

THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO THE QUR'AN

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TRANSLATION

*Johanna Pink***(Un-)Translatability and Translation: Dogmatic Considerations**

When dealing with Muslim Qur'an translations, there appears to be a striking contradiction between the oft-heard claim that, according to Muslim dogma, the Qur'an must not be translated and the fact that it has been translated by Muslims for more than a thousand years. Part of that contradiction stems from the ambiguity of the concept of translation. Translation might be understood as a process whose end result replaces the original text and assumes, for the reader, all of its functions, thereby making it unnecessary to engage with the original. This particular concept of translation is indeed rejected by the vast majority of Muslims, including most Muslim scholars. If, on the other hand, translation is understood as a type of exegesis in a language other than Arabic, serving to explain the meaning of the Arabic Qur'an but not to rival its stylistic perfection or assume its recitational function, then this is a concept that, despite having been the subject of some debate, has been widely embraced by Muslims throughout their intellectual history and is ubiquitous today.¹

The need for translation arose as soon as speakers of languages other than Arabic started to embrace Islam. For these converts and for those who sought to instruct them in the requirements of their new religion, the question of whether and how to translate the Qur'an arose on several levels. There was little conflict over the widespread use of translations for homiletic and exegetical purposes; these translations were essentially seen as a type of commentary on the text. The Arabic word *tarjama*, today often understood as an equivalent of the English term "translation," denoted a permissible adaptation, explanation, or interpretation of the meaning of the text and was thus rather close to the concept of Qur'anic "exegesis" (*tafsīr*).²

In support of the permissibility of *tarjama*, the Andalusian Mālikī jurist Ibrāhīm ibn Mūsā al-Shāṭibī (d. 790/1388) expressed the opinion that it is perfectly legitimate to translate the Qur'an for common Muslims who do not understand Arabic. Such a translation, he held, can certainly not transfer the rhetoric of the Arabic Qur'an and the uniqueness of its style into another language. It can, however, explain its meaning. This, al-Shāṭibī claimed, reflects the consensus of Muslims.³ The fact that the Qur'an had, by this time, already been translated for centuries into various languages without much opposition from Muslim jurists strongly supports this claim.⁴

As al-Shāṭibī's argument shows, the debate around the translatability of the Qur'an was intimately tied to the notion of "the inimitability of the Qur'an" (*i'jāz al-Qur'an*). This doctrine, which had evolved by the third/ninth century, was based on the conviction that human beings were incapable

of producing any text on the stylistic level of the Qur'an.⁵ A translation could only hope to describe the contents, not to capture the full and precise meaning that was transported by the Qur'an's eloquent Arabic. For this reason, Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) cautioned against the use of translations in place of the Arabic original since a translator will invariably have to make choices that do not fully correspond to the Arabic source text and might thus obfuscate its meaning,⁶ in contrast to a commentary that has sufficient space to discuss the meaning at length. Moreover, attempts to imitate the Qur'an's language might even be considered sacrilegious since the Qur'an, in the so-called "challenge verses" (*āyāt al-tahaddī*), repeatedly challenges people to produce a text like it and implies they would not be able to do so even if they tried (e.g., Q 2:24, 17:88).

However, such dogmatic concerns were a rather theoretical matter. Premodern Qur'an translations often took the form of interlinear word-by-word translations where the Arabic text maintains its integrity and its individual words are explained between the lines in non-Arabic glosses that do not form a coherent text of their own.⁷ Other forms – for example, running intraverse or paraphrastic translations – emerged at an early stage as well, always retaining the Arabic text.⁸

The question of reciting the Qur'an in another language, especially during ritual prayer, was a separate issue altogether and engendered a major legal debate. It arose as soon as non-Arabs embraced Islam in massive numbers. The obligatory ritual prayer contains *al-Fātiḥa* ("the Opening" sura, Q 1) and other short segments of the Qur'an. Is it permissible to recite those in translation if a Muslim is unable to recite them in Arabic or is bound to mispronounce them? The majority of jurists responded negatively; they held that if the text cannot be spoken in Arabic, it should be replaced either by a silent pause or by the repeated recitation of the name of God. The notable exception was the Ḥanafī school, which was particularly strong in the Persianate East of the Islamic world. While Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767), the putative founder of that school, had explicitly allowed to anyone the use of Persian translations in recitation, later Ḥanafī jurists generally restricted this permission to persons who had not yet mastered Arabic, which they considered the ideal, or who had not even memorized the relevant fragments of the Qur'an to a sufficient degree, which they required of every Muslim who was at all capable of doing so.⁹

Translation and Exegesis in the Premodern Islamic Tradition

Qur'an translations played various roles in different social contexts. Besides the contested ritual use, non-Arabic versions of the Qur'an – or of Qur'anic material – were employed for homiletic, educational or scholarly purposes. They played an important role in conversions to Islam. Oral translation activity occurred early and presumably in the languages of all peoples that interacted with Muslims frequently. The first and initially most prominent language in which written translations emerged was Persian. This was connected to the rise of New Persian as a literary language and the emergence of a Persianate court culture in the fourth/tenth century.¹⁰

At least from the fifth/eleventh century, Turkic translations were produced. They often built upon the Persian tradition of vernacular exegesis and, like their Persian counterparts, were used in formal education, especially as Turkish court culture emerged. The strong influence of Persian is evident in the frequency of trilingual Qur'an manuscripts, that is, the Arabic Qur'an with Turkic and Persian glosses.¹¹

A different context was that of Iberia, where the Christian Reconquista forced Muslim religious practice into secrecy and led to a loss of Arabic among Mudejars (Iberian Muslims who maintained their religion after the conquest) and Moriscos (Muslims who converted to Christianity, which all Mudejars were forced to do between 1502 and 1526). Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, until the expulsion of the remaining Moriscos from Spain, the Qur'an was frequently translated into *Aljamiado* ('*ajamī*', "foreign"), that is, Romance languages written in Arabic script. Most of these

translations did not cover the complete Qur'an but contained selections of important segments for ritual purposes.¹²

From around the sixteenth century onward, there was a significant rise of vernacular literary activity and thus also of written Qur'anic exegesis in vernacular languages across the Muslim world – again often in Arabic scripts. For example, in the Malay world, written exegetical activity in Malay languages goes back to the sixteenth century, and the oldest surviving manuscript containing a translation of and commentary on a complete sura of the Qur'an dates from around 1600.¹³ The oldest evidence of a written translation or paraphrase of the Qur'an into an African language – Kanembu, spoken in what is today North Nigeria – also dates from the seventeenth century but is probably based on much older precursors.¹⁴ In India, the twelfth-/eighteenth-century reformer Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlāwī (d. 1176/1762) considered it essential to translate the Qur'an for educational purposes. His own translation was into Persian, the language of Indian Muslim courts and scholarship. His sons produced Urdu translations toward the end of the eighteenth century.¹⁵ Around the same time Sindhi translations emerged. Those had their roots not in the court culture but in mystical traditions; they were used by Sufi masters to instruct their disciples.¹⁶

In all these cases, the boundaries between translation and vernacular exegesis were blurred. The text of the Qur'an might be combined with interlinear word-by-word translations or running commentaries; alternatively, or in addition, it might have a paraphrase or more extensive commentary, either in the margins or below the Qur'anic text. The commentary might have been written by a native speaker of the language in question, or it might be a translation from Arabic, drawing on popular Qur'anic commentaries like the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*. Furthermore, it might be interspersed with vernacular poetry. There have also been translations or adaptations of extensive Qur'anic commentaries, a famous example being the Persian *Tafsīr-i Ṭabarī*, which, while not at all corresponding to al-Ṭabarī's extensive Arabic *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, draws on material associated with al-Ṭabarī in order to adapt the Qur'an to the needs of a Persian court, especially by connecting it with Persian history and mythology.¹⁷ In such cases, the complete text of the Qur'an was interpreted in the target language. However, partial translations, often in the form of prayer books, were far more common.

Given the multitude of forms in which a vernacular engagement with the Qur'an took place and the fluidity of the boundaries between them, it is doubtful whether it would make sense or even be possible to distinguish clearly between a translation and a work of exegesis. This reflects the fact that the concept of *tarjama* as an explanation and interpretation of the source text is rather close to the notion of *tafsīr*. Besides, there is no such thing as a "literal" translation. Every translation is a hermeneutical activity.¹⁸ Even the author of an interlinear word-by-word translation who does not seek to produce a separate text with a coherent meaning will have to make choices when deciding on the equivalent of Qur'anic terms. After all, it is well accepted among exegetes that the Qur'an is "polysemic" (*dhū wujūh*). The authors of interlinear translation-glosses responded to this problem in various ways: from translating a single word by a complex expression¹⁹ to picking one among several possible meanings seemingly at random, possibly from a glossary.²⁰ The Arabic word *amr*, for example, can mean "command" as well as "affair." One Persian-Turkic interlinear translation provides a Turkic term with one of the meanings and a Persian term with the other. The intention behind such glosses was clearly to provide not a version of the Qur'an in the vernacular but rather an aid to comprehension or a tool to help readers of the Qur'an learn Arabic.²¹ The only meaningful way to distinguish such activities from what modern readers would recognize as a "translation" is to define "translation" not as an activity but as a literary genre characterized by the attempt to produce a stand-alone text that can be read without any reference to or knowledge of the original. This genre of Qur'an translation only emerged in the late nineteenth century and became pervasive in the first third of the twentieth century.

Print Culture and Modern Statehood

The nineteenth century brought about two decisive changes: the rise of printing and the spread of formal, nonreligious schooling throughout the Muslim world. Both developments not only enormously increased the rate at which Qur'an translations were produced but also fundamentally changed their role. Premodern written translations and commentaries had predominantly been used for educational and scholarly purposes. The illiterate masses had no direct access to them; their contact with religious teachings was more commonly through Sufi rituals, sermons that built upon narrative material like the stories of the prophets, and catechisms.²² With the rise of modern state structures, whether they were imposed by a colonial authority or developed from within as was the case in the Ottoman Empire and Egypt, a new educated class emerged. Its members had not usually received religious training, had rarely memorized the Qur'an, and were literate in their native languages but not in Arabic. The printing press offered the means to provide this new educated class with direct access to religious sources. All these developments seriously challenged the prevailing system of Islamic learning in which oral and personal modes of transmission had always played a central role.²³ This allowed for new forms and styles of writing, often produced by authors outside the ranks of religious scholarship.

The Arabic Qur'an itself was first printed by Muslims in the East of the Islamic World – in Russia, India, and Persia – in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Resistance in the Ottoman Empire was higher. The first Istanbul Qur'an edition was only published in 1874.²⁴ The nineteenth century also saw the burgeoning of printed Qur'an translations that more and more commonly took the form of a coherent text, usually printed alongside the Arabic text. Numerous translations into various South Asian languages were printed beginning in the 1820s. Printed Turkish and Persian translations followed around the middle of the nineteenth century. The first effort to translate the complete Qur'an into Chinese, not in the form of a gloss or interlinear translation but as a stand-alone text, was undertaken in the second half of the nineteenth century.²⁵ By the 1920s, printed translations of the Qur'an into local languages existed all over the Muslim world, from West Africa to South East Asia.²⁶

The traditions of Islamic learning also came under attack from reformist scholars who called for a return to the fundamentals: the Qur'an, the Sunna, and the practice of the first generations of Muslims. In these reformist discourses, the Qur'an gained a new centrality; it was to be stripped of exegetical “innovations” (*bida'*), additions, and distortions. For Walī Allāh al-Dihlāwī, teaching the Arabic Qur'an directly, not through commentaries, was crucial in order to reform the Muslim community. Nonetheless, he obviously had no qualms about making the Qur'an accessible in Persian.

Many intellectuals in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at least in parts of the Islamic world, had more scruples about the concept of translating the Qur'an. In the Ottoman Empire especially, writers preferred to call their works “commentaries” (*tefsir*), “summaries” (*meal*), or “explanations” (*beyan*), making a point of avoiding the term *tercüme* (Turkish for *tarjama*).²⁷ In other regions, like South and Southeast Asia, the term *tarjama* in its local variants was used freely, though with the understanding that it denoted a paraphrase of the meanings, not an independent work meant to replace the original.²⁸

In the nineteenth century, through the experience of colonialism and Christian missionary activities, Muslims also became increasingly aware of and exposed to Qur'an translations produced by non-Muslims. These were either imported or written at the request of colonial administrators, diplomats, and missionaries. They were frequently used to provide arguments for anti-Islamic polemics. Especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, the first Qur'an translations to be produced in local languages like Yoruba and Swahili were written by Christian missionaries, sometimes on the basis of English translations. This occasionally elicited direct reactions in the form of a Muslim “counter-translation.”²⁹

The debates on Qur'an translation were relevant not only to discourses of religious reform but also to processes of nation-state building. Questions of national identity were often intimately connected to the promotion of a national language. This became particularly apparent in Turkey where, in the final stages of the Ottoman Empire, Turkish nationalists dreamed of a Turkish Qur'an. After the Turkish Republic was founded, the government of Kemal Atatürk (d. 1938) commissioned an official Turkish Qur'an translation, although the label "Turkish Qur'an" was rejected by the scholars working on the project, and the end result was an Arabic Qur'an with a Turkish commentary rather than a Turkish text standing on its own. The issue was tied in with debates around the use of Turkish in ritual prayer and received much attention across the Islamic world.³⁰

Later, and much more successfully, the newly independent Indonesian nation state followed suit with a government translation that was first published in the 1960s and that has seen several editions. Major political transformations and changes in the religious field resulted in changes in the translation's rhetoric. Thus, the revolutionary language of the introduction that revolved around the first president Sukarno's (d. 1970) idea of the "fire of Islam" (*api Islam*) was replaced with one of citizenship; the translation became more literal in many instances, but it also took the interests of the state into account more clearly. For example, in its translation of *wa-ka-dhālika ja' alnā fi kulli qaryatin akābira mujrimihā li-yankurū fihā* ("And even so We appointed in every city great ones among its sinners, to devise there," Q 6:123), the first edition seemed to imply that God had appointed "in every country" (*negeri*) authorities or "high-ranking functionaries" (*pembesar-pembesar*) who are "evil" or "criminal" (*yang jahat*). The subsequent editions took care to avoid the political implications this translation might have and replaced it with the far more innocuous statement that God had appointed "very great criminals" (*penjahat-penjahat yang terbesar*).³¹

The government translation is the most widespread printed bilingual version of the Qur'an in Indonesia, but it also makes the official religious discourse vulnerable to attacks. In 2011, Muhammad Thalib, head of the Islamist organization *Majelis Mujahedin Indonesia*, published an extensive criticism of the government translation along with a counter-translation. He accused the government of distorting the meaning of the Qur'an by neglecting to provide indispensable exegetical explanations. Such explanations should, according to Thalib, highlight the negative role of the Jews as clarified in exegetical hadiths and emphasize the need to apply the sharia in all places and times. They should also spell out restrictions on violence and warfare that are not explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an. Since the government translation does not make extensive reference to such restriction, Thalib accuses it of fostering terrorism, thereby seeking to delegitimize the official religious discourse.³²

Politics and Polemics: Twentieth-Century Debates

With the spread of Christian missionary translations and the attempts of Turkish nationalists to create a distinctive Turkish Islam, the stage was set for a renewed debate around the permissibility of translating the Qur'an. This debate was framed within the political and ideological conflicts of the first third of the twentieth century. A third factor also fueled the debate: the translation activities of the Ahmadiyya movement, which had been founded by Mīrzā Ghulām Aḥmad (d. 1908) in India. In 1914, his followers split into two branches over the question of whether Mīrzā Ghulām Aḥmad was a messiah or merely a reformer. Both branches were highly active in spreading their teachings in the Muslim world, Europe, and the United States, and Qur'an translations played a pivotal role in their proselytizing strategies, which often followed Christian models. However, their ideas, especially those of the messianic Qādyānī branch, were highly controversial among Muslims and were rejected as heretical by most. Nonetheless, the Ahmadiyya movement was often among the first to publish a Qur'an translation in a particular language. The English translation by Muḥammad 'Alī³³ (d. 1951)

especially, with its layout in which English and Arabic were printed in side-by-side columns, served as a model for many later translators.

Several factors conspired to make many Muslim intellectuals feel that the authority and unifying force of the Qur'an itself were under threat: colonialism, the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924, the emergence of nation-states, the efforts of Christian missionaries to prove the superiority of the Bible over the Qur'an, and the proliferation of the allegedly heterodox Ahmadiyya Qur'an translations. Therefore, during the first third of the twentieth century, a number of fatwas, articles, and statements were published vehemently attacking the ubiquitous attempts to translate the Qur'an, while other publications called just as strongly for the spreading of the true Qur'anic message through sound translations. Cairo was the main locus of this debate.

Among the opponents of Qur'an translations were the influential reformer Muḥammad Rashīd Riā (d. 1935), editor of the journal *al-Manār*, the two-time *Shaykh al-Islām* of the Ottoman Empire Muṣṭafā Ṣabrī (d. 1954), and the high-ranking Azhar scholar Muḥammad Shākīr (d. 1939). They feared that translating the Qur'an into a multitude of languages would bring about "divisions" (*fitna*) and would undermine the restoration of unity under a caliphate that Rashīd Riḍā, in particular, envisaged as an Arab caliphate. Moreover, they saw little value in granting uneducated Muslims access to a vernacularized version of their holy scripture and instead recommended the spread of Arabic education as a means of achieving Muslim unity. Muslims who were unable to understand the Qur'an should ask religious scholars for its meaning. Thus the opposition to Qur'an translations also served to bolster the authority of traditional religious "scholars" (*ulamā*). The opponents of Qur'an translations furthermore felt that such works promoted secular nationalism, fell in line with a tradition of Christian anti-Muslim polemics, and made the Qur'an too easily accessible to non-Muslims who might deride it. Rashīd Riḍā saw Qur'an translations as part of a colonialist strategy to misguide and divide Muslims. Any translation would invariably distort the Qur'an's message and reduce the range of possible meanings to a single one, chosen by fallible humans who expect Muslims to follow their opinions instead of God's word. Finally, the extensive publication efforts of the Ahmadiyya, and especially the attempt of the Lahore branch to import Muḥammad 'Alī's English Qur'an translation into Egypt, aroused fears of the spread of heterodox ideas. Thus the Muḥammad 'Alī translation was publicly burned in the courtyard of the Azhar mosque in Cairo in 1925.³⁴

On the other hand, eminent scholars such as Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī (d. 1945), *Shaykh al-Azhar* from 1928 to 1929 and again from 1935 to 1945, Maḥmūd Shaltūt (d. 1963), *Shaykh al-Azhar* from 1958 till his death, and Farīd Wajīdī (d. 1954) strongly supported the idea of Qur'an translations. In their opinion, sound Qur'an translations were desperately needed in order to counteract the harmful influence of Christian missionaries and to propagate Islam. For the latter purpose, English translations were seen as particularly desirable. Theologically, al-Marāghī drew upon the ideas of al-Shāṭibī in order to defend the idea of translation. He went so far as to suggest that a translation could serve as a basis for legal rulings. In the 1930s, even Rashīd Riḍā gave up his opposition to Qur'an translations, especially as their supporters stressed that these were not meant to replace the Arabic Qur'an but merely to explain its meanings.³⁵

In 1938, the translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (d. 1953) was the first English Qur'an translation to be printed in Egypt.³⁶ The opposition to translating had by then all but lost its case. The only remaining concession to their arguments is a terminological one, since many Muslim Qur'an translators continue to avoid the label "translation" and prefer designations that point to the exegetical nature of their works, such as "interpretation of the meanings of the Qur'an."

The general loss of reservations about Qur'an translations is exemplified by the fact that an institution in Saudi Arabia – a state that is generally opposed to the concept of "illicit innovations" in religious matters – is today the most important global actor in the production and distribution of Qur'an translations. This is in line with the country's missionary policies. The King Fahd Complex

for the Printing of the Holy Qur'an in Medina was founded by King Fahd in 1982. Since then, it has printed translations into more than 50 languages. Some of these were new editions of existing works, while others have been commissioned or produced by the staff of the Complex. The target languages include many that do not have a strong literary tradition and had therefore previously not had their own version of the Qur'an, such as Tamazight, Chichewa, or the Roma languages. The King Fahd Complex justifies its activity with a fatwa that declares it permissible for Muslims to recite and memorize the Qur'an in other languages if they cannot do so in Arabic. This is a remarkably liberal position, especially given the explicit reference to recitation.³⁷

Translators' Choices

While there are various studies discussing the merits and drawbacks of different translations or methods of translation, Wilson notes that "the interesting choices made by translators are often lost amid compulsive evaluations of accuracy, which is an elusive concept."³⁸

Among the first basic choices a translator has to make is the question whether – or rather, how far – to aim for a "literal" representation of the text.³⁹ One example might illustrate some of the problems inherent in this concept. Sura 100 speaks of humanity's ingratitude toward God (Q 100:6) and continues: *innahū li-ḥubbi l-khayri la-shadīdun* (Q 100:8). Laleh Bakhtiar renders this in her translation as "And he is more severe in the cherishing of good."⁴⁰ She follows the meaning of the Arabic words so closely that the result is hardly comprehensible or meaningful, coming close to the style of premodern interlinear translations. One alternative is to move away from word-by-word translation and present the meaning upon which most exegetes agree. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, for example, writes: "And violent is he in his love of wealth."⁴¹

Such choices are based on an exegetical framework that might reflect the translator's own understanding or a broader exegetical trend. More fundamentally, it touches upon the question whether translation is understood as a process of establishing coherence, either within the Qur'anic text or between the text and ideas upon which the community of believers – or specific communities of believers – agree.

For example, a centuries-long theological debate addressed the nature of the seemingly anthropomorphic attributes of God that are repeatedly mentioned in the Qur'an: God's hand, God's face, God's throne, and so forth. Translators have to decide whether to simply follow the Qur'anic wording in these cases or to take a position in favor of a metaphorical meaning.⁴² Thus, while most authors of English Qur'an translations choose to render the Arabic word *kursī* in the "Throne Verse" (Q 2:255) literally as God's "seat" or "throne," Muhammad Asad speaks of God's "eternal power."⁴³ The *Saheeh International Translation*, on the other hand, pursues a distinct brand of literalness by opting for the translation "His Kursi,"⁴⁴ which expresses the view that many Qur'anic terms are so specific to Islam that they cannot properly be reproduced in a language other than Arabic.⁴⁵

Another question in this context is whether to use Qur'anic terms in the sense in which they have usually been understood by later Muslims or in the sense that they might originally have had. This concerns very fundamental terms like *zakāt*, a word that exists as a loan word in most languages predominantly spoken by Muslims and that is taken to denote the "alms tax," one of the "pillars of Islam." In the Qur'an, however, it is repeatedly used in the sense of righteousness or of general almsgiving. Translating it as "zakat" might thus distort the original meaning.⁴⁶ Similarly, the word *muslim* occurs in the Qur'an in the general sense of a person who submits to God, a category that is not necessarily limited to the followers of the message proclaimed by Muhammad. If translated as "Muslim," however, it will be understood precisely in that restricted sense.⁴⁷

Furthermore, translators, especially Muslim translators, have to deal with the key hermeneutical question of whether to incorporate exegetical hadith material that is generally considered authentic. Some translators have caused controversy by basing their translations of Q 1:7 on a hadith that is

included in many Qur'an commentaries and that Muslim scholars have generally taken to be sound. The verse talks of those who have "earned [God's] wrath on themselves" (*al-maghḍūb 'alayhim*) and "those who go astray" (*al-ḍāllīn*), and the hadith clarifies that this means the Jews and Christians.⁴⁸ Several versions of translations distributed by the King Fahd Complex incorporated this interpretation into their rendition of the sura but later omitted it due to fierce protests. Likewise, Thalib's previously mentioned Islamist Indonesian translation presented it as part of the running text in order to express opposition to the official government discourse on religious pluralism.⁴⁹

As the latter case illustrates, local power dynamics often play an important role in the process of writing and publishing Qur'an translations. They might find their expression in such contentious topics as the status of non-Muslims and women⁵⁰ or in seemingly less controversial and therefore less frequently studied questions of ritual or belief.⁵¹ These dynamics have to be taken into account in order to understand the choices Qur'an translators make.

Types, Purposes, and Target Languages of Translations

For any more systematic understanding of Qur'an translations, it is inadvisable to limit the enquiry to the category of translations that have primarily been discussed so far, that is, works produced by Muslims for a Muslim audience. In fact, Qur'an translations that have been written outside the Islamic world, especially in Western languages, from Latin to English, have hitherto attracted far more scholarly attention and have received much broader coverage in survey articles than those into languages predominantly spoken by Muslims.⁵² The distinction between "Muslim" and "non-Muslim" translations, or those produced inside and outside of the Islamic world, has often been implicitly taken for granted in scholarship. The pitfalls of such an approach become immediately apparent when taking the universal role of English into account. English translations have often served as base translations for translations into other vernaculars and have been the subject of heated debates in Muslim-majority countries like Egypt.⁵³

In the following, an alternative categorization according to intention and target group will be proposed. These categories should, like all categorizations, be understood as a framework for analysis rather than as being exclusive and as explaining everything; indeed, the overlap between them may be significant in certain instances.⁵⁴ The religious orientation of the author and the religious environment in which the translation is published play a role in the definition of the categories, but the most important factors are their purpose and the intended audience. These directly influence the style and form of the translations and the exegetical choices made by the translator.

A first major category is that of *educational* Qur'an translations. They are directed toward Muslims who do not know sufficient Arabic to understand the Qur'an and want to learn about its meaning. Since the target audience does not have advanced religious education, the authors of such translations are interested in providing their readers with a "correct" understanding of the text, which is, of course, dependent on the author's perspective. This might be achieved by clarifying the "real meaning" of Qur'anic expressions in parentheses or notes. Often the boundaries between these translations and paraphrastic commentaries are porous. Some of them contain aids for the recitation of the Arabic Qur'an – for example, transliterations – thus underlining Arabic's privileged position.

A second category – one that has played an important role historically – has its roots in inter-religious *polemics*. The desire to refute Islam was what motivated translations into Greek and possibly into Syriac (though the latter of these have not been preserved) and later a number of translations into Latin as well as European vernaculars. The polemical tradition continued at least into the eighteenth century. It later merged with certain Orientalist discourses, for example, the attempt to prove that the Qur'an had extensively borrowed from Judaism.⁵⁵ In the twentieth century, it lived on in the works of Christian missionaries who translated the Qur'an in order to be better able to preach the Bible to Muslims.⁵⁶

A third category, the *scholarly* Qur'an translation, goes back to the seventeenth century and is connected to the emergence of Oriental Studies in Europe and later in the United States, Japan, and other countries. It is based on philological scholarship, often takes into account the Muslim exegetical tradition, and frequently aims at reconstructing the Qur'anic meaning as it must have been understood by its first listeners. These translations are meant to be suitable for use in the academy, although some translators might also try to make them appealing for a general public that has an interest in Islam.⁵⁷

Satisfying this interest is, indeed, the main aim of translations belonging to the fourth category. They want to *inform* a broader public of the content of the Qur'an. Sometimes such translations, regardless of whether they have been written by Muslims or non-Muslims, are heavily influenced by Muslim exegetical traditions. Those that have been written by Muslims sometimes lean toward apologetics and might also have a missionary impetus.

A small subgroup of the translations belonging to this category make an effort not only to convey the meaning but also to represent the *style* of the Qur'an to an audience incapable of appreciating it in Arabic. Usually this only concerns parts of the Qur'an, most commonly the early Meccan suras, constituting an interesting analogy to the prevalence of commentaries on the last part of the Qur'an, the *juz' 'ammā*, in the Muslim world. For example, works by Michael Sells in English and Angelika Neuwirth in German propose to approach the Qur'an through the early Meccan suras. Their translations of these suras aim at capturing the intensity and poetry of the original.⁵⁸ Several nineteenth-century German-speaking Orientalists – Friedrich Rückert (d. 1866), Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (d. 1856), and Martin Klamroth (d. 1890) – even went so far as to present rhyming translations in German of Meccan suras in which they aimed to convey an impression of the “monorhyme prose” (*saj'*) that is characteristic of most of the Qur'anic text.⁵⁹ More recently, Shawkat Toorawa made a similar attempt to translate several Meccan suras into English while retaining the stylistic feature of *saj'*.⁶⁰

Rhyming translations have, however, been written not only to acquaint a non-Muslim audience with the literary and emotional impression that the Arabic Qur'an leaves on its listeners, but they also have a place in the history of Muslim Qur'an translations as part of a rather unique category that could be termed *devotional*. These translations are highly poetic and have often been written by Sufis or members of movements that are associated with Sufism.⁶¹ In recent times, such projects run the risk of being considered a heretical attempt at imitating God's inimitable style.⁶²

The Translator's Lens and the Question of Origins

Most Qur'an translations written by Muslims and a considerable number of those written by non-Muslims are largely based on the perspective of Muslim exegetical traditions, taking into account their repertoire of exegetical hadiths, occasions of revelation, and semantic explanations pertaining to the Qur'anic text. In the words of one reviewer, “[T]he Qur'an can only be truly understood if it is read in conjunction with the other Islamic literature like *tafsirs* and hadith which elucidate its meanings. These texts all refer and interact with each other to form a complex tapestry of belief.”⁶³

A different approach was pursued by another category of translations, mainly written by Orientalists. In their authors' opinions, Muslim exegetical traditions are not necessarily congruent with what the Qur'an originally wanted to say. The recovery of this original meaning is the main aim of such translations. The German Orientalist Rudi Paret, representing a fairly typical example of this endeavor, stated that a historical interpretation of the Qur'an means “to read out of every sentence the meaning that Muḥammad originally wanted to convey in a situation that was shaped by distinct historical circumstances and a specific milieu.”⁶⁴ In order to retrieve this meaning, Paret considers it advisable to follow the Qur'anic text itself, as opposed to later Muslim exegesis, as closely as possible, for example, by identifying parallel usages of words and expressions within the text. His reading of

the text is based on the assumption that the Qur'an was an Arabic text from the outset and thus has to be understood against the backdrop of pre-Islamic Arabic literature. As for the historical circumstances of its origins, Paret sees no reason to doubt the essentials of the information about Muḥammad's life in first/seventh century Mecca and Medina that is provided by Muslim historians.⁶⁵ In this sense, translations belonging to this category are often to a large extent based on the same sources as those that prefer reading the Qur'an through the Muslim exegetical tradition.

Both approaches have been heavily criticized in recent decades for uncritically reproducing Muslim narratives and not taking into account possible non-Arabic and/or non-Muslim influences on the Qur'an or even sources for the Qur'anic text. This criticism is tied in with larger debates about revisionist approaches to early Islamic history that frequently find their expression in controversies about the translation of specific terms in the Qur'an. In these controversies, the role of biblical and more generally of Jewish and Christian sources in reading the Qur'an is a central point of contention.

Some extreme revisionist theories argue that the Qur'an is originally a Christian text and that its terminology needs to be translated accordingly.⁶⁶ In the beginning of the 2000s, the increasing popularity of revisionist approaches to the early history of Islam and the Qur'an, which had started to emerge in the 1970s, was reflected in the broad reception of Christoph Luxenberg's proposal to read the Qur'an as a Syro-Aramaic Christian liturgical text, especially of his translation of the Qur'anic term *ḥūr 'īn*, normally understood to denote the "virgins [of Paradise]," as "white grapes of crystal clarity" (e.g., Q 56:22). In a later text, Luxenberg claimed that the Qur'anic *Laylat al-Qadr* ("the Night of Destiny") is in reality a reference to Christmas. Such theories have been subject to massive scholarly criticism, pointing out philological and methodological flaws and the thin evidence that supports their proponents' far-reaching conclusions.⁶⁷ It has to be mentioned that none of the revisionists has so far produced a translation of the Qur'an or of larger coherent segments of the Qur'an. Luxenberg, for example, focuses on one Qur'anic passage in which the *ḥūr 'īn* are mentioned and leaves aside other passages in which the description clearly pertains to women and not to fruit. This selective approach to the text is one of the main points of criticism. At the same time, some critics acknowledge the fresh perspectives it opens up to think about the Qur'an as *interacting* with Jewish, Christian, Persian, and Hellenistic texts rather than postulating that it is originally a Christian text.⁶⁸ This way of historically situating the Qur'an is becoming increasingly popular in scholarship.⁶⁹

Thus Gabriel Said Reynolds, besides many others, argues that the Qur'an counts on its audience's knowledge of the Bible and cannot be understood without taking this biblical backdrop into account. For example, when Qur'an 4:155 charges the Jews with saying that their hearts are *ghufl*, this is, according to Reynolds, clearly a reference to the Biblical metaphor of the "uncircumcised heart" that goes back to Jeremiah and that Luke and Paul in the New Testament direct against the Jews.⁷⁰ The proposal to translate the verse in this way is not exactly new; Paret had already translated *ghufl* as "uncircumcised," as did the British Orientalist Arthur John Arberry (d. 1969). Muslim translators, on the other hand, largely ignore the biblical allusion and render the expression in other ways, for example, "our hearts are hardened," "covered up," "already full of knowledge," or "the wrappings (which preserve God's word)."⁷¹ Reynolds' argument is thus mainly directed against Muslim translators and exegetes whose refusal to take the Bible into account,⁷² in his opinion, leads to serious misrepresentations. Likewise, Angelika Neuwirth, in her translation of the early Meccan suras, firmly argues against teleological interpretations that look at the Qur'anic text from the perspective of Islam's later expansion. Rather, she proposes to read it as a literary text whose proclamation was an open-ended process and whose contents, as well as its literary form, speak of an interaction with its Jewish and Christian religious environment, most notably in its allusions to the Psalms. Neuwirth does not deny the simultaneous influence of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, however, which she likewise takes into account as part of the environment in which the Qur'an originated.⁷³

The lens through which a Qur'an translator reads the text is thus invariably tied to his or her position on the origins of the Qur'an and its first audience. Whether the Qur'an is conceived of as

an Arabic Qur'an rooted in the literature of pre-Islamic Arabia, as a Muslim Qur'an that already precludes the results of later exegetical, theological, and juridical debates, as a Jewish-Christian Qur'an, or as a mixture of all three, will have a profound impact on a translator's choices.

Notes

- 1 Travis Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur'an: Translation and the Rise of Persian Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2–6; M. Brett Wilson, *Translating the Qur'an in an Age of Nationalism: Print Culture and Modern Islam in Turkey* (London: Oxford University Press, in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2014), 5.
- 2 Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur'an*, 27.
- 3 Ibid., 126f.
- 4 Ibid., 53.
- 5 Richard C. Martin. "Inimitability," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. 2, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 526–536.
- 6 Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur'an*, 428–432.
- 7 Ibid., 245; Hartmut Bobzin, "Translations of the Qur'ān," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. 5, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 340–358, here: 341.
- 8 Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur'an*, 16f.
- 9 Rudi Paret and J.D. Pearson. "Qur'ān: Translation of the Qur'ān," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 5, 2nd ed., ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 429–432; for an extensive discussion, see Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur'an*, 53–145.
- 10 For a recent extensive and authoritative study of early Persian Qur'an translations and commentaries, see Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur'an*.
- 11 Glyn M. Meredith-Owens, "Notes on an Old Ottoman Translation of the Qur'an," *Oriens* 10 (1957): 258–276; Eleazar Birnbaum, "On Some Turkish Interlinear Translations of the Koran," *Journal of Turkish Studies* 14 (1990): 113–138; A. Zeki Validi Togan, "The Earliest Translation of the Qur'an into Turkish," *İslâm Tetkikleri Enstitüsü Dergisi: Review of the Institute of Islamic Studies* 4 (1964): 1–19; A.J.E. Bodrogligeti, "Ghosts, Copulating Friends, and Pedestrian Locusts in Some Reviews of Eckmann's 'Middle Turkic Glosses,'" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104, no. 3 (1984): 455.
- 12 Consuelo López-Morillas, "Lost and Found? Yça of Segovia and the Qur'an Among the Mudejars and Moriscos," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 10 (1999): 277–292; Consuelo López-Morillas, *El Corán de Toledo: Edición y estudio del manuscrito 235 de la Biblioteca de Castilla-La Mancha* (Gijón: Ed. Trea, 2011); Akasoy, "Review of: El Corán de Toledo, by Consuelo López-Morillas."
- 13 Peter G. Riddell, "Camb. MS Or. li.6.45: The Oldest Surviving Qur'anic Commentary from Southeast Asia," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 16, no. 1 (2014): 120–139.
- 14 Andrea Brigaglia, "Tafsīr and the Intellectual History of Islam in West Africa: The Nigerian Case," in *Tafsīr and Islamic Intellectual History: Exploring the Boundaries of a Genre*, ed. Andreas Görke and Johanna Pink (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 379–415.
- 15 Francis Robinson, "Perso-Islamic Culture in India from the Seventeenth to the Early Twentieth Century," in *Turko-Persia in Historical Perspective*, ed. Robert L. Canfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 119.
- 16 Annemarie Schimmel, "Translations and Commentaries of the Qur'an in Sindhi Languages," *Oriens* 16 (1963): 224–243.
- 17 Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur'an*, 302–330.
- 18 George Steiner, *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 312–319.
- 19 Bodrogligeti, "Ghosts, Copulating Friends, and Pedestrian Locusts," 455.
- 20 Akasoy, "Review of: El Corán de Toledo, by Consuelo López-Morillas," 127.
- 21 Bodrogligeti, "Ghosts, Copulating Friends, and Pedestrian Locusts," 456.
- 22 Wilson, *Translating the Qur'an in an Age of Nationalism*, 85f.
- 23 Francis Robinson, "Technology and Religious Change: Islam and the Impact of Print," *Modern Asian Studies* 27, no. 1 (1993): 229–251.
- 24 Wilson, *Translating the Qur'an in an Age of Nationalism*, 42–68.
- 25 Kristian Petersen, *Interpreting Islam in China. Pilgrimage, Scripture, & Language in the Han Kitab* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 126–127, 143.
- 26 Bobzin, "Translations of the Qur'an," 342–344.
- 27 Wilson, *Translating the Qur'an in an Age of Nationalism*, 136.

- 28 Cf., for example, Junus, *Tarjamah*, one of the earliest translations of the Qur'an into Bahasa Indonesia.
- 29 Bobzin, "Translations of the Qur'an," 342; Solihu, "The Earliest Yoruba Translation of the Qur'an"; Loimeier, "Translating the Qur'an in Sub-Saharan Africa: Dynamics and Disputes."
- 30 Wilson, *Translating the Qur'an in an Age of Nationalism*, 221–247.
- 31 Nur Ichwan, "Negara, Kitab Suci dan Politik"; see also Pink, *Summitischer Tafsiir*, 136.
- 32 Thalib, *Koreksi tarjamah*; Ikhwan, "Fi taḥaddī al-dawla."
- 33 Ali, *The Holy Qur-ān*.
- 34 Wilson, *Translating the Qur'an in an Age of Nationalism*, 119–123, 190–196, 213–215.
- 35 Ibid., 210–213, 215f.
- 36 Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*.
- 37 Ibid., 255–258.
- 38 Wilson, *Translating the Qur'an in an Age of Nationalism*, 5.
- 39 While a truly "literal" representation of a text is, of course, impossible and the accuracy of any given translation always debatable, a translator might nonetheless aim for a translation that follows the source text as closely as possible.
- 40 Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sublime Quran* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2011).
- 41 Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Translation and Commentary*, 1775.
- 42 Pink, "'Literal Meaning' or 'Correct 'aqīda'?"
- 43 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 98f.
- 44 Saheeh International, *The Qur'an – Saheeh International Translation*. The translation is available for download on <https://archive.org/details/Quran-SaheehInternationalTranslationEnglish>. More information on Saheeh International is available on www.saheehinternational.com (accessed April 12, 2015).
- 45 An equivalent to the Saheeh International Translation would be Amir Zaidan's German Qur'an translation (2000) that he himself labels as "*Tafsiir*."
- 46 Zysow, "Zakāt."
- 47 Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran. Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung*, 52–58.
- 48 For an example and further references, see Shawkānī, *Faḥ al-bayān*, 1:93–95.
- 49 Wild, "Muslim Translators and Translations of the Qur'an into English"; Ikhwan, "Fi taḥaddī al-dawla"; Pink, "'Literal Meaning' or 'Correct 'aqīda'?"
- 50 For example, Laleh Bakhtiar's entire translation project was inspired by a desire to reinterpret Q 4:34, a verse that according to conventional readings allows husbands to "beat" (*daraba*) their wives. Cf. www.sublimequran.org (accessed April 12, 2015).
- 51 For the social embeddedness of Qur'an translations, see especially van de Bruinhorst, "I Didn't Want to Write This." See also Wilson, "Ritual and Rhyme"; Pink, "'Literal Meaning' or 'Correct 'aqīda'?"
- 52 Cf. Paret and Pearson, "Qur'ān: Translation of the Qur'ān"; Bobzin, "Translations of the Qur'an."
- 53 Pink, "'Literal Meaning' or 'Correct 'aqīda'?"; Wilson, *Translating the Qur'an in an Age of Nationalism*, 190–208.
- 54 The categories employed here owe much to a study by Andrew Rippin, "Contemporary Translation."
- 55 See Bobzin, "Translations of the Qur'an," 344–350, for additional references on the history of Christian Qur'an translations.
- 56 See, for example, Solihu, "The Earliest Yoruba Translation of the Qur'an."
- 57 Compare, for example, the recent scholarly German Qur'an translation by Hartmut Bobzin (2010), which clearly aims at readability and a certain aesthetic appeal, with the translation by Rudi Paret (1962), which has been the academic standard in German-speaking countries for decades but whose tight layout and cumbersome, technical style tend to make it unattractive to a broader public. Cf. Paret, *Der Koran*; Bobzin, *Der Koran*.
- 58 Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an*; Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, vol. I.
- 59 Rückert, *Der Koran*; von Hammer-Purgstall, "Die letzten vierzig Suren des Korans"; Klamroth, *Die fünfzig ältesten Suren des Korans*.
- 60 Shawkat Toorawa, "'The Inimitable Rose,'" being Qur'anic *saj'* from Surat al-Nas (Q 93–114) in English Rhyming Prose," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 8, no. 2 (2006): 143–153; idem, "Toward an English Rhymed Prose Translation," *Al-'Arabiyya* 38/39 (2005–2006): 129–135.
- 61 Schimmel, "Translations and Commentaries of the Qur'an in Sindhi Languages"; Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur'an*, 268–295; Wilson, "Ritual and Rhyme."
- 62 Yusuf Rahman, "The Controversy Around H.B. Jassin: A Study of His *al-Qurān al-Karīm Bacaan Mulia* and *al-Qur'an Al-Karim Berjawah Puisia*," in *Approaches to the Qur'an in Contemporary Indonesia*, ed. Abdullah Saeed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 85–105.
- 63 David Giovacchini, Review of *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation*, by Ahmed Ali. *MELA Notes* 80 (2007): 71.

- 64 Paret, *Der Koran*, 5 (quotation translated from German).
- 65 *Ibid.*, 5–9.
- 66 See, for example, Lüling, *Über den Ur-Qur'an*; Lüling, *Die Wiederentdeckung des Propheten Muhammad*, S. 162f., where terms like *muslim* and *mushrik* are thought to denote various Late Antique branches of Christianity.
- 67 Walid Saleh, “The Etymological Fallacy and Qur’ānic Studies: Muhammad, Paradise, and Late Antiquity,” in *The Qur’ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’ānic Milieu*, ed. Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx (Leiden: Brill, 2011), esp. 670–693, cf. Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, vol. I, 633f., for arguments in favor of the conventional translation of *ḥūr ‘īn*.
- 68 A.A. Brockett, Review of “Günter Lüling, *Die Wiederentdeckung des Propheten Muhammad. Eine Kritik am ‘christlichen’ Abendland*,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 13, no. 4 (1981): 519–521; Sinai, “‘Weihnachten im Koran.’” Cf. also Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, vol. I, that consistently reads the early Meccan suras in the light of Jewish-Christian scriptures, with a special emphasis on the Psalms.
- 69 See especially the Potsdam-based Corpus Coranicum project: www.corpuscoranicum.de (accessed September 4, 2015).
- 70 Gabriel Reynolds, *The Qur’an and Its Biblical Subtext* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), 147–155.
- 71 The translations by Marmaduke Pickthall, the Royal Aal al-Bayt Foundation, Muhammad Asad, and Abdullah Yusuf Ali, respectively, <http://altafsir.com/ViewTranslations.asp?Display=yes&SoraNo=4&Ayah155&toAyah=155&Language=2&LanguageID=2> (accessed September 4, 2015).
- 72 It needs to be pointed out that, while disinterest in the Bible is, up to now, the mainstream tendency in the Muslim exegetical tradition, it is not unanimous and has not even been so in premodern times. Cf. Saleh, “A Fifteenth-Century Muslim Hebraist.”
- 73 Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, vol. I, 15–22.