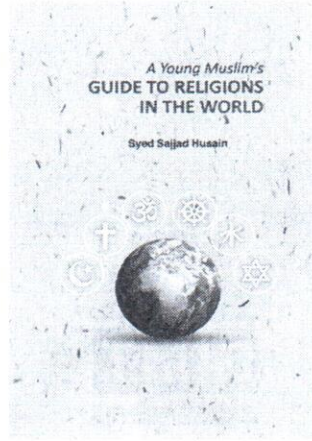


A Young Muslim's
**GUIDE TO RELIGIONS
IN THE WORLD**

SYED SAJJAD HUSAIN



Edited and introduced by
Md. Mahmudul Hasan
International Islamic University Malaysia



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INTRODUCTION

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Syed Sajjad Husain (1920-95) was no ordinary scholar. An intellectual of his stature is perhaps born into a society at a specific time in history and is not easily replaced. His life and work can be ranked among those rarities that provide intellectual nourishment for those who are receptive to it, and then gradually fade into oblivion. One of his students describes him as a colossus who “seemed to have the air of Solomon (peace be upon him) in the Valley of Ants.”¹ This accolade and approval may sound overenthusiastic and have elements of emotion and subjective admiration, but even his critics will agree that Husain was a man of outstanding intellectual ability and brilliance of mind.

Although I did not have the opportunity to meet him in person, he was not a complete stranger to me. I often heard a mentor, Mohammad Abdul Mutalib (d. 2008) speak highly about the man who was his teacher. During my undergraduate years at the University of Dhaka, I once saw Husain’s *Civilization and Society* (1994) with Khandaker Rezaur Rahman (d. 2012), his student who taught us English Victorian literature. Then one day in 1995, I read in the news that Husain had left this world for the next.

¹ Mohammad Abdul Mutalib, “Dr. Syed Sajjad Husain: Man and Myth.” *Dr. Syed Sajjad Husain Memorial Volume*. Ed. Mesbahuddin Ahmad. Dhaka: Dr. Syed Sajjad Husain Memorial Volume Committee, 1999, 310. 302-14.

My knowledge of Husain and his works consisted mainly of these small, impersonal encounters until 2017 when I undertook a research project on English-language Bangladeshi literature. While researching this literary tradition, I came across his English-language books; and I remember being utterly spellbound reading these exceptionally fine works on religion, politics, and culture. I was struck by a sense of wonderment, and even awe at the sophistication of his ideas and the articulation of their expression. I was impressed that a Bangladeshi scholar could produce such stellar works in English! The vast breadth of his knowledge about various issues including literary and religious traditions is incredible. It amazed me beyond words.

While reading his books, one writer that came to mind and offered a ground of comparison was his junior contemporary, the Palestinian-American scholar of literary and cultural studies Edward Said (1935-2003). Both were trained in English literature and addressed the representation of the East in Western writing.² However, while most of Husain's works have a religious – primarily Islamic – orientation, Said's are more secular. Husain's range of knowledge encompasses religion as well as more general subjects – a combination not widely available, especially in a country like Bangladesh.

My encounter with Husain's scholarship triggered a brooding question in my mind – one that I have pondered ever since I read his works. Have we been able to develop in Bangladesh a tradition of academic openness, and a vibrant intellectual and professional space, to understand, value, and build on the legacy of scholars like him? Some of us may dismiss him for reasons extraneous to his encyclopedic erudition and intellectual aptitude, or at least tangential to them.

² For example: Syed Sajjad Husain, *Kipling and India: An Inquiry into the Nature and Extent of Kipling's Knowledge of the Indian Sub-Continent* (Dacca: The University of Dacca, 1964); and Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

There are others who may regard Husain highly and share his ideas but are not competent enough to appreciate their scholarly merit, precision of presentation, and literary and linguistic excellence. Many in this group, because of inefficiency, may even do a grave disservice to the intellectual grandeur and stunning contributions of scholars like Husain (which actually happened with his work!). As an academic, I have been writing and publishing serious pieces for more than a decade now. Having a writerly sensibility, I understand what it takes to produce a scholarly work and how it feels to be distorted and misrepresented, or to see one's work mutilated by editors or violated by the press.

It is unfortunate that, despite his towering intellectual abilities and academic achievements, Husain is not widely known and is somewhat marginalised among scholars of comparable stature of other geographical settings or ideological leanings. However, the obscurity of the scholarly substance and contributions of intellectuals like him is a collective loss of knowledge and an irreparable deprivation for all. Perhaps it goes without saying that had Husain been born in a Western, developed country, he would have been known to readers around the world, handed down to posterity, and mentioned among other great names.

The neglect of Husain is not simply because of what is often described as "cultural imperialism" or the privileged, hegemonic dominance of Western knowledge and academic conventions, which have traditionally led to the marginalisation and dismissal of non-Western perspectives and intellectual resources. Inadequate academic skills, and meagre effort on the part, of those who are primarily responsible to promote Husain's legacy are chiefly to blame for the limited dissemination of his thoughts and ideas, for the insufficient recognition of his prominence as a writer, and for the lack of serious study of his life and works.

In other words, the reasons for his relative obscurity are many. Foremost among them is the inadequacy and persistent

failure of his compatriot successors who, despite the many differences among them, could do a good job by rallying around him in unity and finding in great scholars like him reasons to celebrate and take pride in their works. That is not to say that they need to bury all possible differences and even disappointments over his views on certain subjects. What is important is to recognise the academic value and artistic refinement of his works, and his standing as an exemplary scholar. He was a remarkably erudite man, an educator, and a significant Bangladeshi writer in English.

...

The subject matter of this book is not at the core of my primary research interests and priorities. I agreed to participate in this exercise of editing and shaping this volume out of a deep sense of responsibility and respect to Husain's scholarship. I do not deem it my primary obligation here – nor do I have adequate competence and experience – to comment or elaborate on what he discusses in this monumental work. My focus has been to present this book as an intellectual springboard to explore diverse religious traditions through an objective lens. *A Young Muslim's Guide to Religions in the World* is a human achievement, which is, as far as the message of the book is concerned, complete on its own terms with no glaring omissions.

Despite all the external trappings of modernity and the materiality of everyday life, and although non-religious factors appear to outweigh religious beliefs and appeals in today's world, as Husain argues in this book, there is no denying that religion in both the East and West is fundamental to society. It is a powerful presence, a dominant factor in social life, and an integral part of global culture. For instance, many public holidays in countries around the world have a religious foundation.

In their efforts to wear the tag of non-religiosity, some groups eventually follow conventions of alternative religions and societies to their own. For example, some people bearing Muslim names evade the use of the Islamic greeting *assalamu 'alaikum*.

(peace be upon you). One expression from the West that replaces this is 'goodbye' (or its shortened form, bye) which is more commonly used among communities with a minority or non-existent Muslim population. However, the argument for secularity falls short even here, as 'goodbye' is a contraction of "God be with ye" or "may God be with you" which is by no means a non-religious expression. This is just one small example of how religion is so deeply ingrained in modern society that we forget its religious roots.

Among a section of 'lapsed Muslims', there is a tendency to create distance from the Islamic faith for various reasons. Some might use religion to enhance their own material circumstances or to meet social, political, and interpersonal needs. For example, Muslim political figures who are otherwise hostile to Islamic teachings may don Islamic attire during religious festivals and occasions in an effort to appeal to the Muslim community. This is particularly evident during campaigns for national or local elections to court the vote of the faithful in a rather deceptive manner.

In the West, disclosure or non-disclosure of religious identity is played out in different contexts for reasons of populism and political opportunism. In April 2010, one month prior to the UK General Election, the British Tory politician and Member of Parliament (MP) Sajid Javid (1969-) along with other election candidates participated in a hustings hosted by a body named Churches Together in Alvechurch and Rowney Green. When asked whether or not he held "a personal faith", Javid responded:

My own family's heritage is Muslim. Myself and my four brothers were brought up to believe in God, but I do not practise any religion. My wife is a practising Christian and the only religion practised in my house is Christianity. I think we should recognise that Christianity is the religion of our country.³

³ "Politics in the pulpit." *The Village*, 22 April 2010. Retrieved on Dec 25, 2018 from <http://villageonline.co.uk/village/news/fullstory/politics_in_the_pulpit>.

About eight years later, in mid-2018, another senior Tory politician of Muslim background, Baroness Sayeeda Warsi (1971-) claimed that there was a “simmering anti-Muslim underbelly of Islamophobia within” the British Conservative Party and that “there are certain parts of the party that are in denial about it but it’s true.” Subsequently, the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) called for an investigation into Islamophobia in the party. Refusing to admit the existence of Islamophobia in his party, Javid appropriated his ‘Muslim identity’ as part of a subtler attempt to conceal Islamophobia in the political group to which he belonged. Speaking on the BBC’s Andrew Marr Show on Sunday 3 June 2018, he asserted: “For a start just look at who the Home Secretary is in this country. As you just described me my name is Sajid Javid. I’m the Home Secretary in this country.”⁴

Despite his Muslim name and Pakistani-Muslim origin, the UK Home Secretary’s change of language when discussing religion in Britain from 2010 to 2018 is not necessarily because of a change of heart, but is largely owing to his use of religion as a political tool in two different contexts. Javid conveniently shuttled between Christianity and Islam, as he functionalised religion to meet his political ends (he won the 2010 election, and the talks of an investigation into Islamophobia in the Tory party were eventually abandoned). In front of a Christian audience, he claimed Christianity as the religion of his domestic and national settings. Conversely, while there was a need for him to serve his party’s interest at the expense of the Muslim minority in Britain, he stressed his putative Muslim identity.

Away from the use of religion for political expediency rather than actual religious commitment, faith is an integral part of daily life and human experience for much of the global population. However, as is the case with many Muslims, it is perhaps safe to say that adherents of various religions are not learned in the intricacies of their own and other religions. For many devout

⁴ “ANDREW MARR SHOW: 3RD JUNE 2018.” Retrieved on Dec 25, 2018 from <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/03061801.pdf>>.

believers, the essence of their faith is reduced to a set of ritualistic habits and observances. What Husain attempts in this book is to present the bare bones of a diverse range of religions and belief systems around the world with which it is important for both religious and non-religious persons to be familiar.

Understanding one's own religion as well as those of others and separating legitimate religious practices from intrusions from other sources or traditions make so much difference in people's devotional experience. For example, many Muslims in Bangladesh observe Chehlam⁵ with religious (Islamic) fervour on the fortieth day of the death of a family member or relative. However, Husain contends in this book that this practice has its origins in the Hindu tradition and has no place in the religion of Islam. Once one knows the truth, they are free to decide on continuing or ceasing to observe such pseudo-Islamic ceremonies. However, few will support religious practices based on and driven by ignorance.

Freedom to practice one's religion makes greater sense if it is informed by knowledge about various faith traditions. Equally, rejecting or dismissing religion or the need for it should also be based on one's correct understanding of its rudiments and essential principles. Manifesting an indifference to religion only to mimic the dominant groups in today's materialistic world will smack of low self-esteem, ideological vagrancy, and intellectual destitution. Religion is such an old system and universal sociocultural phenomenon in human history that it should not be bartered away for gimmick, fetish, or fashion.

Many people are drawn to religion mainly because of a search for the sacred, or for reasons of personal meaning and fulfillment that comes as a result. It is all the more helpful for them to go a bit further and study the differences between various faiths and religious orders – undoubtedly, such a study

⁵ A variant spelling of chehlum meaning forty, it is a condolence ceremony often accompanied by religious prayer held on the fortieth day after death.

has the potential to impact our lives in a greater way. For individuals in search of spiritual guidance and a deeper meaning in life, *A Young Muslim's Guide to Religions in the World* is a godsend.

In academic studies, references to various religious traditions appear across disciplines, especially in the humanities and social sciences. As a student of literature, I have greatly benefited from this book and have reached the conclusion that, had I been acquainted with its contents before or during my undergraduate years, my understanding of English literature then would have been far more meaningful and holistic. Perhaps the same would be true for students of other branches of the humanities and social sciences.

Although Husain states in his Preface that he wrote the book for "the lay man", it is equally useful for the advanced readers and researchers. How can one not be buoyed by wonderment and admiration for the writer upon learning that the Chinese word "Chan" and the Japanese "Zen" are actually progressive transliterational distortions of the South Asian term "Dhyan" or "Dhyana" (meditation)! His level of research into topics such as cross-cultural and cross-religious interactions makes this book even more powerful.

What I can say about Husain's presentation of ideas in this book is that he has remained true to his words. He states in the Preface that he has "refrained as far as possible from unsympathetic criticism" (p. 3) of religions other than his own (that is, Islam). Accordingly, he has framed the book as a *show, don't tell* type of work.

His openness, tolerance, and receptivity to other religious ideas and traditions find expression in his statement: "I write from the point of view of a man belonging to the twentieth century who while fully attached to Islam does not think that nothing outside of Islam could be of any importance" (p. 3). At times, his criticism of Muslims is quite explicit, as he opines:

“Many of the real Islamic values, especially the emphasis on knowledge as the key to salvation, find greater adherents outside Islam today than within it” (pp. 3-4). This further showcases his impartiality in discussing faiths and faith communities.

Respect for other religions is rooted in Islamic scripture. The Qur’an states that “every community has had an apostle” (10:47) and “[earlier] communities each had their guide” (13:7). In other words, perhaps, all religion that deserves the name of religion may have begun with a prophet and divine revelation or message from God to be conveyed to the people. However, the Qur’an also maintains in various places that “only later followers of the religion interpolated new and foreign ideas, ideas not derived from any contact with the Absolute, but from man’s limited knowledge, and thus created false or misleading dimensions of the Original religion.”⁶ Ali Ashraf elaborates:

Historically to some extent this may be verified by saying that monotheistic Hinduism as seen in the Upanishadas [Upanishads] was transformed in a much later period into the polytheism of the Puranas – the polytheism that is practised among the masses in India and Java, a polytheism which Hindu sanyasies [sanyasis] always discard. A Muslim is therefore asked to believe in the purity of all the prophets and never speak ill of any religion.⁷

Importantly, as Husain emphasises in this book, Muslims are required to believe in all prophets and not to make “distinction between any of [God’s] apostles” (Qur’an, 2:285). Equally, they are forbidden to desecrate or dishonour sacred images and religious symbols of other groups. As the Qur’an instructs: “But do not revile those [beings] whom they invoke instead of God, lest they revile God out of spite, and in ignorance” (6:108).

⁶ Syed Ali Ashraf, “Education and Culture in the Muslim World: Conflict between Tradition and Modernity.” *Crisis in Muslim Education* by Syed Sajjad Husain and Syed Ali Ashraf. Jeddah: Hodder and Stoughton, 1979, 11. 7-35.

⁷ Ibid.

Husain seeks to lay bare the origins of various religions – some of which share a common source, have identical views on creationism and eschatology, and regard ultimate reality as God. He presents detailed information about beliefs that are influential in the world and found in many different countries. He discusses syncretic religions that incorporate elements from, and exhibit considerable cultural overlapping with, other belief systems, and the ones which are completely incompatible with one another. This book also surveys religions that underscore the goal of spiritual release from the chains of this world. There are also religions, Husain observes, which many may refuse to regard as religions and some of which may strike many readers as completely bizarre. In these discussions, Husain abstains from assuming a self-righteous attitude or attempting to dictate to the reader which religion they ought to choose.

It took a couple of years for Husain to write this book. He authored it towards the end of his life (its first edition was published in 1992 and he passed away in 1995). That is to say, *A Young Muslim's Guide to Religions in the World* is a product of his mature scholarship and considered judgement – well worth a careful reading. I congratulate Ahmad Farid (1936-2019) and Shah Abdul Hannan (1939-) for approaching him to write this book and for extracting much-needed knowledge from him. If not for their persuasions, I wonder whether he would act on his own accord and produce this work.

...

To say that I have edited the book would be an audacious statement and an affront to the dignity and intellectual standing of Husain. In my role as editor of this book, I have attempted to rectify inadvertent slips in the original text (first edition) and the many mistakes that were added in the process of publishing its second edition in 2002. I undertook an arduous and painstaking task in comparing the second edition with the first in order to determine the extent of variation between the two (I was perplexed by the nature and number of incorrect changes that

were made in the second edition!). Additionally, I have consulted innumerable sources to double-check religious, cultural, and historical names and terms – many of which were unknown to me previously – and made orthographic corrections, or replaced some of them with standardised spellings. I have made other minor changes, mainly for accuracy and uniformity, which do not impact the content of the book.

At times, Husain's writing style reminded me of John Milton's long and winding sentences in *Areopagitica* (1644). I kept most of these sentences as they were, but broke up some of them into smaller ones. I also inserted commas to split the longer sentences into clauses, especially where subordinate clauses needed to be more clearly marked from the rest of the sentence. The manuscript on which I worked had a mixture of American and British spellings and usages. Considering the preponderance of British linguistic standards throughout the text, I attempted to convert American spellings to British ones in order to avoid academically unwelcome combination of both traditions.

Perhaps since Husain did not intend *A Young Muslim's Guide to Religions in the World* to be a scholastic book in the strict sense of the term, current academic convention was not maintained in organising its Bibliography. I have kept its original format but corrected some spellings and typos – most of which were not there in the first edition that was published during his lifetime. Husain did not use any footnotes. However, I have added a limited number of footnotes to provide greater clarity and additional information. Previous editions of the book did not mention lifespans of historical and literary figures; and I have attempted to mention those of many.

On a final note, working on this project has been a formidable task. While making changes in places, given the height of Husain's academic and intellectual powers, I was extremely cautious. Despite all my carefulness and sensitivity to the value of *A Young Muslim's Guide to Religions in the World*, I may have failed to address inadvertent slips to which it would be gracious of the reader to draw my attention.