

## A Critical Review of English Translations of the Quran<sup>1</sup>

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Despite the historical fact that the early Muslim community's stand on the translation of the Arabic text of the Quran was ambivalent, as indeed, the general Muslim attitude remains to this day, the act of the Muslim exegetical effort. However, whereas the idea of interpreting the Quran has not been so conventional, the emotional motives behind rendering the Quranic text into languages other than Arabic has always been looked upon with suspicion.

This is obvious as the need for translating the Quran arose in those historic circumstances when a large number of non-Arabic speaking people had embraced Islam, and giving new linguistic orientations to the contents of the revelation-as, for instance, happened in the case of the 'New Testament'-could have led to unforeseeable, and undesirable, developments within the body of the Islamic region itself. (For a brief, though highly useful, survey of the Muslim attitudes towards the permissibility of translating of the text of the revelation to non-Arabic tongues consult M. Ayoub, 'Translation the Meaning', in *Afkar Inquiry*, Vol. 3, No. 5 {Ramadan 1406/May 1986}, pp. 349. The Muslim need for translating the Quran into English arose mainly out of the desire to combat the missionary effort. Following a long production of a-usual erroneous and confounding-European version of the Muslim scripture, Christian missionaries started their offensive against a politically humiliated Islam in the eighteenth century by advancing their own translations of the Quran.

Obviously, Muslims could not allow the missionary effect-invariably confounding the authenticity of the text with a hostile commentary of its own-to go unopposed and unchecked. Hence, the Muslim decision to present a faithful translation of the Quranic text as well as an authentic summary of its teaching to the European world. Later, the Muslim translations were meant to serve even those Muslims whose only access to the Quranic revelation was through the medium of the European languages. Naturally, English was deemed the most important language for the Muslim purpose, not least because of the existence of the British Empire, which after the Ottomans had the largest number of Muslim Subjects.

The same rationale, however, applies to various schools of jurisprudential through within Islam or even to renegade groups outside of Islam, Such as the Qadianis. Their considerable translational activities are motivated by the urge to proclaim what they view as their ideological uniqueness.

Although there is a spate of volumes on the multi-faceted dimensions of the Quran, no substantial work has so far been done to critically examine the mass of existing English translations of the Quran.

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Even bibliographical material on this subject was quite scant before the recent appearance of World Bibliography of the Translations of the Meanings of the Holy Quran (Istanbul, OIC Research Centre, 1986), which provides authentic publication details of the translations of the Quran in sixty-five languages.

Some highly useful work in this field had been earlier by Dr Hamidullah of Hyderabad-Deccan in Paris. Appended to the Cambridge History of Arabic Literature Volume 1, Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period (Cambridge University Press, 1983) is a bibliography of the Quran translations into European languages, prepared by J.D Pearson, as is the latter's article in the Encyclopaedia of Islam. It is, however, of not much use to the Muslim.

Since none of the above-mentioned works is annotated, the reader gets no idea about the translator's mental make-up, his dogmatic presuppositions and his approach to the Quran as well as the quality of the translation.

Similarly the small chapter entitled 'The Quran and Occidental Scholarship' in Bell and Watt's Introduction to the Quran (Edinburgh, 1970, pp. 173-86), although useful in providing background information to the Orientalists' efforts in Quran studies, and translations, more or less for the same reasons, is of little value to general Muslim readers. Thus, studies, which focus on those aspects of each translation of the Quran, are urgently needed lest Western scholars misguide the unsuspecting non-Arabic speaking readers of the Quran. An effort has been made in this survey to bring out the hallmarks and shortcomings of the major complete translations of the Quran.

The early English translations of the Quran by Muslims stemmed mainly from the pious enthusiasm on their part to refute the allegations levelled by the Christian missionaries against Islam in general and the Quran in particular.

Illustrative of this trend are the following translations:

- i. Mohammad Abdul Hakim Khan, "*The Holy Quran: 'with short notes based on the Holy Quran or the authentic traditions of the Prophet, as well as on the old and New Testaments or scientific truth. All fictitious accounts, questionable history and disputed theories have been carefully avoided'*"
- ii. Hairat Dehlawi, "*The Koran Prepared, by various Oriental learned scholars and edited by Mirza Hairat Dehlawi. Intended as 'a complete and exhaustive reply to the manifold criticisms of the Koran by various Christian authors such as Drs. Salc, Rodwell, Palmer and Sir W. Muir'*" (Delhi, 1912)
- iii. Mirza Abdul Fadl, Quran, "*Arabic Text and English Translation Arranged Chronologically with an Abstract*" (Allahabad, 1912)

Science none of these early translations was by a reputed Islamic Scholar, both the quality of the translation and level of scholarship are not very high, and these works are of mere historical interest.

Later works, however, reflect a more mature and scholarly effort.

Muhammad Marmaduke William Pickthall, an English man of letters who embraced Islam-during official service in Hyderabad-Deccan-holds the distinction of bringing out a first-rate rendering of the Quran in English, "*The Meaning of the Glorious Quran*" (London, 1930)

It keeps scrupulously close to the original in elegant though now somewhat archaic, English. However, although it is one of the most widely used English translations, it provides scant explanatory notes and background information. This obviously restricts its usefulness for an uninitiated reader of the Quran.

Abdullah Yousuf Ali's *The Holy Quran: "Translation and Commentary"* (Lahore, 1934-37), perhaps the most popular translation, stands as another major achievement in this field. A civil servant by vocation, Yusuf Ali was not a scholar in the classic Muslim tradition. Small wonder, then, that some of his copious notes, particularly on hell and heaven, angels, jinn and polygamy etc. Are informed with the pseudo-rationalist spirit of his times, as for instance in the works of S. Ahmad and S. Amir Ali.

His overemphasis on all things spiritual also distorts the Quranic worldview. Against this is the fact that Yusuf Ali doubtless was one of the few Muslims who enjoyed an excellent command over the English language. It is fully reflected in his translation. Though his is more of a paraphrase than a literal translation, yet it attempts represent the sense of the original.

Abdul Majid Daryabadi "*The Holy Quran: with English Translation and Commentary*" (Lahore, 1941-57) is, however, fully cognate with the traditional viewpoint.

Like Pickthall's earlier attempt, it is a faithful rendering, supplemented with useful notes on historical, geographical and eschatological issues, particularly the illuminating discussions on comparative religion. Though the notes are not always very exhaustive, they help to expel the doubts in the mind of westernized readers. However, it too contains an inadequate background information about the Surahs and some of his notes.

"*The meaning of the Quran*" (Lahore, 1967), the English version of the Abul A'la Maududi's magnum opus, the Urdu *Tafhim al-Quran* is in an interpretive rendering of the Quran. Apart from setting verses/Surahs in the circumstances of its time, the author constantly relates, though exhaustive note, the universal message of the Quran to his own time and its specific problems. Since the translation of this work done by Muhammad Akbar is pitifully poor and uninspiring, the much-needed new English translation of the entire work is in progress under the auspices of the Islamic Foundation, Leicester.

"*The Message of the Quran*" by Muhammad Asad (Gibraltar, 1980) represents a notable addition to the body of English translations couched in chaste English. This work is nonetheless visited by deviation from the viewpoint of Muslims on many counts. Averse to take some Qur'anic statements literally, Asad-a convert from Judaism to Islam- denies the occurrence of such events as the throwing Abraham into the fire, Jesus speaking in the cradle, etc. He also regards Luqmān, Khizr and Dhu al-Qarnayn as 'mythical figures' and holds controversial views on the abrogation of verses. These blemishes apart, this highly readable translation contain useful, though sometimes unreliable background information about the Quranic Surahs and even provide exhaustive notes on various Quranic themes.

The fairly recent “*The Quranic: The First American Version*” (Vermont, 1985) by another native Muslim speaker of English, T.B. Irving, marks the appearance of the latest major English translation. Apart from the obnoxious title, the work is bereft of textual and explanatory notes.

Using his own arbitrary Judgment, Irving has assigned themes to each Quranic Ruku (section). Although modern and forceful English has been used, it is not altogether free of instances of mistranslation and loose expression. With American readers in mind, particularly the youth, Irving has employed many American English idioms, which, in places, are not befitting of the dignity of the Qur’anic diction and style.

In addition to the above, there are also a number of other English translations by Muslims, which, however, do not rank as significant as significant ventures in this field.

They may be listed as:

1. Al-Haj Hafiz Ghulam Sarwar, “*Translation of the Holy Quran*” (Singapore, 1920)
2. Ali Ahmad Khan Jullundhri, “*Translation of the Glorious Holy Quran with Commentary*” (Lahore, 1962)
3. Abdur Rahman Tariq and Zia Uddin Gilani, “*The Holy Quran Rendered into English*” (Lahore, 1966)
4. Syed Abdul Latif, “*Al-Quran Rendered into English*” (Hyderabad, 1969)
5. Hashim Amir Ali, “*The Message of the Quran Presented in Perspective*” (Tokyo, 1974)
6. Taqi al-Din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, “*Explanatory English Translation of the Holy Quran*” (Chicago, 1977)
7. Muhammad Ahmad Mufassir, “*The Koran: First Tafseer in English*” (London, 1979)
8. Mahmud Y. Zayid, “*The Holy Quran: An English Translation of the Meaning of the Quran*” (checked and revised in collaboration with a committee of Muslim scholars-Beirut, 1908)
9. S.M. Sarwar, “*The Holy Quran: Arabic Text and English Translation*” (Elmhurst, 1981)
10. Ahmad Ali, “*Al-Quran: A Contemporary Translation*” (Karachi, 1984)

(In view of the blasphemous statements contained in Rashid Khalifa “*The Quran: The Final Scripture*” [Authorized English version-Tucson, 1978], it has not been included in the translations by Muslims).

Even amongst the Muslims translations, some are representative of the strong feelings of their translators for their particular school.

For example, the Shi ah doctrines are fully reflected in accompanying commentaries of the following books: S.V. Mir Ahmad Ali, “*The Holy Quran with English Translation and Commentary, according to the version of the Holy Ablul Bail*” includes ‘special notes from Haj Mirza Mahdi Pooya Yazdi on the Philosophical aspects of the verses’ (Karachi, 1964); M.H. Shakir, “*Holy Quran*” (New York, 1982); Sayyid Muhammad Husayn al-Tabātabā’ī, “*al-Mīzān: An Exegesis of the Quran*,” translated from Persian into

English by Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi (Tehran, 1980). So far thirteen volumes of the work have been published.<sup>2</sup>

Illustrative of the Bareilvi Sunni sectarian stance is “*Holy Quran, the English Version of Ahmad Reza Khal Bareilvi Urdu translation*,” by Hanif Akhtar Fatmi (Lahore, n.d.).

As pointed out earlier, the Qadiyanis, though having abandoned Islam, have been actively engaged in translating the Quran. Apart from English, their translations are available in several European and African languages.

Muhammad Ali’s “*The Holy Quran: English Translation*” (Lahore, 1917) marks the beginning of this effort. This Qadiyani translator is guilty of misinterpreting several Quranic verses, particularly those related to the Promised Messiah, his miracles and the Quranic angelology.

Similar distortions mar another Qadiyani translation by Sher Ali, “*The Holy Quran: Arabic Text with English Translation*” (Rabwah, 1955). Published under the auspices of Mirza Bashiruddin Mahmud Ahmad, second successor of the “Promised Messiah” and head of the Ahmadis, this oft-reprinted work represents the official Qadiyani version of the Quran. Unapologizing, Sher Ali refers to Mirza Ghulam Ahmad as the “Promised Messiah” and mistranslated and misinterpreted a number of Quranic verses.

Zafarullah Khan’s “*The Quran: Arabic Text and English Translation*” (London, 1970) ranks as another notable Qadiyani venture in this field. Like other Qadiyanis, Zafarullah too twists the Quranic verses to opine that the door of prophet hood was not closed with the Prophet Muhammad (S). The obtrusion of similar obnoxious views upon the Quranic text is found in the following Qadiyani translations, too:

- i. Kamaluddin and Nazir Ahmad, “*A Running Commentary of the Holy Quran* (London, 1948)
- (ii) Salahuddin Peer, “*The Wonderful Koran*” (Lahore, 1960)
- (iii) Malik Ghulam Farid, “*The Holy Quran*” (Rabwah, 1962)
- (iv) Khadim Rahman Nuri, “*The Running Commentary of the Holy Quran with under-bracket comments*” (Shillong, 1964)
- (v) Ferozuddin Ruhi, “*The Quran*” (Karachi, 1965)

Apart from the Qadianis, Christian missionaries have been the most active non-Muslim translators of the Quran. As already noted, origins of this inglorious tradition may be traced back to the anti-Islamic motives of the missionaries.

Small wonder, then that these are far from being a just translation, replete as they are with frequent transpositions, omissions, unaccountable liberties and unpardonable faults.

A very crude specimen of the Orientalist-missionary approach to the Quran is found in Alexander Ross’ “*The Al-Koran of Mahomet translated out of Arabic into French, by the Sieur Du Ryer...And newly English, for the satisfaction for all that desire to look into the Turkish vanities*” (London, 1649).

In translating the Quran, the intention of Ross, a chaplain of King Charles I, was: “I thought good to bring it to their colours, that so viewing thine enemies in their full body, thou must the better prepared to encounter...his Al-Koran.”

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<sup>2</sup> Additional 7 volumes of *Al-Mizān* from Nos. 14 – 16, 25, and 28- 30 have been translated by Tawus Raja and volumes 26 & 27 by Salim Rossier. All these have published by Tawheed Institute in Australia Ltd (Oct 2020).

In the same rabidly anti-Islamic vein are the two appendices in the work entitled as (a) ‘A Needful Caveat or Admonition, for them who desire to know what use may be made of or if there be danger in reading the Al-Koran’ (pp 406-20) and ‘The Life and Death of Mahomet: the Prophet of the Turks and another of the Al-Koran’ (pp 395-405).

George Sale, a lawyer brought out his “*The Koran, commonly called The Al-Koran of Mohammed*” (London, 1734), which has been the most popular English translation. Sale’s exhaustive “Preliminary Discourse’, dealing mainly with Sira and the Quran, betrays his deep hostility towards Islam and his missionary intent in that he suggests the rules to be observed for ‘the conversions of Mohammedans’ (q.v.).

As to the translations itself, it abounds in numerous instances of omission, distortion and interpolations.

Dissatisfied with Sale’s work, J. M. Rodwell, Rector of St. Ethelburga, London, produced his translation entitled “*The Koran*” (London, 1861). Apart from hurling all sorts of wild and nasty allegations against the Prophet and the Quran in the Preface, Rodwell is guilty of having invented the so-called chronological Surah order of the Quran. Nor is his translation free from grave mistakes of translation and his own fanciful interpretations in the notes.

E.H. Palmer, a Cambridge scholar, was entrusted with the preparation of a new translation of the Quran for Max Muller’s Sacred Books of the East series. Accordingly, his translation, “*The Quran*,” appeared in London in 1880. As to the worth of Palmer’s translation, reference may be made to A.R. Nyko’s articles, “Notes on E.H. Palmer’s “*The Quran*,” published in the Journal of the American Oriental Society, 56 (1936) pp. 77-84 in which no less than 65 instances of omission and mistranslation in Palmer’s work have been pointed out.

Richard Bell, Reader of Arabic, University of Edinburgh, and an acknowledged Orientalist produced a translated of the Quran with special reference to its surah order, as is evident from the title of his work, *The Quran Translated with critical arrangement of the Surahs* (Edinburgh, 1937-39). In addition to describing the prophet as the author of the Quran, Bell also believes that the Quran in its present form was actually written by Muhammad himself. In rearranging the Surah order of the Quran, Bell, in fact makes a thorough mess of the traditional agreement and tries to point out alterations, substitutions and derangements in the text.

A.J. Arberry, a renowned Orientalist and Professor of Arabic at the Universities of London and Cambridge, has been so far, the latest non-Muslim translator of the Quran.

Arberry “*The Koran Interpreted*” (London, 1957) no doubt stands out above the other English renderings by non-Muslims in terms of both its approach and quality. Nonetheless it is not altogether free from mistakes of omission and mistranslation, such as in Al-I Imrān 111:43, al-Nisā 4:72, 147 and 157, al-Mā’idah 5:55 and 71.

N.J. Dawood is perhaps the only Jew to have translated the Quran into English. Available in the Penguin edition. Dawood’s translation, “*The Koran*” (London, 1956) is perhaps the most widely circulated non-Muslim English translation of the Quran. The author’s bias towards Islam is easily observable in the introduction. Apart from adopting

an unusual Surah order in his translation, Dawood is guilty also of having mistranslated the Quran in places.

No doubt, the peculiar circumstances of history which brought the Quran into contact with the English language have left their imprint on the non-Muslim as well as the Muslim bid to translate it. The results and achievements of their efforts leave a lot to be desired.

As we presented our comments about numerous English translations of the Quran available, yet few are very important. Ultimately we are going to introduce, a contemporary famous translation, if any of them, can claim a phrase-by-phrase translation, concurrent with the original text in Arabic, "*The Quran with Phrase by Phrase Translation*" By Ali Quli Qarai is neither prose nor poetry but a unique, mesmerising fusion of both. This edition from the Islamic College for Advanced Studies (ICAS), does just this. In addition to being of invaluable benefit to readers who understand English only, this method also permits those with even a rudimentary grasp of Arabic to draw nearer to the Quran's intimate style and lofty message, while being guided by English.

Major Features of his Translation:

A new phrasal approach has been followed in this translation through. Each phrase of the translation is placed opposite the corresponding Arabic phrase.

As the principal aim was to provide a translation assisting direct access to the Arabic Quran, the translator has tried, so far as possible to maintain a formal equivalence between the phrase and clauses of the source and the target text, but the translator has not hesitated to make adjustments when required by the need for intelligibility, clarity and naturalness of the expression, so far as permitted by the constraint imposed by the method of "minor-paraphrasing". These adjustments are of various kinds and it is not possible to describe all of all of them here. They involve making grammatical changes such as those of tense, aspect, voice, person, and number, substitutions of nouns by verbs and vice versa, making obligatory omissions and additions and making explicit what is implicit in the source text. At times they involve adjustments of idiom and syntactical changes. The reader should be aware about the presence of these changes when collating the Arabic text with the translation.

The treatment of the Quranic idioms is an important part of the policy followed in translation. Broadly speaking, they fall into three categories. There are some Arabic idioms which though unfamiliar to the English-speaking audience are not difficult to understand when translated literally. These have been rendered literally. Some idioms are unintelligible when translated literally. These have been paraphrased appropriately so they are understood. Some other yield to an idiomatic rendering in English.

This translation has been carried out according to what appeared to be the most probable among the interpretation mentioned by the commentators. Occasionally the translator has mentioned alternate interpretation in the footnotes when the appeared to be significant. Throughout the course of this translation extensive reference was made to various classical commentaries of the Quran, such as those of Tabari, Fakhr, Razi,

Zamakhshari and Suyuti among Sunni works and Tabataba'i's *Al-Mizān* and Bahrani's *Tafsir al-Burham* among shia works.

The translation is based on Hafs version of the reading of Asim, which is the most popular of the readings of the Holy Quran. Some of the alternate readings where they appeared significant to this translator have been noted in the footnotes with their translation.

Instances of eclipses in the Quran-which in the context of English means "omission of a word or phrase necessary for understanding"-often go beyond such a description and are not always so evident. These have been indicated in the foot notes.

Cross references have been mentioned under verses in some cases, but a relatively extensive index of subjects, names and terms has been placed in the appendix. Entries, which are not mentioned expressly in the text but are referred to implicitly, as mentioned in commentaries and exegetical traditions, are marked with an asterisk. As the works consulted for preparing the index had made use of copies of the Quran with different systems of numbering the verses, there might be a discrepancy of one or two between the number of a verse as given in the index and its corresponding number in the Arabic text.

Unlike, for instance, major Muslim languages such as Persian, Turkish and Urdu, which have thoroughly exhausted indigenous and literary resources to meet the scholarly and emotional demands of the task, the prolific resources of the universal medium of English have not been fully employed in the service of the Quran.

The Muslim Scripture is yet to find a dignified and faithful expression in the English language that matches the majesty and grandeur of the original. The currents of history, however, seem to be in favour of such a development. Even English is acquiring a native Muslim character and it is only a matter of time before we have a worthy translation of the Quran in that tongue.

Till then, the Muslim student should judiciously make use of Pickthall, A. Yusuf Ali, Asad, Irving, and Qarai. Even Arberry's stylistic qualities must not be ignored. Ultimately, of course, the Muslim should try to discover the original and not allow himself to be lost in a maze of translations and interpretations.