Introduction

Hussein Amin: A Courageous Voice Calling for Reform

By Paolo L. Branca, Lecturer in Arabic and Islamology, Catholic University of Milan (Italy)

Hussein Ahmad Amin was born in Cairo in June 1932, where he also passed away in April 2014. He was educated at schools in Egypt before graduating from the Faculty of Law at Cairo University. Following his legal training he studied English literature in London and subsequently practiced law and worked as a broadcaster for Egyptian radio as well as the BBC Arabic World service. He went on to a career in the Diplomatic Service of the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Following this, while he was Deputy Director of the Diplomatic Institute in Cairo, Hussein Amin produced some of his major works, namely *Dalīl al-Muslim al-ḥazīn ilā muqtada-l-sulūk fī’l-qarn al-ʿishrīn* (A Guide for the Sad and Perplexed Muslim Concerning the Sort of Behaviour Required by and in the Twentieth Century; translated here as *The Sorrowful Muslim’s Guide*),[[1]](#footnote-1) and *Ḥawla aldaʿwa ʾilā taṭbīq al-sharīʿa* (On the Implementation of Sharia).[[2]](#footnote-2) Both books elicited severe reactions from the official religious establishment and generated intense debate not only in Egypt, but around the Arab World more widely.

Hussein’s father, Ahmad Amin (1886-1954), was the first teacher of the young Hussein. Ahmad had studied the classical Islamic disciplines at Al-Azhar, where he came into contact with Muhammad Abduh, whose reformist views deeply influenced him. Ahmad subsequently became a teacher, after which he studied law at the newly established (1907) Islamic Judicial School (*Madrassat al-qaḍāʾ al-sharʿī*’), which also profoundly affected him.[[3]](#footnote-3) After working as a judge, he became a Professor at Cairo University, eventually becoming the Dean of the Faculty of Literature at the same university.

In later years, Ahmad Amin conceived of a combined work with Taha Husayn to chart the history of Islamic culture. Taha Husayn published the first book in the series in 1926,[[4]](#footnote-4) while Ahmad Amin published his well-known works on the intellectual history of Islamic culture between 1933 and 1952.[[5]](#footnote-5) With respect to traditional production, these works stand out due to their subject, style and the sources used. In short, they are some of the most mature fruits of the *Nahda* or Renaissance which distinguished the Arab world at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Soon the struggle for independence from colonialism and the nationalist and revolutionary regimes that followed would see a prevalence of apologetic and polemical works instead.

Ahmad Amin’s unapologetic works and his critical view of certain historical developments greatly influenced Hussein. Indeed, Hussein took them a step further. For example, in his famous *Fajr al-Islam* (Dawn of Islam), Ahmad Amin wrote a few highly critical paragraphs on the way in which the *aḥādīth* (prophetic traditions) were collected and how several of the Prophet’s Companions had accused one another of putting traditions in the Prophet’s mouth. However, while Ahmad did not go on to say that these traditions were fabricated or forged, or analyse the need and reasons for forging traditions at that time, Hussein did. He devotes an entire chapter (Chapter Four, “The Role of Aḥādīth (traditions) ascribed to the Prophet in the History of Islamic Societies”) in *The Sorrowful Muslim’s Guide* to a discussion of the forged and fabricated traditions, the reasons for their fabrication and their continued use. While Ahmad Amin was a product of al-Azhar and a reformist, he was still conservative. Hussein did not have this loyalty to al-Azhar and went further in his criticism than his father.

Although Hussein was not a religious scholar like his father, he clearly benefited from his father’s legacy and the surroundings in which he grew up. Indeed, such was his father’s influence that Hussein wrote a book of memoirs entitled *Fī bayt Aḥmad Amīn* (In the house of Ahmad Amin).[[6]](#footnote-6) In his later years, Ahmad Amin suffered from blindness. It was Hussein who read to him from the original sources his father had amassed in his library and who took down the thoughts that he dictated. This gave Hussein Amin an almost intimate familiarity with the ancient sources. In addition, thanks to Hussein’s diplomatic appointments which allowed him to travel around the world, he was able to tangibly experience the results of the intellectual stagnation his father had identified in his works. Furthermore, Hussein’s diplomatic career exposed him to various schools of thought, especially modern Western ones, which affirmed the liberal and secular positions that he already held. From this awareness and his resulting sense of responsibility, came the intense pages of *The Sorrowful Muslim’s Guide*, published here in English translation for the first time.[[7]](#footnote-7)

As a ‘Guide’, it references the famous *Guide for the Perplexed* (*dalālat al-ḥā’irīn*) by Mōsheh ben Maymōn, Mūsā ibn Maymūn ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Qurṭubī al-Isrāʾīlī in Arabic, more commonly known as Maimonides (1135-1204). Without wishing to make improper comparisons between the great medieval philosopher and a modern Egyptian writer, the spirit of the former, which appears in his famous saying: **“**Do not consider it proof because it is written in books, for the liar who will deceive with his tongue will not hesitate to do the same with his pen,” is also found in Chapter 4 of *The Sorrowful Muslim’s Guide*:

“[...] the jurists and scholars resorted to supporting any view which they saw as viable and desirable by a *ḥadīth* (prophetic tradition) that they ascribed to the Prophet, much like those who wrote The Book of Deuteronomy and then attributed it to Moses to give it an authoritative and trustworthy character. This practice became relatively easy after the death of the Companions' generation, who had alone been able to deny that the Prophet had uttered such and such *ḥadīth* (prophetic tradition). The jurists and scholars were reassured and their conscience rested easy, as they believed that putting words and sayings into the Prophet's mouth would serve the religion of Islam and stand against the worldly rule of the Umayyads.”

A quotation from another book by Hussein Amin published in 1985 also written in the same spirit of critical enquiry, echoes a similar viewpoint:

“The number of legal provisions laid down explicitly by the Qur’an and in the traditions universally deemed valid is extremely low if compared to those contained in books of law. In the Qur’an, there are only about eighty verses with a juridical subject, such as those on the penalties for theft and adultery or concerning wills and inheritance. Most of these lines, moreover, are limited to stating general principles which allow different interpretations and applications, which can then be adapted to the requirements of different periods and different circumstances.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Despite winning the prize for best work published in the previous year at the Cairo Book Fair in 1984, *The Sorrowful Muslim’s Guide* was not received positively everywhere. Initially, most of the ideas explored in each chapter were published as articles in the Kuwaiti magazine *al-Arabi* and the Qatari magazine *al-Doha*. These articles generated heated discussions in several daily and weekly publications not only in Cairo, but around the Arab World. His writings met with fierce criticism from some quarters, including for example Ahmed Bahgat in *al-Ahram*, Ismail al-Kilani in Abu Dhabi’s *Manar al-Islam*,and George Tarabishi in Bahrain’s *al-Magalla al-Thaqafiyya*. Hussein was called a fame-hungry atheist and accused of disseminating evil, and worse. However, his work was also praised by other leading journalists of the time, such as Anis Mansur of *October*, who was the first to publish Hussein Amin’s articles in Egypt. Fathi Radwan of *al-Hilal* called him the most important religious writer of the year and Yusry Hussein of *al-Arab* described him as a writer who shakes the silence and reopens the doors of *ijtihād* (independent legal reasoning)*.*

These discussions prompted Amin to expand his articles and collect them in *The Sorrowful Muslim’s Guide* in order to provide them with more depth and substance. He also wanted the articles to incorporate a running theme, namely that of refuting the misconception that the Prophet and his Companions were infallible, and that Islam as a religion was not influenced by political and economic factors.

Like Muhammad Abduh and his own father before him, Hussein agreed that since Islamic law had been established in the past, it was changeable. He went a step further, arguing that many of its rules and regulations were not applicable to contemporary social problems. The publication of *The Sorrowful Muslim’s Guide* reopened this debate. Whilst leading intellectuals in Egypt and the Arab world more widely commended Hussein Amin for his courage, knowledge and meticulous research, describing him as a voice of reform in a period of stagnation,[[9]](#footnote-9) the book also generated much criticism from Muslim clerics, such as Mohamed al-Ghazali for example. Several journalists, authors, and public figures with a variety of Islamist leanings also attacked the book.[[10]](#footnote-10) They were most critical of Amin’s description of political Islam and his accusation that Islamists who, in his opinion, despite not knowing much about Islamic history, sharia and *fiqh* (jurisprudence), demanded the application of sharia in contemporary life. Amin argued extensively that political Islam developed as a result of social and economic decline as well as corruption in government circles. Islamists refuted this vehemently, arguing along the lines of the Muslim Brotherhood slogan that “Islam is the solution.” These intense debates clearly illustrate that *The Sorrowful Muslim’s Guide* addresses several subjects of great contemporary importance that are relevant to current global affairs and the challenges that face Muslim societies today. Indeed, at the time of its publication in 1983, Hussein Amin already foresaw the dangers of political Islam and the terrorist movements associated with it.

Moving now to the specific subject of the book, while it is not the intention here to summarise it or to offer a detailed description or commentary, its basic idea is strong and compelling. It recounts that today’s Muslims are sorrowful because they cannot reconcile what they believe in and what their religion imposes on them, with what contemporary life demands from them. The sorrowful Muslims are torn, because if they follow the dictates of their religion, they will be forced to deny what has become familiar and prevalent among their contemporaries, and if they adopt what is commonplace and prevalent among their contemporaries, they will find themselves obliged to deviate from the principles of their religion and its teachings.

The book raises questions regarding issues about which many other Muslim intellectuals and thinkers have been silent; questions still considered taboo by many in the Muslim world. These include – among others - current religious practice vs. the Islamic ideal; the many additions to the original revelation; the veracity of the Prophet’s biography and his sayings; the development of Sufism, and the many historical and ideological influences on Islamic thought.

To illustrate the originality of Amin’s arguments and how he developed them, I will discuss his analysis of the biographies of the Prophet, an apparently rather technical subject, but with a far wider scope. Indeed, the way in which the narrative of the founder of a religion is explored, is revealing about the way in which the sense and the mission of a community are conceived.

The first of these biographies, *al-Maghāzī*, is an obvious example of this. In it, Muhammad is mainly presented as a political and military leader. Yet in the first twelve years of his preaching, he was the representative of a few dozen monotheists in a pagan city which was largely hostile towards him. However, he had no armed clashes in this city. It was only in the following ten years, after the *Hijra* (migration of Muhammad to Medina in 621) and until his death, that armed battles and skirmishes erupted. Since Muhammad was clearly much more than a military leader during his first twelve years of preaching, it is clear that this type of literary genre was used more to support the needs of the Islamic conquests - in full swing at this time - than to faithfully reconstruct Muhammad’s life.

The subsequent *al-Sīra al-nabawiya* (Prophet’s biographies), the more recent and far more ‘politically correct’ biographies, tend to paint Muhammad as a precursor of, for example, ecological or feminist movements. For this reason, they are no less problematic in the eyes of serious scholars. Indeed, the continual risk is that current circumstances and fashions are followed, thereby fatally moving away from historical context and falling into the trap of apologetics and ideology. In *The Sorrowful Muslim’s Guide*, Hussein Amin therefore highlights the need for a new and unapologetic biography of Muhammad.

A similar discourse applies to the material known as the *Sunna*, or Prophetic Tradition, the collected deeds and words of the Prophet and his Companions. However, in this case the topic is much more sensitive and delicate, as these *aḥādīth* (plural of *ḥadīth*, or deeds, acts, and words of the Prophet) are one of the main sources of Islamic law – as commonly understood - or the sharia.

Hussein Amin was very critical of the idea that Islamic law could be applied in today’s world. His chapter on *ḥadīth* is not only a critique of their various different historical abuses, but also of the claim by contemporary violent and militant groups engaged in *takfīr* (accusing someone of *kufr*, i.e. heresy or disbelief) and terrorism who claim their ideologies are based on *ḥadīth* - a very topical issue with regard to the so-called Islamic State and before that al-Qaeda.

However scrupulously and diligently Muslim scholars collected the traditions, they were collected over a long period of time characterised by violent oppositions between different sects and divergent interest groups in the *umma* (community of believers in the world). Until this day, the effects of this can be felt. For example, the way in which the different and opposing creeds that evolved, and which are discussed in Chapter 7 (‘Political and Social Roots of Islamic Sects’) of the book, can be explained by their different contexts (historical, ideological, political, cultural and even economic). These creeds did not evolve alone, but rather in response to one another. These contexts and currents include Sufism, for example, which concentrated on the founding spiritual aspects of an authentic religious experience, just as other sects became the mouthpieces of the concerns of ethnic groups and communities that feared losing their voice in the structure of the nascent universal Caliphate. In these cases religion was employed as an instrument rather than as a genuinely theological application of the doctrinal aspects.

The Arabisation and perhaps also the sudden secularisation of Muslim societies promoted by new nation states, paradoxically allowed anyone to approach the sources without the mediation of a category of specialists and scholars. The simple and even at times layman application of Islamic law is revealed in this context as window-dressing. It practically marginalises fundamental aspects of long years of dedication to responsible training and education. Even the eschatological visions of very early Islam, presented at the onset of the Prophet’s mission as imminent, have been relegated to sometime in the future. This has very little influence on the present, except to re-emerge in caricatured and deviated form in the worst subversive and nihilist movements, the expression of a superficial and contradictory Westernisation and falsely linked with a celestial perspective worthy of this name.

In tackling these subjects, Hussein Amin’s work is more courageous and explicit than most, since he addresses controversial subjects and muffles his explosive criticality with wisdom, wit and temperate satire. At the same time, as a faithful continuer of the reformist spirit of his father and his father’s teachers, his work reflects the views of earlier reformist modernists, especially Muhammad Abduh.

His work can therefore be considered as the reconciliation between authenticity and modernity, or the reconciliation of Islam with modernity and the contemporary world. However, it is more representative of modern Islamic humanism in the tradition of historical Islamic humanism as practiced by the *Muʿtazila* (theological school founded on reason and rational thought; flourished under the Abbasid caliphate from the eighth to the eleventh century) and as apparent in the writings of many of their eminent scholars, most notably al-Jāḥiz (159/776-255/868 or 869). Hussein Amin can definitely be viewed as a member of this humanitarian tradition. His knowledge of classical Islamic culture and sources, as well as his equally thorough grounding in western culture, allowed him to distinguish between the essentially original and the superfluous additions in religious belief. This enabled him to suggest reform of corrupted beliefs, and adjustment of religious feelings, local values ​​and culture in order to adhere to the principles ​​of humanism. He read the religious heritage inherited from his ancestors whilst wearing the glasses of humanism. After re-reading and interpreting it according to human values, ​​he recognised that the past holds the present hostage by stifling it through fundamentalist Islamic thought.

*The Sorrowful Muslim’s Guide* also echoes Hussein Amin’s previous calls for reinstating *ijtihād* and to which he devoted a whole book.[[11]](#footnote-11) This resulted in many heated discussions about whether or not the sharia, or rather Islamic law, could be applied in today’s world. Some of these discussions became violent and he was accused of heresy. However, Hussein Amin stayed true to his convictions and reiterated his beliefs in his subsequent books. For example in *Ḥawla al-daʿwah ila taṭbīq al-sharīʿah al-Islāmiyah* (Regarding the Call for the Application of Islamic Shari'a) mentioned above, he included a chapter "Defending dogs in Islam". This was because his daughter, being part of a family that kept dogs at home, had become upset after her religious studies teacher told her class that dogs were unclean and that angels do not enter a house where dogs are kept. For the sake of reason, rather than *taqlīd* - or blind following - Amin mined the pages of Islamic heritage for information and evidence for the source of this opinion, which he did not find.

Fundamentalists are accused of usually following blindly, unless the matter is in their own best interests. This brings to mind a well-known anecdote of a peasant meeting his neighbour, a religious cleric, to whom he says: “What do I do now that a dog has urinated on one of the walls of my house?” The cleric replies: "Nothing will help other than the demolition of this wall that was defiled!" The poor peasant replies: "But this is the wall separating your house and mine, so will you pay half the cost?" The cleric replies: In this case a little water will purify the wall."

Hussein is a man to whom we must be grateful, since he is one of the many who, from Morocco to Indonesia, but also in the Diaspora, struggled and continue to struggle to make their voices heard. A deafening silence, complicit with too many interests that cannot be confessed but which are evident in their tragic consequences, is at long last broken in *The Sorrowful Muslim’s Guide* in favour of listening more attentively to the voices of an Islam that wants to be modern, while remaining faithful to its origins.

These two intentions are opposed only in appearance, and are in actual fact complementary for all those who intend to save ancient traditions from the sad destiny of ending up in the display cases of a museum. Indeed, in addition to *The Sorrowful Muslim’s Guide* Hussein Amin also devoted books to discussing the state of Islam in a changing world,[[12]](#footnote-12) to exploring renewed religiosity and Islamic revival which he felt promoted rituals at the expense of core Islamic values and spirituality.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The challenge facing reformers and followers of Islamic humanism, such as Hussein Amin, is that their attempts to apply humanity and reason to Islamic heritage, and their extraordinary efforts to free the original texts from previous interpretations and to offer a modern humane one instead, are not easily acceptable to the wider public. As radicalisation reaches new heights - thanks in part to certain interpretations of Islam - calls for reform have occasionally lacked direction and have suffered from an absence of public support. In Egypt, calls by the authorities for a “renewal of religious discourse” have been concurrent with the jailing of outspoken writers and scholars on charges of contempt for religion. In 2015, for example, Islam El-Behairy received a 1-year prison sentence for criticising al-Bukhari and other scholars, such as Ibn Taymiyyah and the four founders of the Islamic Legal Schools. In 2016, writer Fatima Naoot received a 3-year prison sentence for criticising the practice of ritual sacrifice during *Eid Al-Adha* (the feast of the sacrifice). And in February 2017, preacher Mohamed Abdullah Nasr was sentenced to five years in prison for criticising al-Bukhari and declaring he was the ‘awaited Mahdi.’ More than ever, perplexed and sorrowful Muslims need a voice which reconciles religious teachings and the demands of contemporary life.

Hussein Amin’s message is therefore still as relevant and timely today as it was when it was first published. Eleven editions of the book have already been published in Arabic with a twelfth under way, indicating its popularity in Egypt and the wider Arab world. The value of its translation into English is not only to make an important work of liberal thought in modern Egypt available to the Anglophone world, but also to highlight antiquated religious thought and particular inherited customs that were subsumed into Islamic heritage and which urgently require radical disentangling and reinterpretation.

1. Amīn, H. A. (1983). *Dalīl al-muslim al-hazīn ila muqtada al-sulūk fi-l-qarn al-ʻishrīn.* Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Amīn, H. A. (1985). *Ḥawla al-daʿwa ʾilā taṭbīq al-sharīʿa.* Beirut: Dar al-Nahdah al-'Arabiyah [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For more on the effects of the Judicial School on contemporary Muslim thought see for example Ghānim, D. A.-W. (2017). *Athār madrassat al-qaḍāʾ al-sharʿī ʿala al-fikr al-Islāmī al-muʿāṣir*. Istanbul: Dār al-Maqāṣid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Fī al-shiʿr al-jāhilī* (Pre-Islamic Poetry). (1926). Cairo: Maṭbaʻat Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣrīyah; [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Fajr al-Islām* (The dawn of Islam, 1 volume). (1938). Cairo: Maṭbaʻat al-Iʻtimād; *Duḥā al-Islām* (The aurora of Islam, 3 volumes). (1938). Cairo: Lagnit al-taʾlīf wa-l-targama; and *Zuhr al-Islām* (The noon of Islam, 4 volumes). (1952). Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍa al-Miṣrīya; which were then condensed into *Yawm al-Islām* (The day of Islam, 1 volume). (1952). Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahdah al-Miṣriyah. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Amīn, H. A. (1989). *Fi bayt Aḥmad Amīn.* Cairo: Maktabah Madhbuli. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. It was previosuly translated into French as Amīn, H. A. (1992) *Le livre du musulman désemparé: pour entrer dans le troisième millénaire.* (R. Jacquemond, Trans.) Paris: Editions La Découverte. However, the French translation omitted two complete chapters and several paragraphs in other chapters. The English translation is therefore the first complete translation in a European language. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Amīn, H. A. (1985). *Hawla al-da`wah ila tatbiq al-shari`ah al-Islamiyah wa-dirasat Islamiyah ukhra.* Cairo: Dar al-Nahdah al-`Arabiyah, p.26. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. These included, for example, Sayyid Hegazy, Fathi Radwan, Ahmed al-Da’ig, and Salah Eissa. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. These included Mohamed Said Ramadan Al-Bouti, known as the Shaykh of the Levant, Shaykh Adel Jalil Shalabi, who published a very critical review of the book in the *Middle Eastern Times*, as did Shaykh Abdel Moneim Selim in *al-Arabi*. Other critics were Mohamed Galal Kishk, Egyptian Islamist journalist and writer in *October*, Fahmy Howeidi in *al-Ahram*, and Saudi writer Mundhir al-Asʻad who wrote three highly polemical books refuting *The Sorrowful Muslim’s Guide*. In 1990 he published the short book *Islām ākhir zaman: qirāʼah fī ārāʼ Ḥusayn Aḥmad Amīn* (What has Islam come to? A Reading of Husayn Ahmad Amin's views), (1990), Riyadh: Dār al-Miʻrāj lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzīʻ, which was followed four years later in 1994 by *Al-Kādhib al-ḥazīn wa-ḥabīb al-mulḥidīn wa-al-munaṣṣarīn, Ḥusayn Aḥmad Amīn* (The Sorrowful Liar, Lover and Supporter of Atheists: Husayn Ahmad Amin), (1994), Cairo: Dār al-Ṣaḥwah lil-Nash. Finally in 1997 he published an expanded version of his first book titled *Islām ākhir zaman: tafnīd ʻilmī shāmil li-abāṭīl al-mustashriqīn wa-al-mutagharribīn allatī saraqahā Ḥusayn Aḥmad Amīn* (What has Islam Come to? A Complete Scientific Refutation of the False Claims of Orientalists and Westernised Writers stolen by Husayn Ahmad Amin), (1997), Riyadh: Maktabat al-ʻAbīkān. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Amin, H. A. (1993). *al-Ijtihād fī al-Islām Ḥaqq huwā amm wājib?* Cairo: al-Hayʼah al-Miṣrīyah al-ʻĀmmah lil-Kitāb. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Amīn, H. A. (1988). *al-Islām fī ʼālam mutaghayir wa maqalat Islamiyyat ukhra.* Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Amin, H. A. (1994). *al-Mawqif al-ḥaḍārī min al-nazaʻāt al-dīnīyah wa-dirāsāt ukhrā.* Cairo: Sīnā lil-Nashr. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)