in the book is the convert's narrative as the discovery of a »true« religion, which provides Asad with a deeper spiritual and moral orientation. A typical element in conversion stories is the symbolic purification or renewal (Sandage and Moe 2013), which in Asad's case is associated with the desert as a place of asceticism and spiritual cleansing. Although Asad seeks to distance himself from Western Orientalism and strives to offer an authentic portrayal of the Islamic world, traces of the romanticized *Orient* and narrative patterns typical of conversion stories remain discernible. His narrative oscillates between competing discourses—that of the European traveler exploring *the Orient* and that of the devout Muslim fully immersed in the world he depicts. A recurring theme in the book is therefore the demarcations that allow Asad to include and exclude, shaping his identity by transforming himself. Therefore, *The Road to Mecca* serves as a relevant document, shedding light on the political and social situation in the Islamic world during the interwar period. In this sense, the book offers insights on multiple levels as a narrative authored by a European who intertwines romanticized Orientalist tropes with the accounts of a convert. These perspectives merge in the book to form a symbiosis as Asad describes his personal spiritual journey and physical exploration of the Islamic world.

Taking these literary and sociological preliminary remarks into account, the central research question for this paper is how Asad draws boundaries between *the West* and *Islam*, and on which levels these demarcations occur throughout the book. To answer this question, the article first presents the methodological approach for analyzing *The Road to Mecca*, then outlines the results of the qualitative content anal-

ysis. The subsequent section interprets and compares these findings with sociological insights on religion. Finally, the concluding section synthesizes the main arguments and implications.

2   Methodological Approach and Category Formation

To answer the research question, I conducted a close reading of *The Road to Mecca*, systematically identifying and coding all passages that mark delineations from other entities such as cultures and religions. This boundary-drawing is particularly evident in Asad's conversion narrative, where he discursively legitimizes and enacts a decisive shift from Judaism to Islam. The coding process focused on sentences containing words with clear semantic meaning as well as those that carry connotations of differentiation based on pragmatics and specific speech acts.

The methodological framework of this analysis is based on qualitative content analysis, a method first clearly formulated by Siegfried Kracauer. Kracauer opposed the dominance of behaviorist approaches and instead advocated for a hermeneutic interpretation of meaning within texts (Kracauer 1952, 631–642). Today, qualitative content analysis in the social sciences continues this tradition by systematically interpreting textual data in terms of the meaning (van der Hoek 2024b, 34). In this study, relevant passages were coded into categories and subcategories developed either deductively—drawing on theoretical concepts—or inductively—emerging directly from the material (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2023, 101). These categories help structure the material and allow a nuanced evaluation of the content after the coding process (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2023, 102).

For this study, I applied Kuckartz and Rädiker's approach of a structuring qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2023, 99–122) and developed twelve categories from the coded material, organized into three overarching main categories.

In the following section, I will discuss in detail the first main category, (1) *Individual Boundaries*, which elaborates on how Asad differentiates between (1.1) *Western* and *Islamic* identity, (1.2) intellect and heart, and (1.3) former and new life. The subsequent section presents the second main category, (2) *Collective Boundaries*. This category encompasses the subcategories of boundaries between (2.1) *the West* and *Islam*, (2.2) tradition and modernity in the Islamic world, and (2.3) religious universalism and particularism. The final and most extensive main category is (3) *Historical and Political Boundaries*, addressed in Asad's writings. This main category already proportionally indicates that historical and political antagonisms between *the West* and *the Muslim world* play a dominant role in Asad's autobiography and

conversion to Islam. This category consists of six subcategories: (3.1) the boundary of the Crusades, (3.2) the boundary of colonialism, (3.3) the boundary of Zionism, (3.4) the boundary of modern nation-building, (3.5) the boundary of modernity and progress, and (3.6) the boundary between Western political dominance versus Islamic sovereignty.

2.1   Individual Boundaries

The first main category delves into the personal and spiritual transitions the author experienced, highlighting the distinctions he made. Asad's sojourn, particularly his conversion to Islam, reflects profound boundary drawing on an individual level. The transformation he describes is religious, cultural, intellectual, and even physical, as he portrays himself as stronger and more resilient after living in the desert (Asad 2004[1954], 135). These traits, which emerge through his estrangement from values he considers Western and his approach toward the Islamic world, are addressed in several passages, illustrating his growing distance from *Western civilization* and rejection of Western thinking, which he perceives as superficial and materialistic (Asad 2004[1954], 141). The boundary between his former identity and his new affiliation with Islam becomes especially clear in his critique of Western societal structures, most radically expressed in his arguments against Kemalism and Zionism (Asad 2004[1954], 92, 93, 136, 268). Throughout the book, Asad describes *the West* as a place of »spiritual blindness« (Asad 2004[1954], 298) and a »moral vacuum« (Asad 2004[1954], 141), contrasting sharply with the profound spiritual values of Islam, which pursue simplicity and purity (Asad 2004[1954], 108). This interplay between collective and personal boundaries ultimately manifests in his decision to gradually leave *the West* behind and fully immerse himself in *the Islamic world*.

The subsequent subcategory (1.1. *Western and Islamic Identity)* particularly analyzes this break with *the West* and his turn toward a new spiritual and cultural identity. Asad describes Western society as marked by intellectual rationalism, which neglects spirituality and faith. Europe, divided by ideological entanglements and the dynamics of revolutions and counter-revolutions, appears to him as so conflict-ridden that it opposes the true recognition of God (Asad 2004[1954], 141). In Islam, however, he finds harmony between intellect and heart and between rational thought and spiritual insight (Asad 2004[1954], 312). Asad further explores this boundary in the subcategory 1.2. *Between Intellect and Heart*, where he describes his personal journey as a search for an integrated understanding of reason and faith, and considers Western intellectualism disorganized, because it excludes the spiritual aspect of human life (Asad 2004[1954], 308).

Furthermore, Asad expresses his boundary with Judaism, and particularly Zionism, by consistently opposing Zionist movements without critically weighing individual cases or acknowledging any justification for Zionism. He writes:

> »[...] I was inclined to take the side of the Arabs whenever the Jewish-Arab question was brought up—which, of course, happened very often« (Asad 2004 [1954], 95).

This is consistent with his descriptions of encounters with other Jewish individuals in Jerusalem who also opposed Zionism. In doing so, Asad differentiates between Jews who adhere to a Zionist worldview and those who returned to Palestine »out of a religious longing for the Holy Land and its Biblical associations« (Asad 2004[1954], 98). Thus, he indicates that for him, Zionism has a purely political and thoroughly secular cause. The possibility of religious Zionism, on the other hand, remains ignored throughout his book. While contemporaneous travelers like Bell and Lawrence mention the presence of Jews (Bell 1907, 18; 291) and Zionism (Lawrence 1926, 41) in the region, describe their settlements, and occasionally comment on their interactions with Arab neighbors, they do so in a relatively neutral and descriptive manner without developing a sustained political critique. In contrast, Asad places a strong focus on the Jewish, and particularly the Zionist, movement, framing it as a decisive and problematic force in the region's political transformation. His engagement with this topic reflects his broader project of redefining political and spiritual affiliations beyond European categories and secular nationalisms. This subcategory illustrates the tension between heart (religious longing, spiritual identity) and intellect (political critique, rational analysis of Zionism), as Asad is intellectually deconstructing dominant political ideologies while simultaneously showing sensitivity to non-political, faith-based motivations.

In the third subcategory, 1.3. *Between Former and New Life*, codes were gathered in which Asad describes how his former life in Europe increasingly lost significance, and he fully integrated into the Muslim world (Asad 2004[1954], 346). His decision to live in the Arab world reflects his complete departure from *Western civilization*. His conversion to Islam is drawn as a process that separates him from his past through higher insights, allowing immersion into a new cultural and spiritual identity (Asad 2004[1954], 24), and Asad closely links these individual boundaries to the collective and historical tensions he addresses throughout his book. His personal transformation reflects the broader tension between *the West* and *Islam*, which he expresses in his critique of Western colonial powers and their influence on the Islamic world. His personal conversion thus becomes a symbolic act, reflecting the wider political and cultural conflicts between these two worlds.

2.2   Collective Boundaries

Similarly, the main category 2. *Collective Boundaries*, which was derived from *The Road to Mecca*, builds on earlier reflections on individual boundaries and expands them through various forms of demarcation. The subcategory 2.1. *Between Tradition and Modernity* captures Asad's engagement with the tensions within the Islamic world resulting from the influence of Western modernity. He highlights how these external forces have contributed to internal disagreements and conflicts within the Muslim community *(Umma)*. Asad portrays Islamic societies as being in a state of transition, shaped by their encounter with Western values and technologies, and views the Arab-Islamic world through the lens of colonial subjugation. An analysis of the various codes within this subcategory reveals that these encounters triggered profound cultural and spiritual conflicts. In Asad's perspective, Western modernity advances a materialistic concept of progress that fundamentally contradicts the spiritual and traditional values of Islam—especially the lifestyle associated with the desert.

Asad argues that Islam, in its untainted form, embodies spiritual and moral wholeness and purity—qualities he sees as threatened by the forces of modernity. He attributes the corruption of the Islamic world primarily to Western colonialism and globalization (Asad 2004 [1954], 134, 136, 141). In particular, he views progressive thinking as a potentially destructive force, capable of eroding the traditional structures of Islamic society in a profoundly harmful way (Asad 2004 [1954], 225, 293). These reflections culminate in Asad's romanticized depiction of the Bedouins, whom he portrays as living embodiments of the purity, nobility, and authenticity of Islamic tradition—standing in stark contrast to the modern urban centers increasingly shaped by Western influence (Asad 2004 [1954], 294). His conception of Islamic values emerges less through a systematic exposition than through a negative contrast to Western modernity. As a result, the reader is left with a sense of moral clarity and spiritual resilience, yet the precise nature of these values remains elusive and enigmatically defined more by what they reject than by what they affirm.

The subcategory 2.2. *Between Tradition and Modernity,* thus, captures this underlying tension between the preservation of Islamic heritage and the destabilizing force of Western paradigms by drawing on Christian-Jewish traditions and knowledge, from which he nevertheless distances himself, as can be noticeably seen in the following quote:

> »My instinctive, youthful conviction that man does not live by bread alone crystallized into the intellectual conviction that the current adoration of ›progress‹ was no more than a weak, shadowy substitute for an earlier faith in absolute values a pseudo-faith devised by people who had lost all inner strength to believe

in absolute values and were now deluding themselves with the belief that some-
how, by mere evolutionary impulse, man would outgrow his present difficul-
ties...« (Asad 2004 [1954], 141).

While in Europe, Asad primarily perceived himself as an individual seeking career
and recognition, his first experience as a Muslim, however, was »to be part of a com-
munity of brethren« (Asad 2004 [1954], 346). This shift highlights his preference
for collective spiritual belonging over individualistic ambition—another way in
which his values are defined in contrast to those of *the West*.

2.3   Historical and Political Boundaries

Historical and political boundaries in Asad's narrative reshape colonial discourses by
reframing, appropriating, or excluding them along specific demarcation lines. Asad
frames tensions, power asymmetries, and corruption in the Arab and Muslim world
not as products of indigenous societies or human nature, but as consequences im-
posed by Western colonial dominance (Asad 2004 [1954], 161, 304).

Asad addresses the tensions that arise within the Islamic world when universal re-
ligious principles encounter local cultural and geographical specificities. Asad views
Islam as a religion with a universal claim, one that appeals to all people regardless
of their origin or social status. At the same time, he recognizes that the expression
of Islam varies across regions, shaped by local traditions and historical trajectories,
which give rise to multiple interpretations and practices within the global Muslim
community (Asad 2004 [1954], 304). Therefore, Asad emphasizes in his work that
he understands Islam as an inherently universal religion, not confined to a specific
people, such as the Arabs, or a particular region. He argues that Islam, in its original
form, created a transnational community that transcends ethnic, cultural, and geo-
graphical boundaries. Especially in his reflection on Islamic history, Asad notes in
this line of inquiry that many local particularities have often distorted or overshad-
owed the universal principles of Islam (Asad 2004 [1954], 144, 160, 304). A central
theme in this category is Asad's critique of movements that restrict Islam to ethnic
or cultural characteristics, as can be seen clearly in the following quote:

> »Yes, I think to myself, Western man has truly given himself up 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. In order not to perish in this loneliness, he
> must endeavour to dominate life by outward means. The fact of being alive can,
> by itself, no longer give him inner security: he must always wrestle for it, with
> pain, from moment to new moment. Because he has lost all metaphysical orien-
> tation, and has decided to do without it, he must continuously invent for himself

mechanical allies: and, thus, the furious, desperate drive of his technique. He invents every day new machines and gives each of them something of his soul to make them fight for his existence« (Asad 2004 [1954], 294).

Asad perceives development as a threat to the universal character of life—a concern that extends beyond Islam itself. His position becomes particularly clear in the context of intra-Islamic discourse when he reflects on the nature of Wahhabism in contrast to other Islamic traditions he encountered in Saudi Arabia (Asad 2004 [1954], 110, 160). While acknowledging that reformist efforts may be well-intentioned, Asad warns against excessive zeal, which he sees as endangering Islam's inherent flexibility and risking a drift into dogmatic rigidity (Asad 2004 [1954], 110, 160, 208). Despite these tensions and challenges, Asad underscores Islam's capacity to adapt to diverse cultural and geographical contexts without relinquishing its universal claim (Asad 2004 [1954], 160). In this sense, he also presents Islam as a potential source of hope for the broader world (Asad 2004 [1954], 305). For him, this political and geographical flexibility is a central characteristic of Islam that distinguishes it from other religions (Asad 2004 [1954], 295). While Asad acknowledges and appreciates the diversity within the Islamic world, he calls for a return to the universal principles of Islam apart from cultural differences, which should apply to all Muslims, regardless of their local traditions or cultural particularities (Asad 2004 [1954], 117; 198).

This boundary between religious universalism and local particularism within Islam is not limited to the Islamic world but also reflects a deeper philosophical reflection on the nature of religion and culture (Asad 1993, 29). Asad argues that the universal principles of Islam can unite humanity, whereas local expressions and interpretations often lead to divisions (Asad 2004 [1954], 117). This perspective gains particular relevance in a globalized world, where Muslims—especially in the first half of the 20th century—faced growing challenges and became increasingly aware of the need to preserve their religious identity within diverse cultural contexts (Aslan 2023, 35).

The question of the relationship between religious universalism and local particularism is closely intertwined with the challenges of modernity and the tensions between tradition and progress. In this context, Asad considers Islam to be a stronger religion than Christianity, as it encompasses not only a spiritual but also a political dimension. This view is illustrated in the following quote:

> »Islam postulated a self-contained political community which cuts across the conventional divisions of tribe and race. In this respect, Islam and Christianity might be said to have had the same aim: both advocated an international community of people united by their adherence to a common ideal; but whereas

> Christianity had contented itself with a mere moral advocacy of this principle and, by advising its followers to give Caesar his due, had restricted its universal appeal to the spiritual sphere, Islam unfolded before the world the vision of a political organization in which God-consciousness would be the mainspring of man's practical behaviour and the sole basis of all social institutions. Thus—fulfilling what Christianity had left unfulfilled—Islam inaugurated a new chapter in the development of man: the first instance of an open, ideological society in contrast with the closed, racially or geographically limited, societies of the past« (Asad 2004 [1954], 303).

This passage encapsulates Asad's broader view that Islam offers not just a personal path of faith but a comprehensive social and political framework rooted in divine consciousness. By positioning Islam as the fulfillment of an unrealized Christian ideal, Asad reaffirms its universalistic claim—one that transcends ethnic, tribal, and geographic boundaries and speaks to the heart of humanity's collective organization and ethical orientation.

3   Religious Studies Interpretation of Conversion and Boundary Drawing in *The Road to Mecca*

Understanding religious conversion has long been a central concern of the psychology of religion (Popp-Beier 2003). Over the past three decades, numerous handbooks and edited volumes have contributed to the development of a distinct interdisciplinary field of conversion research (Lamb and Bryant 1999; Henning and Nestler 2002; Buckser and Glazier 2003; Giordan 2009). The sociology of religion in particular has produced a wide range of questions and focal points in this area (Wolhrab-Sahr et al. 1998; Gooren 2005; Rambo and Farhadian 2014).

Wohlrab-Sahr identified three paradigmatic fundamental questions of sociological conversion research in a German-language literature review and suggested a fourth: 1. What is conversion? 2. Why does conversion occur? 3. How do converts present themselves? 4. What is the role of conversion in relation to biography? (Wohlrab-Sahr 2002). The four fundamental questions can be explored using the codes derived from Asad's autobiography, which highlight that the uniqueness of *The Road to Mecca* lies in how Asad frames his conversion as a multi-year process of negotiation and understanding—an approach that closely aligns with the questions proposed by Wohlrab-Sahr.

1. What is conversion? Asad's narrative provides insight into the nature of conversion, which he describes as a profound inner transformation rather than a sudden

or easily definable event. For Asad, converting to Islam was not merely an intellectual decision but rather a deep spiritual development that gradually awoke inside him something he likens to a »robber in the night« without controlling it (Asad 2004 [1954], 198). Asad's conversion ultimately marked the culmination of years of questioning and an increasing sense of spiritual affinity with Islam—an affinity, he suggests, that had always been present at a subconscious level (Asad 2004 [1954], 301). This process aligns with William James's classic understanding of conversion as a developmental transition:

> »Conversion is in its essence a normal adolescent phenomenon, incidental to the passage from the child's small universe to the wider intellectual and spiritual life of maturity« (James 1929 [1902], 196).

Asad himself describes his transformation in language that emphasizes passivity and a lack of conscious control:

> »An integrated image of Islam was now emerging with a finality, a decisiveness that sometimes astounded me. It was taking shape by a process that could almost be described as a kind of mental osmosis—that is, without any conscious effort on my part to piece together and ›systematize‹ the many fragments of knowledge that had come my way during the past four years« (Asad 2004 [1954], 301).

This portrayal underscores an emic model of conversion as gradual discovery as opposed to decisive rupture. Asad presents himself as entirely receptive, exposed to a higher realization rather than actively constructing it. He notes that Islam began to seriously occupy his thoughts only after spending several years immersed in Muslim societies and experiencing the faith firsthand. Instead of making a deliberate choice to convert, he describes the process as one of recognition—a growing inner awareness that Islam already aligned with his moral and spiritual orientation (Asad 2004 [1954], 306).

From an etic perspective, Asad's gradual turn toward Islam must be understood as a conversion in the conventional sense, or rather as the emic uncovering of a religious orientation perceived by him as always having been latent. While Asad's account resonates with phenomenological models of existential alignment and embodied resonance, it also challenges linear or decision-based typologies commonly used in the study of religious change. Scholarly reading must therefore maintain a clear distinction between his self-understanding and the analytical frameworks used to interpret it—acknowledging the narrative structure without reifying the notion of an inherent or essential religious core.

2. Why does conversion occur? Asad's conversion is not the result of a sudden epiphany but rather the outcome of years of experiences and reflections during his travels

in the Muslim world. Several main reasons for his conversion can thus be identified: first, his encounters with Arab-Muslim culture, which impressed Asad with its simplicity and dignity (Asad 2004 [1954], 184, 302). Second, Asad increasingly felt alienated from *the West*, which he perceived as excessively materialistic and spiritually bankrupt. His growing disappointment with Western society, as well as with Judaism, led him to seek a deeper meaning in life, a search that ultimately found its answer in Islam (Asad 2004 [1954], 74). Asad perceived Islam intellectually and morally appealing and understood it as a comprehensive and logical system that accounted for both the spiritual and material aspects of life (Asad 2004 [1954], 302). He appreciated the balance that Islam established between reason and faith, how it harmoniously considered the needs of both body and soul (Asad 2004 [1954], 314), and particularly endorsed the political form of an Islamic theocracy (Asad 2004 [1954], 303).

3. How do converts present themselves? Asad does not merely adopt a new religion; he undergoes a comprehensive transformation and profound realignment of his entire identity. Throughout his book, he reveals to the readers that conversion is not solely a religious act but a departure from a cultural, intellectual, and spiritual past. The journey to the Islamic center, Mecca, is portrayed as a spiritual quest for a more comprehensive and profound truth—one that he could not find in *Western civilization*. Asad emphasizes that Islam is the way of life that encompasses all aspects of existence—not just the religious but also the political, intellectual, and spiritual. Conversion is therefore not merely the decision to follow a religion but the discovery of a truth that is already deeply rooted within human beings. Asad views Islam as fundamentally incompatible with Western society and lifestyle, which he sharply criticizes and sometimes even demonizes for its materialism, rationalism, and spiritual emptiness. Conversion represents a turn away from Western values and toward a way of life that is in harmony with the spiritual and moral principles of Islam, as mentioned above. Asad describes himself as someone who has found a simpler yet purer way of life that provides him with spiritual and moral guidance.

4. What is the purpose of conversion? Asad's conversion occurs in response to a profound inner quest for spiritual fulfillment and moral clarity, according to his narrative. It is not merely a religious decision but a comprehensive transformation. Asad experiences conversion as a solution to the growing alienation he feels towards *the West*. The dissatisfaction he experienced in Europe drives him to seek an alternative way of life that can provide spiritual fulfillment (Asad 2004 [1954], 346). Asad finds in Islam a way of life that creates a balance between spiritual and material needs. He is fascinated by the simplicity and pure faith of the Muslim communities he encounters, which offer him the authenticity he missed in *the West* (Asad 2004 [1954], 128). Moreover, Asad is deeply impressed by the universal message of Islam, and, unlike

Judaism or Christianity, he sees Islam as not having an exclusive claim for a particular group, but as a religion that appeals to all people and emphasizes the idea of a unified human community.

Asad's conversion takes place in the context of a deep spiritual search that leads him away from the Western world and towards Islam, where he finds a religion and way of life that provides him with inner fulfillment, moral guidance, and universal values. It is the result of a gradual, reflective decision that radically changes his life.

All these are valuable and productive questions that will be framed by the inquiry into boundary-drawing—specifically, how Asad's conversion narrative, as related to his identification with the Arab-Muslim world, can be considered one of the various communicative genres present within the »communicative household« of a society. This approach seeks to explore the extent to which the emphasis on processuality is typical for conversion narratives (Luckmann 1986).

The aim here is to avoid asking whether Asad's religious shift had a truly successive or rather disruptive character, and whether it should be considered a conversion in the strict sense or more of an alternation (Travisano 1970; Pilarzyk 1978). Instead, the focus is on how the author frames his conversion as a process and the levels at which he establishes these boundaries. This aligns with a whole school of conversion research that began to perceive conversion accounts less as sources of actual conversion events and more as retrospective narratives of radical change, serving as a narrative reconstruction of one's own biography (Hindmarsh 2014; Stromberg 2014). The way Asad frames his pre-conversion attitudes as entirely negative and his post-conversion attitudes as entirely positive corresponds to a typical conversion rhetoric. This type of rhetoric has been described extensively in the context of Pentecostal testimonies (de Castro Moreira 2021; van der Hoek 2024a). This radicalism is particularly evident in Asad's narrative through the familial consequences of his conversion, making it appropriate to speak of a »definite break with one's former identity such that the past and the present are antithetical in some important respects« (Barker and Currie 1985, 305; Coleman 2003, 16; Robbins 2004). The fundamental realignment of his moral compass is repeatedly emphasized, and Asad summarizes in his introduction:

> »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«
> (Asad 2004 [1954], 8).

The rhetorical function of this narrative strategy is to frame the transformation of personal faith as comprehensible and authentic. By emphasizing thorough engage-

ment with and step-by-step assimilation into the new religion, such narratives counter the common perception of conversion as sudden and irrational. Winchester described this phenomenon of gradual conversion in the context of conversions to Orthodox Christianity, calling it *conversion to continuity*—a narrative »[…] in which the convert progressively discovers, reclaims, and cultivates a latent Orthodox self« (Winchester 2015, 439). According to Winchester, conversion in the Orthodox Church is frequently recounted as gradual self-discovery (Winchester 2015, 439; see also Edgar 1999). Meyer, in her study of Ghanaian Pentecostal churches, points to a similar situation, noting a rhetoric of ongoing engagement by converts with their former religious traditions, resulting in gradual growth in the Christian faith (Meyer 1998). In this sense, *gradual conversion* represents another narrative form of this everyday religiosity, which can also be found in a Muslim conversion narrative, as exemplified by Asad.

4   Asad's Conversion as Dialectical Transformation

Asad traces the dialectical unfolding of his search for truth by actively negating his inherited cultural and religious identity and shaping a new, spiritually integrated self. His early life—shaped by Jewish traditions, Enlightenment ideals, and Western rationalism and materialism—forms the thesis, a point of origin characterized by embeddedness in the European intellectual and religious world (Asad 2004[1954], 55). This identity, however, encounters its limits and gradually experiences a profound estrangement from what it comes to perceive as the superficiality, materialism, and moral vacuity of the Western world (Asad 2004 [1954], 108).

This first negation manifests in his growing critical distance from Zionist ideology, European nationalism, and the instrumental rationality of modernity. His conversion to Islam is not merely a spiritual turn but a way of philosophical rupture and a conscious disassociation from *the West*'s civilizational regime. Asad draws boundaries between East and West, between Judaism and Islam, between intellect and heart—boundaries that both reflect and produce his transformation. In this moment, his previous identity is negated: he no longer identifies with the categories of his origin but repositions himself entirely within an Islamic worldview. This negation is active and constructive—not destruction, but a leap toward an Other to overcome inner contradiction.

Yet, in the Hegelian sense, this movement does not end in simple opposition. The negation of the negation—the dialectical *Aufhebung* (Hegel 1970)—emerges as Asad synthesizes his inherited intellectual tools with his newly embraced Islamic faith. Importantly, Charles Taylor's reading of identity, strongly influenced by Hegel,

sheds light on this process: identity is not simply a given but emerges through a narrative of orientation toward goods that are recognized through reflection and historical unfolding. As Taylor argues, individuals are always embedded in »inescapable frameworks« that shape their self-understanding (Taylor 1989, 27), and their identity forms dynamically through negotiation with these moral horizons. In this light, Asad does not become the »pure« other but constructs a new subjectivity that incorporates *the West's* critical rationality within the framework of Islamic spirituality. Through his narrative, he positions himself as a Muslim who understands *the West* from within yet now speaks for Islam with the authority of one who has transcended his origin. This synthesis becomes productive in autobiographical, political, and religious dimensions.

On the individual level, Asad reconstructs his identity through a narrative of enlightenment and redemption—drawing on classic conversion motifs while embedding them in a broader cultural critique. On the collective level, he articulates Islam as a spiritual counter-model to Western decadence, calling for a return to authenticity, simplicity, and divine order. Historically and politically, he reads the rupture between *Islam* and *the West* as the outcome of centuries of colonial violence and theological misrecognition—projecting onto Islam the redemptive possibility of global moral order. In this sense, *The Road to Mecca* is not only a personal narrative of religious transformation but also a philosophical drama of identity formation through dialectical negation. It is a story of estrangement and return, of rupture and synthesis, of rejecting the familiar to arrive—critically and spiritually—at a new conception of self. Asad's journey reveals how conversion can function not merely as a change of belief but as a medium of world-interpretation, critique, and political positioning. Following the Hegelian and Taylorian understanding of identity as a historically unfolding negotiation with moral sources, Asad's narrative offers not resolution but provocation—a challenge to reconsider the very terms upon which the boundaries between West and Islam have been drawn.

However, the possibilities of interpreting these boundaries remain hidden from the reader and, following the methodological evaluation and coding, can only shed a certain light on Asad's transformation. As Susan Sontag poignantly argued, interpretation often »impoverishes« a work by reducing its sensuous and existential presence to a set of abstract meanings (Sontag 1964, 5). Especially when analyzing autobiographical or religious narratives shaped by different epistemologies and historical events, the aim should not be to maximize extracted content, but »to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all« (Sontag 1964, 10). This implies a critical awareness of one's own interpretive frameworks and a willingness to let the text resist full appropriation.

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