



ISLAMIC VIEW OF TRANSLATABILITY OF THE KORAN AND ITS MISSIOLOGICAL  
IMPLICATION

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore the possibility of a Christian witness among orthodox Muslim scholars given their Islamic idea of translatability of the Koran. The view holds that the Koran is not translatable due to the divine status of the Arabic language, the inadequacy of a translation preserving meaning, and the inability of a translation preserving the literary form. The study concludes that in sharing the Christian Gospel to orthodox Muslim scholars, one must consider their view of translatability of the Word of God. Knowing their version of and position on translatability of the Koran and clearly explaining to them the Christian view could provide a window for them to appreciate the Bible and through its testimony access the true Word of God, Jesus Christ. To do that effectively the Christian witness must make it clear that Koran is to the Muslims what Christ and not the Bible is to Christians and that the Bible as a written revelation of God's word is critical as it points God's people toward Jesus Christ, the express image of God.

Key Words: Translatability, Orthodox Muslim, Koran, Revelation, Inspiration, and Christian Witness

## INTRODUCTION

Religion is what sets human kind apart from all other lower creatures. In every human culture and civilization there are explicit traces of attempts by its people to relate to what they deem divine. 'Oral' religions are those whose traditions and teachings are transmitted from a generation to the other orally while scriptural religions have reduced their teachings and traditions into a written document which they deem to be their holy writ. The religious traditions with sacred scriptures include Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam (Ward 1994, 113).

But one would ask, as to what constitutes the word of God? In the scriptural traditions, the word of God comprises of the revealed written laws and traditions which have been collected, preserved and transmitted from generation to generation. It is these collections that are referred to as the Holy Scriptures. Koran is the sacred scripture in Islam. The Koran is believed, at least in medieval Islamic tradition, "to be uncreated and entire in the spiritual realm" (Ward 1994, 209; cf. Goldziher 1981, 97). In fact Walls notes that, "In Islamic faith God speaks to mankind, calling to obedience. The sign of that speech is the Qur'an, the direct speech of God, delivered in Arabic at the chosen time through God's chosen Apostle, unalterably fixed in heaven for ever" (Walls 1990, 27).

This paper is an attempt to explore the Islamic idea of translatability of the Koran and how it impacts on Christian witness among orthodox Muslim scholars. Due to the focus of this paper and the extensive nature of the subject, I will delimit it by treating only the Islamic orthodox philosophy on translatability of the Koran. To do this I will consider the Koran in Islamic faith, the Islamic orthodox idea on Koranic revelation and inspiration, Arabic as a sacred language and its implication on Koran's translatability, and the missiological implications of Islamic view of translatability of the Koran for Christian witness. Orthodox Muslim scholars are within the *missio Dei*. They have to be reached with the gospel of Jesus. Yet this cannot be effective without getting into their worldview and meeting them on their terms if they have to encounter and accept the truth of the gospel. From this study it is befitting to conclude that in sharing the gospel to orthodox Muslim scholars, one must take a serious note of their view of translatability of the word of God. Knowing their version of and position on translatability of the Koran and clearly explaining to them the Christian view could provide a window for them to appreciate the Bible and through its testimony access the true Word of God, Jesus Christ.

### THE KORAN IN THE ORTHODOX ISLAM

Orthodox Islam as opposed to the liberal and folk Islam is a wing of Islamic religion that holds and preserves the most ancient teaching and traditions as passed down from its founder. They have remained faithful to the original Islamic theology despite challenges from scholasticism. According to the orthodox Islam, Koran is the Word of God (read Allah). It is a copycat of "the 'Mother of the Book' in heaven" containing the very words of God. Koran is words of truth from God were conveyed to Prophet Muhammad by Gabriel, the Archangel. The prophet latter recited those words and they were "written down in the Arabic language" (Braswell 1996, 50).

Various Islamic traditions hold different views on the issue of the divine nature and aspects of the Koran. The orthodox Islamic tradition claims that both the written and recited scripture in Arabic are divine and uncreated. One such tradition is after *Al-Ash'ari* who hold that:

The Qur'an is on the preserved (heavenly) tablet; it is in the heart of those who have been given knowledge; it is written down in books in reality; it is recited by our tongues in reality; it is heard by us in reality; as it is written: 'If a polytheist seeks your protection, grant it to him so that he may hear the speech of Allah' (9:6)-thus what you say to him is Allah's own speech. This is to say: all of these are essentially identical with the uncreated divine word, which has been on the heavenly tablet from all eternity, in reality (*fi'l-haqiqa*), and not in some figurative sense, not in the sense that all these are copies, citations, or communications of a heavenly original (Goldziher 1981, 100).

This underscores the fact that not only the recitals in the Arabic language, but even the written down script in the Arabic language is Allah's own speech and thus holy and celestial (Braswell 1996, 50, 52). And so for one to gain the salvation that comes from Allah he must be able to access not only the recited word but also to the Koran in its original Arabic language (Arberry 1983, ix).

### ISLAMIC IDEA OF REVELATION AND INSPIRATION

All scriptural religious traditions hold at least to one or the other kind of revelation and inspiration. This is true of the Islamic faith. Though there are discussions and seeming disagreements even among Islamic scholars pertaining to the revelation and inspiration of Koran, the traditional view seem to still

hold. In orthodox Islam, the concept of revelation holds for the Koran while inspiration applies to their other religious literatures – the Hadith, and the Sunnah (See Sim 1998, 112).

Orthodox Islam is an ardent proponent of a piecemeal or propositional revelation of the Koran. The very words of the Koran in the Arabic language were sent down into Prophet Muhammad's heart on the Night of Destiny. Thus the Koran is not a product of human and divine interaction but solely a divine product. The 'sending- down' concept of revelation of the Koran in the traditions of Islam points to the reason as to why Koranic verses both in its oratory and literal form are the greatest miracle. And because the Koran provides a perfect revelation from God, Muslims have little or no interest at all in other so called God's self-revelation (Ward 1994, 174-175).

Another crucial element that influences orthodox Islamic view on translatability of the Koran has to do with the Language. To Muslims, Arabic is the language in which the "Mother of the Books" of which the Koran is a copycat is written (Sim 1998, 117). The language is sacred. Any translation of Koran in another language becomes an edition and loses the authority vested in the Koran as uncreated and eternal. Thus the authority of the Koran as the word of God (Allah) rests in the very words sent down from Allah in a particular language –Arabic. This is why listening to the recitation of and looking at the very words in Arabic is so crucial for those non-Arabic speakers who convert to Islam who use other editions (translations).

### **IMPLICATIONS ON ITS TRANSLATABILITY**

Translation is the ability to express concepts of one worldview and language into the other (Sim 1998, 151). This would entail finding the most equivalent word(s) or term(s) that convey an approximate meaning of the concept in the other language. It is a very intricate undertaking that calls for great care. The reason for translation is to help those from the other cultures and language groups to access, appreciate and, para-adventure, understand these concepts. Translation can take place if there is a common understanding from both cultures that the concept is crucial and can find equivalent expression in the other culture. For the Word of God, this is critical. Though it is revealed in particular cultural garbs, including language, its universality can not be played down. This concept is clearly underscored in the Islamic tradition by acknowledging and encouraging its adherents to consult the people of the book, followers of Judaism and Christianity, in case of uncertainty.

But this very pertinent practice of sharing the Word of God is not possible, at least according to orthodox Islamic tradition. This is because of the status of Arabic language, inadequacy of a translation in preserving meaning, and the inability of a translation in preserving the literary form. To orthodox Islam, Arabic language is "pure and godly" (Bramswell 1996, 53). It is the language in which the 'Mother of Books' in heaven is written. It is also clear from this tradition that Allah speaks and hears Arabic language only. Consequently, Arabic becomes the only language that can express the things of God. The tradition also holds on the propositional revelation of the Koran. To Muslims the Koran is God's speech. When one is reading the Koran or reciting it in Arabic, he actually is speaking direct words from God. The concern therefore would be how to preserve the original meaning in a translation. The tradition holds that it is impossible to explain or express God or things of God in another language. Hence, the Koran is divine and since it is the Arabic language which makes it matchless, eloquent and above all inerrant, any translation into human languages will introduce errors (Bramswell 1996, 53).

Another reason as to why Islam does not assent to the translation of the Koran is its form. Koran is oracular and poetic in nature. This gives it an outstanding form. This poetic beauty can not be maintained in another language. Consequently, it is destroyed in the process of translation. The destruction of the Koran's form is disastrous as its impact is not only by subject matter but also by eloquence (Taylor 1979, 12; Sim 1998, 117, 118).

This discussion must now bring to bear on the Christian mandate on reaching out to the orthodox Muslim scholars who hails such a position of the word of God, the Koran. Two issues are critical to such a witness: 1) establishing a Christian equivalent of the Muslim Koran and 2) affirming the translatability and the correct place of vernacular scripture. This forms the Christian missiological implications.

### **MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Our Christian mandate of reaching all kindred with the good news of the gospel is overrun by barriers from different religious background. Muslim belief on translatability is one such barrier. People from such background know well that the Koran is the word of God send-down from Allah to reveal his will to his people. And it is sufficient for any need of God's self-revelation. They also know pretty well that Arabic is the divine language which has the expression of Allah's will as recorded in the holy Koran. For them any attempt to put the word of God in any other human language robs it of the inerrancy and so it

divine nature. This applies, at least to the orthodox Islam adherents, to all the so called divine scriptures. Therefore how do we address such dilemma from a Christian perspective reasonably?

First we must address the issue of equivalence. Braswell quotes Richard who notes that, "Whereas the divine presence for the Jew is in the Law and the Christian is in the person of Christ, it is in the Qur'an for the Muslim as a direct encounter with God" (Braswell 1996, 53). Jesus is the Word of God come from heaven, the express image of God (John 1:1-18; Hebrew 1:1-5). This fact must dawn to both the Christian who is witnessing and the orthodox Islamic adherents. Many Christians while witnessing to their Muslims friends never make this clear to them. The word of God that came from heaven, according to Christian faith, is Jesus Christ and not the Bible. And it is in Jesus that Christians and those converting to Christianity encounter God.

But one would ask then, what is the importance of the written word, the Bible? The Bible is the written account and a testimony of how God through time has moved in and through people's lives pointing them to him. It is important to the seeker who wants to know God. It provides a history of God's relation with a specific people that culminates in a special revelation as they encounter Jesus Christ. It thus point the seeker to Christ in whom he encounters God. And due to the seeker's specificity in terms of environment and culture, the Bible must, as in the event of Christ, speak to him in the terms and language he understands, his vernacular. This is the miracle of Bible translation. It is through this translation that the seeker will hear and understand the word of God in order to call upon Jesus Christ in whom he will encounter God (cf. Romans 10:1-15).

### CONCLUSION

This paper has clearly demonstrated the orthodox Islamic belief on translatability of the Koran, and how this belief impacts on their acceptance of their vernacular Bibles as authentic scriptures. The significance of understanding that Jesus is the true word of God has been postulated. A Christian witness to orthodox Islamic faith adherents must have studied and understood this truth. I have suggested two things that such a witness must seek to address. These are:

1. Making it clear that the Koran is to the Muslims what Christ and not the Bible is to Christians.
2. Making it clear that the Bible as a written revelation of God's word is critical as it points God's people to Jesus Christ, the express image of God.

All human languages can serve as divine medium of communication of God's written word and the translation of the Christian scriptures into various vernaculars and their impact demonstrates God's ability to meet his people from where they are. The greatest miracle is not translatability of God's word, the Bible into various human languages but God translating himself, in Jesus Christ, into human life in order to save some. Humility and prudence must be exercised in reaching out to people holding to orthodox Islamic assumption of translatability.

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