

**Translation and religious texts:
authenticity and authority in the translated
forms of *The Qur'an***

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Abstract:

The issue of translating the Qu'ran stands as a subject which is still under permanent debate and speculation. The reason of such a fact is often justified by the impossible provision of an authentic form of the Holly Book in the target language, as it is presented in its original version in Arabic. For the ones who bear and strongly sustain this very particular assumption the translated forms of the Qu'ran can and will never be regarded as the Qu'ran itself in its rules and sacredness. Rather, a translation of the Qu'ran should be seen as a mere translation of the "meaning" of the texts that come in this Holly Book, and can never replace the authentic form of these texts. That is why, the supporters, and they are the majority of this claim, often insist on the fact that Islam and the Qu'an are completely distinct from the other religions and their texts. In this sense, Sheikh Attiyya Saqr, former head of Al-Azhar fatwa comittee, states, " the issue of translating the Qu'ran has been much debated since decades. However, the translation of the Qu'ran can never be seen as the Qu'ran itself. The reason for this is that translation is not the word of Allah which was revealed to the prophet (peace and blessings be upon him); besides, the words of the Qu'ran are conveyed in a language other than arabic which forms part and parcel of the miraculous nature of the Qu'ran ".

Therefore, this communication aims to explore the subject of the translation of religious texts from different translation approaches, with a particular concern addressed to the Qu'ran because of many reasons: first, since it is our Holy Book and thus it deserves more attention and interest; and second, because it is the only, as it is noted in many studies, sacred book where a literal translation is not accepted. The other main aim of this study is to attempt to provide a valuable and a very objective assessment of the degree of validity of the present approaches adopted by translators to translate the meaning of the Quranic texts for the people of other languages, who cannot understand Arabic language. Besides, by this work we wish we could come up with the major reasons that unenable translators to yield authentic and authoritative texts, as they are present in the original form of the Qu'ran, and display theoretical and practical problems translators encounter when translating the Quranic verses from Arabic to other languages.

Introduction:

The translation of the Qu'ran from Arabic language to English is a very difficult task. Translators often claim that this particular Holy Book is completely distinct from all other spiritual genres, and religious scriptures. For them, the Qu'ran underlies unique and specific linguistic, historical, and cultural characteristics that cannot allow translators to produce a similar translated document. That is, a translated form of the Qu'ran cannot replace the Qu'ran in its original form because the former does not recognize the authority and authenticity that are particular to the Qu'ran in Arabic.

Therefore, our present communication is situated in the heart of this problematic. It is an attempt to shed some light on the issue of translability of the Holy Book of

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muslims. Our basic goal, out of this work, is to come up with a valuable evaluation of the available translations, and hence to end up with a conclusion of whether what is translated recognizes the authenticity and authority that are the main ingredients of the Qu'ran in its natural form. Our approach in this study is to prove or disprove what we hypothesized above. This will be fulfilled through a very meticulous synthesis of a number of common translation studies on the Qu'ran carried on by Muslims and non-muslims.

01- A brief survey of the history of English translations of *The Qur'an*:

It has been well known for about all scholars, who are involved in the domain of the translation of the Qu'ran, that the question of translation is ambivalent. Such an attitude is always interpreted by the fact that the act of translating may be logically regarded by muslims to be very suspicious. But still, even if this specific attitude to consider the Qu'ran as something which needs to be carefully accepted among muslims, those latter have continued to believe that the decision to yield a more valid translation of the Quranic text as well as an authentic summary of its teaching to the non-muslim world can serve a better understanding of Islam. On the other side, the subject of translating the Qu'ran has not remained only a concern of its bearers; rather, this issue has transgressed to become even an interest among non-muslims. In this sense, Christian missionaries got an advance to translate the Holly Book of Muslims, with an intention to approach the distance between their religion and the Qu'ran. Two sorts of translations have come to exist together. One sort of translation that was borne by those who believe they are the legitimate legacy of Islam. And another sort that regards that the translation of the Qu'ran could be of a great benefit for

them to understand the pillars of Islam as they are presented in the Qu'ran. The result of this state of fact was and still is the provision of a wealthy bibliography on this issue.

In a very useful paper on bibliographic material on the subject of the translation of the Qu'ran, Kidwai (1987) provided a substantial work which illustrated the existing mass of English translations of the Qu'ran. This bibliography comprises the two sorts of translations cited above: the translations done by Muslims, and the ones made by the non-muslims. In what is following, an illustration of the two trends is briefly displayed:

A- English translations provided by muslims :

01- Mohammad Abdul Hakim Khan :

" The Holly Qu'ran " – (Patiala, 1905).

- A translation with short notes based on the Holly Qu'ran or authentic tradition of the prophet (Peace Be Upon Him).

02- Hairat Dehlawi :

" The Qu'ran Prepared "- (Delhi, 1912)

- By various oriental learned scholars edited

by Mizra Hairat Dehlawi –

Intended as a complete and exhaustive reply to the manifold criticisms of the Koran by various christian authors.

03- Mizal Abu Al Fadl :

" Qu'ran, Arabic Text and English Translation Arranged Chronologically With Abstract ". - (Allahbad, 1912).

Since these early translations were by reputed Islamic scholars, both the quality of the translation and level of scholarship are not very high and these works are mere

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

04- Muhammad Marmaduke William Pickthall :

" The Meaning Of The Glorious Qu'ran " – (London, 1930).

- The author is an English who embraced Islam. His translation is one of the most widely used English translations. It provides scan explanatory notes and background information.

05- Abdul Yussuf Ali :

" The Holly Qu'ran " – (Lahor, 1934).

- Perhaps the most popular translation. It stands as a major achievement in this field.

06- Abdul Madjid Daryabadi :

" The Holly Qu'ran: with English Translation and Commentary
" (Lahor, 1947, 1951).

- A faithful rendering, supplemented with useful notes.

07- Sayyid Abdul A'la Mawdudi :

" The Meaning Of The Qu'ran " – (Lahor, 1967).

- An interpretative rendering of the Qu'ran which remarkably succeeds in recapturing some of the majesty of the original.

08- Muhamad Assad :

" The Message Of The Qu'ran " – (Gibraltar, 1980).

- It represents a notable addition to the body of English translators. This work is nonetheless vitiated by deviation from the view point of muslim orthodoxy on many counts.

09- T.B.Irving :

" The fairly Recent Of The Qu'ran "- (Vermont, 1985).

- The first American version by a native muslim speaker. It presents textual explanations and notes. It has been criticized because Irving has employed many American idioms, which are not benifitting of the dignity of the Qu'ranic diction and style.

B- English translations provided by non-muslims:

01- Alexander Ross :

" The Alcoran Of Mahomet " – (London, 1649).

- A very crude specimen of the orientalist missionary approach to the Qu'ran.

02- George Sale :

" The Al Koran of Mohamed " –

- It is regarded as the most popular English translation of the Qu'ran – to the translation itself, it abounds in numerous instances of omission, distortion, and interpolations.

03- J.M.Rodwell :

" The Koran " – (London, 1861).

- The translation comprises grave mistakes of translation...

04- E.H.Palmer :

" The Qu'ran " – (London, 1880).

- This translation comprises omission, and mistranslation.

05- B.Richards :

" The Qu'ran Translated With A Critical Rearrangement Of The Surahs "- (Edinburgh, 1937 _ 9).

- This translation showed many mistakes and false interpretations.

06- A.J.Berry :

" The Koran Interpreted "

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- The latest non – muslim translator of the Qu'ran. His translation is not, nonetheless, free from mistakes, omission, and mistranslation.

07- N.J.Dawood :
" The Koran "

- The only jew to have translated the Qu'ran into English. The author bias against Islam in his translation is very noticeable.

02- Authority and authenticity in the translation of *The Qur'an*:

Many scholars claim that the translation of religious texts is so complicated. This difficulty is justified by the complex characteristics of these texts. Catherine Moir (2009) managed to explicit this fact thoroughly. She made it clear enough for everybody that religious scriptures are so pregnant with cultural, and historical significance, a fact that understandably renders them problematic from a translation perspective. In the words of David Jasper, translating religious texts is an, " impossible necessity " (2005, 105). Moir (ibid) added that the ambivalence of form and style, and the question of how best to surmount this problem has always been central in translation, an is particularly relevant to the translation of religious texts, most of all to those whose provenance is considered to be divine revelation. It is these considerations that usually let the debate remain raised about whether religious texts are translatable, or not.

In this respect, when it comes to the Qu'ran, the subject of recognizing authority and authenticity of the translated forms stands as clear for everybody. It goes without saying that this Holly Book does not recognize these two aspects in the translated versions. In an attempt to elucidate

this idea, there is a strong need to understand the nature of the religious texts in the Qu'ran and the big difference it presents with the other religious scriptures, the Bible of Christians, for instance.

The first aspect that is manifested with the Qu'ran is at the level of its Language, Arabic. This language is seen to be the vector of Allah's message. In the Qu'ran, Allah speaks directly to the prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) through the Angel Gabriel. For muslims, it is not the prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) who is Allah's revelation, but, rather, it is the Qu'ran. In this context, Arabic is the language of the Qu'ran, and therefore, this language is the literal, physical embodiment of the divine word. Here, it is very conspicuous the strong tie between the Qu'ran as a revelation of Allah, and the language of this revelation. Both of the two are associated to one another. One side cannot exist without the other. That is why when translating the Qu'ran to English, or even to any other language, the translated form loses the criteria of authority and authenticity.

The second aspect is related to a lessening of authority and authenticity in the translated form of the Qu'ran. This can be identified in what scholars have come to label the traditional modes of transmission of epistemic authority.

Infact, contrary to other religious scriptures, " there is no *textus receptus* ", a generally accepted form of the Qu'ran in any language other than Arabic (Schub, 2003). Moir (ibid) pointed out that this is partly due to the doctrine found within the text itself. For Moir (ibid) the oral tradition into which the Quranic revelation entered is of the outmost relevance. The dissemination of knowledge in Islam is traditionally revolved around oral modes of transmission. Al Quran means " the recitation ", and the oral tradition was, and to a large extent still is, at the heart of Islamic epistemic authority (Robinson,

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1993, 231). This oral tradition of the Qu'ran is what is seen to be a " purer " nature of this Holly Book. Indeed, only by being recited does the Qu'ran realize its divinity, a fact borne out by the value attached to " Tajwid ", techniques for recitation (ibid). In a more explicit illustration of that particular aspect, reference could be made to the philosophy of Ibn Khaldun. Ibn Khaldun, asserted that the pure idea exists only in the mind, the spoken word is an approximation of these ideas, and the written word yet a further approximation (Steiner, 1967). By deduction, to translate would mean to approximate yet further (Moir, ibid).

03- Other major problems in the translation of *The Qur'an*:

The nature of the Quranic language and the natural epistemic mode of transmission of the word of Allah are not the only aspects that do not allow translators to provide a likely faithful translated form of the Qu'ran. Other problems can be identified to make it impossible to yield a translated form that recognizes authority and authenticity of the Qu'ran in its original version. Majumda (1988) came up with a list of some of these problems in his comprehensive dissertation. Some of these are:

03. 1 – Translation and interpretation:

Translation is intertwined with interpretation. It has been proved out of the myriads of the available translations of the Qu'ran in English that it is never possible for a translation to be an exact one-to-one transference from one language to another.

03. 2 – Loss of economy of expression:

Translations have indicated that when translating, the translated form displays a loss of economy and compactness of the original Arabic text. This follows that in all translations the beauty of Arabic with its music is lost.

03. 3 – Translation and supra-segmentals of language:

The existence of the supra-segmental oracy, which is purely specific to the Qu'ran, can be lost when translating this Holy Book. Very often, the supra-segmentals are manifested in the sound quality of Arabic.

03. 4 – Translation of metaphoric expressions:

Knowing that the language of the Qu'ran is full of figurative expressions, this fact renders translations very complicated. To keep the right meaning of idioms, for instance, it is not an easy matter.

03. 5 – Translation and the diction of *The Qur'an*:

The Qu'ran is full of special diction. When it comes to translation, in many instances, it is very complicated to meet the word that bears the same meaning in English. This renders the translating act difficult, and sometimes impossible.

03. 6 – Other Problems:

- A large number of verbs in Arabic cannot be translated as verbs in English but require a combination of words.

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- In arabic present and future tenses both are denoted by the same verb, but not in English.
- In Arabic, there can be abrupt grammatical transitions of person or number in the same sentence.
- A personal relative pronoun can have different antecedants in one and the same sentence. The translator cannot allow such ambiguities.
- There is no real equivalence in the import of many words of Arabic and English words generally held to be synonyms.

04 – Evaluating english translations of *The Qur'an*:

Whatever the problems that are identified when translating the Qu'ran into English, this Holly Book remains a necessity for both muslims and non-muslims. For muslims, the translations of the Qu'ran serve their religion, and make clear for others the basics of Islam. For non-muslims, the act of translating the Qu'ran can enable them to get involved in a religion that interests them. But still, is there an authentic translated form of the Qu'ran ? and if the answer is affirmative, could we say that the Qu'ran is translatable?

In order to get a valuable assessment of the existing translations of the Qu'ran, and hence to answer the raised questions above, we have referred to some studies that dealt with this problem. From a meticulous analysis of the collected information, we have come up with the definite conclusion that when it comes to translating the Qu'ran from Arabic language to English, there is no translation that recognizes authenticity and authority. All what can be yielded are mere

translations that concern more the interpretation of the meaning of the " Surahs ". In short, the Qu'ran is untranslatable. To corroborate this particular assumption, we can refer to some extracts of some translators, who spent a long time in translation, or translation studies carried on by others:

*** Pickthall:**

" ... the Qu'ran cannot be translated ... The Holy Book is here rendered almost literally and every effort has been made to choose befitting language. But the result is not the glorious Qu'ran, that inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears ... It is an attempt to present the meaning of the Qu'ran in English. It can never take the place of the Qu'ran in Arabic, no is it meant to do so ..."

*** Assad:**

" ...unlike any other book, its meaning and its linguistic presentation form one unbreakable whole. The position of individual words in a sentence, the rythm, and sound of its phrases and their syntactic construction, the manner in which a metaphor.

Flows almost imperceptibly into a pragmatic statement, the use of acoustic stress not merely in the service of rhetoric but as a means of alluding to unspoken but clearly implied ideas; all this makes the Qu'ran, in the last resort, unique and untranslatable - A fact that has been pointed by many translators and scholars ...".

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*** Daryabad:**

"... the difficulty is increased hundredfold when one has to render into English, with any degree of accuracy and precision, a work so rich in meaning, so pithy in expression, so vigorous in style and so subtle in implications as the Holy Qu'ran. To reproduce even partially its exotic beauty, wonderful grandeur and magical vivacity without sacrificing the requirements of the English idioms and usage, is the despair of the translator and an ideal impossible of attainment ..." (Majumdar, *ibid*).

Conclusion:

To conclude, again what incited us to tackle this subject is the dire need to provide an objective assessment of the degree of authenticity and authority in the translated forms of the Qu'ran. In other words, our intention in this communication is meant to see whether the translation of the Qu'ran is a " pure " translation of a religious scripture, or is merely an interpretation of meaning. Therefore, the various studies held by a big number of translators all over the world have proved that all what has been produced in this field can never be considered as authentic and authoritative material. Rather, this synthesis of major works on the translation of the Qu'ran into English has led us to the conclusion that the Qu'ran is untranslatable. And that the Qu'ran is unique and different from the other religious scriptures. And more importantly, the Qu'ran is the word of Allah that cannot be changed, nor transformed, nor falsified.

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