

A Survey of Key English Translations of the Holy Qur'an

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ملخص:

كان القرآن، و لا يزال، محط أنظار العالم، من مسلمين وغير مسلمين، من غير العارفين بالعربية، بغية فهمه والاطلاع على مكنوناته. و قد سعى هذا الفريق و ذلك سعيا حثيثا إلى تحقيق هدفه، و كان ذلك عن طريق الترجمة. فقد خضع القرآن إلى عملية الترجمة و نال حظّه منها، كما لم ينله كتاب قبله، حتّى بلغ عدد ترجماته، من ترجمة كاملة و ترجمات جزئية ومختارات، ما يقارب 1500 عمل ترجمي في حوالي 105 لغات. و كان للقرآن الحظ الوافر في الترجمة باللغة الانكليزية منذ بدايات القرن السادس عشر ميلادي إلى يومنا هذا. و بما أن الحيز الممنوح لنا بين طيات هذه المجلة لا يسمح لنا ببسط هذا الموضوع بإسهاب، فإننا سنحاول، في مقالنا هذا، أن نلقي نظرة خاطفة على بعض ترجمات القرآن بهذه اللغة، و بخاصة منها تلك الترجمات التي تميّزت بسمّة ما أو تركت أثرا ما، أو كان لصاحبها تميّز ما أو سبق في مجال ما في عملية ترجمة القرآن.

The Qur'an was, and still is, the focus of interest in the world. Muslims and non-Muslims alike, amongst those who don't know Arabic, seek to understand its message and access to its contents. Both parties managed no effort to achieve this goal through translation. Actually, the Quran has had its share of translation. To date, according to Istanbul Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture, and to The Centre for Translation of the Holy Qur'an, in Iran, the Qur'an has been translated into about 105 languages and the number of its translations - including complete translations, partial translations and selections - is tantamount to 1500 works.

In this paper, which is a survey of English translations of the Holy Qur'an from the very beginning of this effort i.e. around 1515 to the present day, we will attempt to shed light only on key translations, chiefly those with special characteristics, special influence or which gained a

reputation as good translations, and the authors of which had distinctive traits or scored a great success in the translation of this sacred book. It is, in fact, an ambitious and long-drawn-out study which neither the space allowed in this periodical nor time can permit.

English was one of the first modern European languages into which the Qur'an was translated in complete version. It ranked fourth in position after Italian (1547), German (1616) and French (1647). Nevertheless, it had the primacy, in 1515, to have some printed selections of the Qur'an. Ihsanoglu (1986:26) and Hamidullah (1989:xlvi) trace the existence of a 61-page pamphlet, printed in London, by an anonymous author and entitled: Here begynneth a lytell treatyse of the Turkes law called alcoran. And also it speaketh of Machamet the Nygromancer. The author of the book is anonymous, but the title does show how the author views the Qur'an and the Prophet. Thus the Qur'an is not a

divine canon but a mere 'Turkes law' and Mohammad is not a prophet but rather a 'Nygromancer' i.e. a necromancer!

The first complete translation of the Qur'an into English, with which the English Language ranked fourth, was done by Alexander Ross (1654-1590) in 1648. Ross was a Scottish chaplain to King Charles I, who left several works in philosophy, history and religion. The title of his translation is long and strange and it also reveals the translator's intention:

The Alcoran of Mahomet, Translated out of Arabique into French by the Sieur du Ryer, Lord of Malezair, and Resident for the French King, at Alexandria. And Newly Englished, for the satisfaction of all that desire to look into the Turkish Vanities. To which is prefixed, the Life of Mahomet, the Prophet of the Turks, and Author of the Alcoran. With 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 Alcoran

Ross, as he himself acknowledges, based his translation on the French translation by André Du Ryer. This rendition, as George sale (1896:7-8) described it:

“is no other than a translation of Du Ryer's, and that a very bad one; for Alexander Ross, who did it, being utterly unacquainted with the Arabic, and no great master of the French, has added a number of fresh mistakes of his own to these of Du Ryer, not to mention the meanness of his language, which would make a better book ridiculous”.

Muslim reviewers of Qur'an translations in English have a low opinion of it. Tawfik (2007:4) and Abou Sheishaa (2001), for instance, agree that the translation of Ross abounds in religious bias and inaccuracies since he, himself, describes the Qur'an as a poison that has infected a very great part of the universe.

Having criticised the previous translations of the Qur'an, particularly their being not fair to the

original text, George Sale (1697-1736), the renowned English Orientalist and lawyer, occasioned a *raison d'être* for a new translation of the Qur'an. That was in 1734. His translation was the first translation of the Qur'an in English from the original Arabic. Due to lack of proficiency in Arabic, Sale relied on Father Ludovico Maracci's Latin translation of the Qur'an which was printed in 1698. The title of his translation runs as follows:

The Koran, Commonly Called the Alkoran of Mohammed, Translated into English immediately from the Original Arabic, with explanatory Notes, taken from the most approved Commentators, to which is prefixed a preliminary Discourse

As for his method of translation, Sale would translate the verses roughly, without putting their conventional numbers, explain the implicit intended meaning and incorporate it in the body of the translation itself, writing it in italics in order to distinguish it from the original. In this, he relied so

much, as he stated in the Preface, on Al-Baidhawi's commentary of the Qur'an. In his 'Preliminary Discourse' that covers 200 pages, Sale expounds the history of the Arabs before the advent of the prophet Muhammad, the state of Christianity and Judaism at the time of the prophet, the Prophet's biography and the nature of the Qur'an and its peculiarities. In 1881, an American priest, Elwood Morris Wherry (1843-1927) who spent half of his life as a missionary among Muslims in India, presented to the public Sale's translation of the Qur'an in a four-volume book with some major emendations. He added fresh explanations, numbered the verses, prefixed brief introductions to the suras (Qur'an chapters) and provided a complete and detailed index. Although Rodwell (1915:17), himself a translator of the Qur'an as we shall see later, praises the 'Preliminary Discourse' prefixed to Sale's translation and considers it 'a storehouse of valuable information', he nevertheless thinks that "Sale has, however,

followed Maracci too closely, especially by introducing his paraphrastic comments into the body of the text, as well as by his constant use of Latinised instead of Saxon words". Some orientalist admit that:

"the version of that eminent scholar fully deserves the consideration it has so long enjoyed, but from the large amount of exegetical matter which he has incorporated in his text, and from the style of language employed, which differs widely from the nervous energy and rugged simplicity of the original, his work can scarcely be regarded as a fair representation of the Qur'ân". (Palmer, 1980: lxxix). This defect in Sale's translation, however, is for zwemer, the American Arabist, very useful for the reader:

"Whatever faults may have been found in Sale's translation, his Preliminary Discourse will always stand as one of the most valuable contributions to the study of Islam [...] Sale's

translation is extremely paraphrastic, but the fact that the additional matter in italics is, in nearly every case, added from the Commentary of El-Beidhawi, makes it the more valuable to the reader. This is the only complete English translation with explanatory footnotes, without which the Koran is scarcely intelligible.” (Zwemer, 1915:251).

Sale’s ‘Preliminary Discourse’ was translated into several European languages and even into Arabic by Protestant missionaries in Egypt under the title ‘Makalat fi’l Islam’. (Zwemer, loc. cit.; Abou Sheishaa, loc. cit.)

‘The koran, Translated from the Arabic, the Suras Arranged in Chronological Order, with Notes and Index’. This was the title given by John Meadows Rodwell (1808-1900) to his translation of the Qur’an which appeared in 1861, prefaced by the English Orientalist Margoliouth. This translation, mostly in blank verse, with unnumbered verses, bounds in footnotes, most of them references to

Sale's translation, which Rodwell was very harsh in criticising it. What distinguishes this translation from the others is the rearrangement of the suras in a chronological order, according to the divine communication, beginning with sura 'Al-'Alaq' (The Clot, which is the 96th in the actual suras order of the Qur'an) and ending with sura 'Al-Maïda' (The Table, which is the 5th). The judgement of the critics was plain:

“Rodwell's version approaches nearer to the Arabic, but even in that there is too much assumption of the literary style. The arrangement of the Sûrahs in chronological order, too, though a help to the student, destroys the miscellaneous character of the book, as used by the Muslims, and as Mohammed's successors left it”. (Palmer, op. cit.:lxxx)

Also, like every work of translation, and especially a translation of the Qur'an, Rodwell's rendition is said to be not “free from grave mistakes

of translation and his own fanciful interpretations in the notes” (Kidwai, 1987). He endeavoured to present to the English-speaking people a high-quality unbiased rendition of the Qur’an, but as Yusuf Ali (1979: xv) put it: “Though he tries to render the idiom fairly, his notes show the mind of a Christian clergyman, who was more concerned to ‘show up’ the Book than to appreciate or expound its beauties”. In 1880, Edward Henry Palmer (1840-1882), the English orientalist, made a new translation of the Qu’ran in English. He was one of the scholars of the historic University of Cambridge, who mastered Arabic and Persian as well as other European languages. He visited many Arab countries such as Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and left valuable works particularly his books on the grammar of the Arabic language. In the introduction to his translation, making reference to Al-Baidhawi and George Sale, Palmer (op. cit.:lxxx) mentions the following:

“In my rendering I have, for the most part, kept to the interpretation of the Arabic commentator Bâidhâwî, and have only followed my own opinion in certain cases where a word or expression, quite familiar to me from my experience of every-day desert life, appeared to be somewhat strained by these learned schoolmen”.

Yusuf Ali, who stood up to Palmer because of his low opinion of the Qur'an, thinks that Palmer's translation “suffers from the idea that the Qur'an ought to be translated in colloquial language. He failed to realise the beauty and grandeur of style in the original Arabic. To him that style was ‘rude and rugged’: we may more justifiably call his translation careless and slipshod”. (Yusuf Ali, *op. cit.*:xv).

The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed the commencement of a rapid and intense movement of Qur'an translation in English, both in quantity and quality. A campaign pioneered by a lot of translators from India and Pakistan, Muslims and Qadianis, as

well as by non-Arabs who converted to Islam and missionaries working in India, Pakistan and other countries. The translation was carried out either from Urdu, an official language in Pakistan, or directly from the original Arabic. Thus, the Indian doctor Mohammed Abdul Hakim Khan was the first Muslim to translate the Qur'an into English, in 1905. His rendition, 'The Holy Qur'an Translated with Short Notes', constituted the starting point for the translation of the Qur'an by Muslim translators, Arabs and non-Arabs alike, in order to face "the amount of mischief done by versions of non-Muslim and anti-Muslim writers". (Yusuf Ali, loc. cit.). Pickthall (1930:vii) sustains this idea by confirming that "some of the translations include commentation offensive to Muslims, and almost all employ a style of language which Muslims at once recognise as unworthy".

After Mohammed Abdul Hakim Khan, in 1917, appeared another translation of the Qur'an by

Muhammad Ali (1875-1951). That was the first translation of the Qur'an in English based on and comprising the thoughts and ideas of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, founder of the Qadiani doctrine, with a very simple and direct title: 'The Holy Qur'an: English Translation'. Yusuf Ali (loc. cit.) points out that Muhammad Ali's translation of the Qur'an "is a scholarly work, and is equipped with adequate explanatory matter in the notes and the Preface, and fairly a full index. But the English of the text is decidedly weak, and is not likely to appeal to those who know no Arabic". Furthermore, some critics and reviewers of Qur'an translations in English state it clearly: "Muhammad Ali's biases show through, however. Consistent with his Lahori-Ahmadi creed, Muhammad Ali sought to eschew any reference to miracles. He sometimes departed from a faithful rendering of the original Arabic". (Khaleel, 2005). His rendition, reports Abou Sheishaa (loc. cit.), is considered "a 'deviate' translation of the Qur'an

which contradicted the principles of Islamic belief and attempted to destroy Islam from within". Consequently, Al-Azhar seized this translation, when the Lahori Ahmadiyya tried to circulate it in 1925, and published a fatwa prohibiting its circulation in Egypt.

Mohammad Marmaduke Pickthall (1875-1936) was the first English Muslim to translate the Qur'an into English. In 1929, this novelist, writer and Arabist, won the support of Egyptian scholars, among others, Sheikh Mustafa Al-Maraghi, former Rector of Al-Azhar University. His translation, 'The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an: an Explanatory Translation', carried out directly from the Arabic text, became very popular among Muslim readers in English. It was edited in 1930, authorized by Al-Azhar, and was reprinted dozens of times. Pickthall, like the other translators of the Qur'an, pointed out to the fact that he referred in his translation to the Commentaries of Al-Baidhawi, Al-Zamakhshari and

Al-Jalalayn. His translation is characterised by its classical English style, the author being influenced by the idiom of the Holy Bible. Of course, this is due to his surroundings – that is the influence of his father who was a clergyman - and to his rich and deep readings in this field recognised by a diploma in theology. Pickthall did not comment a lot in his translation, and the notes are scarce. Kidwai (1987) made mention of this aspect in Pickthall's translation. Yusuf Ali (loc. cit.), on the other hand, was very lucid and succinct: "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 Qur'an". His translation was almost literal. Hence it could not give an accurate idea of the Qur'an. Moreover, Khaleel (loc. cit.) remarks:

“While Pickthall's work was popular in the first half of the twentieth century and, therefore,

historically important, its current demand is limited by its archaic prose and lack of annotation. Perhaps the death knell for the Pickthall translation's use has been the Saudi government's decision to distribute other translations free of charge.”

A few years later, two translations of the Qur'an coincided: one in Edinburgh, the other in Lahore. The former was that of the English Arabist Richard Bell (1876-1952) between 1937 and 1939. Bell rearranged the suras order chronologically, as did Rodwell before. The title of his translation, *The Qur'an translated with a crucial rearrangement of Surahs*, was an insinuation to Rodwell's translation of the Qur'an where the rearrangement of the suras order was not pushed to the limit. In this matter, he rather adopted and made reference to the chronological order of the suras elaborated by the German orientalist Theodor Nöldeke, where he deliberately rearranged the Quran, chapter by chapter and verse by verse, until he made of this sacred book

a confused text. With such a work, Bell destroyed the text and deceived the reader. The latter translation was authored by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1872-1952) between 1934 and 1937. This translator is of an Indian Muslim family. He studied Arabic and religious sciences at the hands of his father, and studied law at the University of Cambridge in England. He died in London in 1953 and was buried in the same cemetery as Pickthall. For the sake of grasping the meanings of the Qur'an and rendering them faithfully, Yusuf Ali made use of Al-Tabari's, Al-Zamakhshari's, Al-Razi's, Ibn-Kathir's and Al-Jalalayn's Qur'an commentaries. For each suras he prefixed an introduction, and for each part a summary in blank verse. His translation, *The Holy Qur'an: Translation and Commentary*, is characterised by its highly appreciated idiom, its beautiful style, and a lot of old English words, like Pickthall's. Also, there is ample use of free verse commentaries on the suras, which exceeded 300, as

well as heavy use of footnotes, with more than 6300. At the end of his translation, in long and detailed indexes, he expounds the most important subject matters of religion and Islamic faith. The use of such splendid English language in Yusuf Ali's translation shows his high mastery of this tongue, and the use of profuse free verse commentaries, footnotes and indexes shows the depth of his knowledge about religion and his endeavour to explicate everything in the Qur'an. It is worth mentioning that in Yusuf Ali's commentaries, footnotes and indexes there appears a tendency to Sufism. To those who might ask the question why there was a need for a fresh English translation of the Qur'an, Yusuf Ali gave the following answer:

"I would invite them to take any particular passage [...] and compare it with any previous version they choose. If they find that I have helped them even the least bit further in understanding its meaning, or appreciating its beauty, or catching something of the

grandeur of the original, I would claim that my humble attempt is justified.” (Yusuf Ali, op. cit.:iii)

Regarded as the most popular translation in the Muslim world and being published in different parts of the world including USA, Mecca, Nigeria, Canada, India, Syria, Libya and Qatar, Yusuf Ali’s “English translation of the Qur’an,” states Tawfik (op. cit.:11-12), quoting Khan, “is so well-read that almost every English-speaking Muslim house will have a copy”. Yusuf Ali’s mastery of the English language is said to be unrivalled. This appears manifestly in his translation. There is only a small minority of Muslims who reached his high station. Irving (1985), one of the Qur’an translators, on the other hand, considers “Yusuf Ali’s [translation] more satisfactory as a commentary but his English is overladen with extra words which neither explain the text nor embellish the meaning. True embellishment is the simple telling word which does not detract, but carries the mind directly to the meaning.”

In the second half of the twentieth century, in 1953, the English Orientalist Arthur John Arberry (1905-1969) published the translation of some selections of the Qur'an. Arberry was a professor of Arabic at the British universities, worked in Egypt, and was fluent in Arabic and Persian. In 1955, he presented *The Koran Interpreted*, a complete translation of the Quran directly from the original Arabic. He, prior to this, translated the works of the Persian mystic poet Rumi, the Indian poet and philosopher Muhammad Iqbal as well as the Seven Odes i.e Al-Muallaqat. Arberry's rendition is renowned for its quality and style, and as Mustafa (2001:203) points out: "In terms of style, Arberry's translation tries to emulate the quality of the original. It does so with some success and seems, at least partially, to have influenced other translations that aimed at the same effect". According to Khaleel (loc. cit.), "The Arberry version has earned the admiration of intellectuals worldwide, and having been reprinted

several times, remains the reference of choice for most academics. It seems destined to maintain that position for the foreseeable future”.

One year after Arberry's translation, in 1956, the Iraqi Jew Naim Joseph Dawood (born in 1927) published a complete translation of the Qur'an, in London, entitled: *The Koran Translated with Notes*. This may be the first translation of the Qur'an in English performed by a Jew. Dawood also adopted the same suras order i.e the chronological order, as Rodwell and Bell, then changed his mind in later editions. Prior to this rendition, he translated into English some of the tales of the 'One Thousand and One Nights' i.e. *The Arabian Nights*, and a selection of Ibn Khaldun's book, *Al-Muqaddima*.

In 1980, a fresh English translation of the Qur'an by another Jew, Muhammad Asad (1900-1992), came to light. Asad, formerly named Leopold Weiss, was an Austrian Muslim convert. He left many works, visited many Arab countries, worked in

various fields, held political office in Pakistan for which he was appointed Minister Plenipotentiary to the United Nations. He mastered many languages including Hebrew and Arabic as well as some modern European languages. Of his important works, we may name the translation and commentary on Sahih Bukhari and his Qur'an rendition, *The Message of The Quran*. Asad thinks that the previous translators of the Qur'an failed to obtain the 'feel' of the Arabic language in their translations because:

“familiarity with the bedouin speech of Central and Eastern Arabia - in addition, of course, to academic knowledge of classical Arabic - is the only way for a non-Arab of our time to achieve an intimate understanding of the diction of the Qur'an. And because none of the scholars who have previously translated the Qur'an into European languages has ever fulfilled this prerequisite, their

translations have remained but distant, and faulty, echoes of its meaning and spirit.” (Asad,1980).

As a consequence, he considers that his translation is “perhaps the first attempt at a really idiomatic, explanatory rendition of the Qur'anic message into a European language [because] it is based on a lifetime of study and of many years spent in Arabia.” (Asad, loc. cit.). And this is what it is supported by some critics such as Khaleel (loc. cit.) for whom it is “one of the best translations available, both in terms of its comprehensible English and generally knowledgeable annotations”.

Rashad Khalifa (1935-1990), the Egyptian-American biochemistry specialist, was the first Arab Muslim to translate the Quran into English. He was an imam at a mosque in Tucson, Arizona. He first published his translation of the Qur'an in 1978 as *The Quran - The Final Scripture* and then modified it in 1981 to be *The Quran - The Final Testament*, an imitation of the Holy Scriptures titles: the Old

Testament and the New Testament. Khalifa's translation abounds in footnotes, most of which refer to calculations based on the number 19 and to 'Rashad Khalifa', 'Messenger of the Covenant', as he does confirm this on almost every page of his translation, and to which is appended 38 indexes covering various subjects. Many critics consider Khalifa's not to be a translation by a Muslim and condemn it as blasphemous. The author claims that he is a messenger supported by a miracle, an idea he used to profess in every forum, and to the effect that the entire Qur'an is based mainly on the language of mathematics, chiefly number 19, and that the Prophet Muhammad was a literate person and wrote God's revelations with his own hand.

A short period of time after Khalifa, Professor Thomas Ballantine Irving (1914-2002), an American Muslim convert known as Al-Hajj Ta'lim Ali Abu Nasr, joined up with the translators of the Qur'an. In fact, he is the first to translate the Qur'an into

American English. That was in 1985 with his rendition entitled: *The Qur'an: the First American Version*. Irving's chief concern was to translate the Qur'an into a language understood and appreciated by English-speaking Muslims, especially the new generation. His rendition is, in his own words:

“not a translation but a version, a modest tafsir for the English-speaking Muslim who has not been able to rely on Arabic for his meanings, and for sincere enquirers, those modern Hanifs who are tired of the trinity, or of chaos and confusion in matters religious. The carper should look elsewhere”. (Irving, 1985).

Appreciated by English-speaking Muslims the world over and in North America, as has been mapped out for it, Arberry's rendition was subject to some criticism:

“Although modern and forceful English has been used, it is not altogether free of instances of mistranslation and loose expressions. 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.” (Kidwai, loc. cit.)

To date, dozens of Qur'an translations into English came to light, with almost similar titles, most by Muslims, directly from the original Arabic. Libraries abound with these new translations, most of which are similar in terms of wording and language level. Perhaps this is due to the fact that many translators relied on previous translations of the Qur'an. Tawfik (op. cit.: 22) counted more than 60 complete Qur'an translations into English until 2005.

No doubt that behind this daunting task there are translators with disparate intellectual and religious backgrounds who ventured in this field, with different abilities and capacities: some of them master Arabic and others don't; with different intentions and goals: some of them sought to show the 'defects' of the Quran and warn people of its

'heresy', and others sought to highlight its beauties and glorious meanings; and with different translational procedures: some of them stick to the literality of the text and others transcend it.

As long as the Qur'an is, as stated in the prophetic tradition, a book the marvels of which do not expire and wonders are endless; and as long as Muslims who do not know Arabic are still longing to learn the Qur'an in their own languages; and as long as there are non-Muslims who seek to know the contents of the Qur'an in foreign languages, translators will continue to dive into its depths, extract its hidden contents and bring it out to people in different tongues. We do not think translators, Arabs or non-Arabs, Muslims or non-Muslims, will stop at this. Every time there is a fresh translation, and in every translation there is something new.

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