

## Muslim Theolinguistic Perspectives on Publishing Qur'anic Translation without the Original Arabic Text

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### ABSTRACT

The article deals with Muslim theolinguistic attitudes towards and conventional Islamic protocols of publishing Qur'anic translation. Though considerable amount of research has been done on the issue of (im)permissibility of translating the Holy Qur'an, not much attention has been paid to Muslim theological positions on the precise modes of publishing Qur'anic translations. The paper undertakes a historical and diachronic study of notable fatwas (Islamic legal pronouncements) and discusses the views of diverse Muslim theologians ranging from classicists like Abu Hanifa, Ibne Humam, and Al-Suyuti to neo-classicists like Ashraf Ali Thanawi, Muhammad Shafi` and Taqi Usmani. It has been shown that how when it comes to the Holy Qur'an, the form and the contents both have been deemed inextricably linked and any attempt to sever the one from the other has been deemed as a recipe to dismantle the entire scheme not just of meaning but also of grace which inheres in the matrices of the sacred text. Arabic being the lingua sacra (the sacred language) of Islam occupies a unique position in Islamic theological and doctrinal system. Therefore, with reference to the Holy Qur'an, there exists a complex mix of the sacred, the semantic and the semiotic.

*Key Words:* Qur'an, translation, fatwa, Arabic text, publishing.

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### Revering the Inimitable

“Say: ‘If men and jinn banded together to produce the like of this Qur’an, they would never produce its like, not though they backed one another’”<sup>(1)</sup> thus runs one of the mightiest challenges of the Holy Qur’an which claims its inimitability or matchlessness (*i’jāz*). This inimitability of the Holy Qur’an, according to Muslim doctrine, is its central miraculous attribute and is enshrined in many verses of the Holy Qur’an called *Ayāt al-Tahaddi*—“Verses of Challenge”.<sup>(2)</sup> Within the Islamic theological discourse, this inimitability of the Holy Qur’an (*i’jāz al-Qur’ān*) constitutes one of the greatest proofs of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)’s prophethood.<sup>(3)</sup> The Holy Qur’an, in this way, presents itself as a direct Divine Speech which is eternal and uncreated. It is considered inimitable not just in content but also in form. The former generally includes such features as scientific precisions (cosmological, cosmographic details), historic prophecies and viability of its legislative and civic claims; whereas, the latter includes its style, narrativity, rhythms and rhetoric (*balagha*).<sup>(4)</sup>

Hence, for Muslims, the Holy Qur’an represents the verbatim Word of God (*Kalimatullāh*) as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). From this perspective, therefore, the Holy Qur’an happens to be a self-referential text within which God refers to his verses (*ayāt*)<sup>(5)</sup> as striking linguistic miracles revealed in ‘a pure Arabic tongue’ (*lisānun arabīyyun mubīn*).<sup>(6)</sup>

If the form and the content are so seamlessly wedded then obviously any attempt to separate the one from the other is not just an act of grave transgression but also a recipe of destruction for the very word of God and its import. If the Word of God is inimitable, then ipso facto it is untranslatable. How could any human being conceivably translate a text

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(1) Qur’an, 17:88.

(2) Thomas Hoffman, *The Poetic Qur’an: Studies on Qur’ānic Poeticity*. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007), 141.

(3) Stefan Wild, “Inimitability”, in Oliver Leaman, ed., *The Qur’an: An Encyclopedia* (London: Routledge, 2006), 295-296.

(4) Afnan H. Fatani, “Language and the Holy Qur’an,” in Oliver Leaman, ed., *The Qur’an: An Encyclopedia* (London: Routledge, 2006), 657-660.

(5) The Arabic word “ayah” (plural: *ayat*) means ‘verse’ as well as ‘sign’. Allah has promised in the Holy Qur’an to reveal his *ayat* (signs) to the true seeker: “We shall show them our signs on the horizons and within themselves until it will be manifest onto them that it is the Truth” (Qur’an, 41: 53).

(6) Stefan Wild, “Inimitability”, in Oliver Leaman, ed., *The Qur’an: An Encyclopedia* (London: Routledge, 2006), 295-296. 357.

which is a linguistic miracle?<sup>(1)</sup> How could an arrangement of divine sounds and words which has the ability not only to 'soften hearts' and 'shiver skins'<sup>(2)</sup> but also to 'shatter rocks'<sup>(3)</sup> and to 'subdue mountains'<sup>(4)</sup>? These were the perplexing questions and a large number of Muslim theologians and scholars devoted their energies to them over centuries. A considerable number of scholars came up with the view that translating the Holy Qur'an is just impermissible. The most remarkable example in the recent times is Shaykh Ahmad Muhammad Shakir (1882-1958), Egyptian scholar and theologian, who utterly prohibited the translation of the Holy Qur'an. To him, the Holy Qur'an was simply untranslatable, full stop.<sup>(5)</sup>

This, nevertheless, should be borne in mind that the apprehensions of some of the Muslim scholars about the translatability of their scripture are not unique to them or to Islam. The early Church officials in the history of Christianity voiced the similar apprehensions about the translations of the Bible. The hostility of the Church towards Jerome's project of translation is just one case in point. For a considerable part of the early ecclesiastical history, the Church officials also harbored such misgivings and thought that translating the Bible would undermine the stability and ideology of the Church on the one hand and lead to the sacrilege of the Divine Word on the other hand.

It is largely for these questions that whenever a translation of the Holy Qur'an was done, utmost care was taken not to call it the Holy Qur'an or to put it at par with it in any way. Similarly, it was in this vein that when Marmaduke Pickthall (1875-1936), a foremost British convert to

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(1) The distinctive linguistics and literary features of the Holy Qur'an, such as its dramatic images and intoned rhythms happen to be some of the most daunting challenges to deal with. The Holy Qur'an is also the first notable prose book in the Arabic language which was primarily endowed with a poetic tradition and ever since it has served as a prototypical model of sublimity for Arabic literature. As a sacred text, it enjoys a decisive value which is assuredly beyond that of its literary worth. Moreover, it has also been evaluated by a large number of critics and literary figures to be artistically matchless in its effect and aesthetics. It was because of this centrality of the Holy Qur'an in the Arab and subsequently in the Muslim society that the Arabic language acquired a status of an international language (see, Ismail K. Poonawala, "Koran" in *Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia*, at <http://encarta.msn.com>, (1997-2009).

(2) Qur'an, 39:23.

(3) Qur'an, 2:74.

(4) Qur'an, 59:21.

(5) Ahmad Muhammad Shakir, *Al-Qawl al-Fasl fi Tarjamat al-Qur'an al-Karim ila al-Lughat al-Ajamiyya*. (Cairo: Matbaat al-Nahda, 1925).

Islam and one of the most renowned translators of the Holy Qur'an<sup>(1)</sup>, brought out his translation, he clarified right in the *Foreword*:

The Holy Qur'an cannot be translated. That is the belief of the traditional Sheykh's and the view of the present writer. The book is here rendered almost literally and every effort has been made to choose befitting language. But the result is not the Glorious Holy Qur'an, that inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy. It is only an attempt to present the meaning of the Holy Qur'an—and peradventure something of the charm—in English. It can never take the place of the Holy Qur'an in Arabic, nor is it meant to do so.<sup>(2)</sup>

The title Marmaduke suggested for his translation is also indicative of this circumspection: *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an: Text and Explanatory Translation*. The same caution was sounded later by Abul A'la Maududi (1903-79), one of the extremely influential theologians from the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent, in the very opening sentence of the preface (*muqadma*) to his famous exegesis *Tafheemul Qur'an* (The Comprehension of the Holy Qur'an): "While looking at these submissions, no one should fall into this misunderstanding that I am writing a preface to the Holy Qur'an. This preface is not of the Holy Qur'an but of *Tafheemul Qur'an*".<sup>(3)</sup> The distinction is crucial as Muslim exegetes and scholars have been exercising utmost care not to get their words confused with the words of God.

This has always been the position of Muslim scholars, translators, exegetes (*mufasssirīn*) and hermeneuticists. At the same time, the need to understand the Word of God (*Kalimatullah*) has always been felt with extraordinary urgency. The realization of this urgency is made clear by the following quote:

The Holy Qur'an is, for Muslims, the revealed word of God. Hence, the interpretation of the Holy Qur'an (*tafsīr*) has emerged as one of the most revered disciplines in Islam. Given that the life of the early Muslims revolved around the Holy Qur'an from the

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(1) In spite of its somewhat archaic phraseology, Pickthall's translation is still unrivalled by many standards. Its exactness and conformity to the original is still widely acknowledged.

(2) Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), iii.

(3) Abul A'la Maududi, *Tafheemul Qur'an*. Vol. 1, 16th Ed. (Lahore: Idara Tarjumanul Qur'an, 1984), 1.

beginning, one of their earliest concerns was to understand the message of the sacred text.<sup>(1)</sup>

Moreover, it is also important to mention here that, though the translation and interpretation of the Holy Qur'an as a proper discipline (*ilmutafsir*, Eng. 'Science of Qur'anic Exegesis')<sup>(2)</sup> emerged over a period of time, Muslims have been associated with it right from its revelation, albeit in less formal ways. They have been reciting its verses and chapters, discussing it, reflecting upon it, attempting to explain it to one another right from the beginning.<sup>(3)</sup> It was this which later developed into a robust exegetical practice and gave birth to a hermeneutic proto-tradition in Islam.<sup>(4)</sup>

However, the scholars and translators found practical solutions over time and translations of the Holy Qur'an emerged both by Muslim and non-Muslim translators. It was, nonetheless, always enunciated in unmistakable terms that these translations would never, in any way, mean to replicate the original; rather, they would be meant to offer assistance to the reader in comprehending the Holy Qur'an. These translations were, therefore, interpretive or exegetical texts in which the translators not so much rendered the actual words but presented a paraphrase or an interpretation of them. As a result, what was translated was the *meanings* of the Holy Qur'an and not the Holy Qur'an itself. It is because of this concern that most of the translators labeled their works as translations of the *meanings* of the Holy Qur'an.<sup>(5)</sup>

These are the issues about which much has been written and said and here a brief mention of all this has been made just to establish the context. The present paper, as has been mentioned above, is not about the translation of the Holy Qur'an as such; rather, it deals with the

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(1) Abdullah Saeed, "Qur'an" in Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Vol. 11, (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2005), 7561

(2) The inauguration of meanings in the divine text and its warranted interpretation remains the topic of *tafsir* which is a special branch of learning. Very stringent demands are placed upon anyone who intends to comment upon this text. A commentator has to be well-versed in a wide range of disciplines which are known as "the sciences of the Holy Qur'an." *Tafsir* encompasses an immense body of knowledge which represents all the central theological and legal trends since the classical era.

(See, Ismail K. Poonawala, "Koran" in *Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia*, at <http://encarta.msn.com>, (1997-2009).

(3) Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Qur'an" in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Qur'an>. Retrieved on April 8, 2017.

(4) Abdullah Saeed, "Qur'an" in Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Vol. 11, (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2005), 7562.

(5) Afnan H. Fatani, "Language and the Holy Qur'an," in Oliver Leaman, ed., *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia* (London: Routledge, 2006), 669.

theologically prescribed modes of presenting the Qur'anic translations i.e. their printing and publication.

### **Inextricability of Form and Content**

In the light of the preceding discussion about the (im)permissibility of Qur'anic translations and guided by the notions of inimitability and untranslatability, it is easy to realize as to why Muslim theologians and hermeneutists called for special protocols when it came to the printing or publication of translations of the Holy Qur'an. Historically, when Muslim scholars eventually permitted translating the Holy Qur'an they made the provision of the actual Arabic text mandatory. This was done in view of the belief that Qur'anic form as well as its contents is inextricable not just at the semantic and stylistic levels but also at the semiotic, symbolic, impressionistic and pragmatic levels.<sup>(1)</sup> The form is divinely ordained and is not a mere receptacle of meaning or a vehicle of God's intents. Instead, it is constitutive of meaning and a repository of divine grace which abides in the very soul of Islam and which has been permeating its civilization and literature. Therefore, a translation of the Holy Qur'an was prescribed to be accompanied by the source text as it was this source text which was thought to be operating as the syntactic, paradigmatic and discursive template against which all translational moves were to be assessed and negotiated.

The earliest known views on this issue are traceable to Abu Hanifa (d. 767), one of the exceptionally renowned Muslim theologians and Imams of Muslim jurisprudence (*fiqh*). To him, it is altogether permissible to translate the Holy Qur'an but the translation must be accompanied by the actual Arabic text. Publishing just the translation is, however, not permissible.<sup>(2)</sup> Abu Hanifa's verdict served as a prototype for the latter Hanafi scholars who upheld it and further elaborated its details and particulars. Among them, mention must be made of Hasan Bin Ammar Al-Sharnbali (d. 1139), Burhan al-Din al-Marghinani (d. 1197), and Qawamuddin Muhammad Bin Ahmad (d. 1336).

The next figure who devoted considerable energy and talent to this issue is Ibne Humam (d. 1457), a celebrated Egyptian jurist and a notable

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(1) Even in the realm of purely secular textualities it is not uncommon to call for special protocols while dealing with the so-called *definitive* texts. For example, Walter Benjamin, a renowned German translation scholar and philosopher, treats poetry as a definitive text and asks for special procedures to translate it. To him poetry is *definitive* because it is sacred i.e. *ineffable* and perhaps untranslatable. This untranslatability flows from the fact that form and content are inseparable. So, in this regard, the translatability remains predetermined by the original (See, Sergio Gabriel Waisman, *Borges and Translation: The Irreverence of the Periphery*, NJ: Bucknell University Press, 2005) 61.

(2) Marmaduke Pickthall. *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 422.

theologian. He categorically declared the presentation (i.e. publishing) of Qur'anic translation without the Arabic text impermissible. However, he worked out some concessions as well:

It is stated in al-Kafi, if a person makes a habit of recitation in Persian or intends to publish the Holy Qur'an in Persian he will be stopped. If he does so for one or two verses, he will not be stopped. However, if he writes the Holy Qur'an, and the interpretation of each letter and its translation, this is permissible.<sup>(1)</sup>

Quoting Ibne Humam to this effect is remarkable as his is the most articulate and clearest opinion on this subject. In the second volume of his mammoth work *Fathul Qadīr*, he deals with this issue at length. The prohibition laid down by him is both oral and verbal. This is arguably due to the dual status of the Holy Qur'an according to which it is the Speech (*Al-Kalām*) as well as the Book (*Al-Kitāb*). Therefore, to Ibne Humam, the Holy Qur'an cannot be 'recited' in any language other than Arabic and, similarly, the interpretation and/or translation of the Holy Qur'an must accompany its actual text.<sup>(2)</sup>

Jalal al-Din Al-Suyuti (d. 1505), an Egyptian scholar of Shāfi'ī School, a juristic expert and one of the most prolific writers of his age, also upheld the position taken by his predecessor, Ibne Humam. He dealt with the matter in his landmark book *Al-Itqān fi 'Ulum Al-Qur'an* ("The Perfect Guide to the Sciences of the Holy Qur'an"). According to Al-Suyuti, a translation which does not have the actual Arabic text with it should be wrapped in a cloth and buried in a graveyard.<sup>(3)</sup> It is interesting to note that burial is sign of respect in Islam and the same treatment is meted out to the worn-out copies of the Holy Qur'an i.e. the worn-out copies of the Holy Qur'an are prescribed to be wrapped in cloth and buried on some holy ground where they are not likely to be trampled on.<sup>(4)</sup>

Therefore, although a translation is not considered at par with the actual Qur'an, it however enjoys the same protocols, in terms of respect as per Al-Suyuti's understanding. This is understandable given the extraordinary veneration Muslims routinely display towards the Holy Qur'an and anything (even remotely) associated with it. Some other Muslim scholars have also prescribed the same protocols for a translation as well as the actual Qur'an. For instance it is not permissible to touch the

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(1) Ibne Humam, *Sharḥ Fath al-Qadīr* (Cairo: Al-Maktabah al-Tijārīyah al-Kubrā, 1897), 248.

(2) Ibid.

(3) Jalaluddin Al-Suyuti, *Al-Itqan fi Ulum Al-Qur'an. Vol. 2*, (Beirut: Dar Ihya' Al-Ulum, 1996), 187.

(4) Kristina Myrvold, *The Death of Sacred Texts: Ritual Disposal and Renovation of Texts in World* (Farnham Surrey English: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 89.

Holy Qur'an without ablution<sup>(1)</sup> and, by analogy, some scholars have prohibited touching a translation of the Holy Qur'an without ablution<sup>(2)</sup>. Muhammad Bin Ismail Al-Tahtawi (d. 1231) took the same position which was reiterated four centuries later in *Fatawa-e-Alamgiri*. However, this view has its detractors as well and there are scholars who declare it permissible to touch an exegesis (*tafsīr*) of the Holy Qur'an without ablution<sup>(3)</sup> and, obviously, an exegesis is more than a translation. The rationale they advance is quite simple and intuitive: a translation is never at par with the actual Qur'an.

Abu Hanifa, Ibne Humam and Al-Suyuti essentially speak from the classicist tradition of Islam but they do have their counterparts among the neo-classicists whose ideas are presented below.

Ashraf Ali Thanawi (d. 1943), arguably one of the most far-reaching neo-classicists, has also declared it prohibited to publish a translation of the Holy Qur'an without providing the corresponding Arabic text. To him, such a practice would result in the same fate which the previous religious scriptures have met—loss of the actual text. He also maintained that this practice, in the end, would result in the distortions, textual modifications and even a total replacement of the Holy Qur'an. The earlier religions have gone this way and their adherents fell into disputes and, over time, different faith communities developed serious schisms. The presence of the original text, therefore, is the only practical way to settle or negotiate the semantic disputes and differences.<sup>(4)</sup>

Lastly, to Thanawi, the presence of the Arabic text will be a constant semiotic and impressionistic reminder for the reader that whatever he or she is reading is not the actual word of God, but its human interpretation. Hence, any kind of errors and omissions would be unlikely to be attributed to God as such.<sup>(5)</sup>

In continuation with the neo-classical tradition, the former Grand Mufti of Pakistan, Muhammad Shafi` (d. 1976) issued a detailed fatwa about this issue citing the notable theologians of the past and underscoring

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(1)“Touching or holding Quran in hand without wadu?” *Fatwa*. Darul Ifta, Darul Uloom Deoband, India. URL: <https://darulifta-deoband.com/home/en/The-Holy-Quran/57323>.

(2) Mufti Abdurrahman ibn Yusuf. *Fiqh Al-Imām* (Birmingham: White Thread Press, 2004), 74.

(3) Ibn Abidin Shami, *Radd al-Mukhtar*. Vol. 1, (Karachi: Maktabah Rasheediyah, 2000), 177.

(4)Yousaf Shabbir, *Prohibition of Publishing a Translation of the Qur' ān Without the Arabic Text*, available at: <<https://nawaader.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/can-Qur'an-translation-be-published-without-the-arabic-text-dec-2016.pdf> >. Retrieved on April 8, 2017.

(5)Muhammad Shafi`, *Jawahirul Fiqh*. Vol. 2, (Karachi: Maktaba Darul-Uloom, 2010), 110.

the implications of publishing a translation of the Holy Qur'an without providing the actual Arabic text. He dealt with this question at length in his mammoth 7-volume work: *Jawahirul Fiqh* (The Gems of Jurisprudence). According to him:

To publish or print just the translation of the Holy Qur'an is unanimously impermissible and forbidden as per the consensus of the Four Imams as is evidenced by the narrations and judgements of the Four Schools. If its publication and printing is impermissible, its buying and selling is also impermissible as it amounts to aiding the sinning. Therefore, the seller, the buyer, the publisher will be guilty of this act.<sup>(1)</sup>

The fatwa was ratified by a large number of prominent Muslim scholars and jurists such as Idrees Kandhelwi (d. 1974), Mufti Mahmud Hasan Gangohi (d. 1996), Mufti Masood Ahamd (d. 1980), Mufti Farooq Ahmad (d. 1989), Mufti Abdul Rehman (d. 1999), Maulana Zahurul Hassan (d. 1977), Maulana Asad Ullah (d. 1996), Maulana Abdul Latif (d. 2001), and others.<sup>(2)</sup> Mufti Saeed Ahmad, the former Grand Mufti of Darul Uloom Deoband India also sanctioned the fatwa and added the following explanatory note:

To publish or print the translation of the Holy Qur'an without the Arabic original is not permissible. Reading from it and purchasing it is not permissible. Muslims should take all possible action against the publishers to stop the publication of such translations.<sup>(3)</sup>

Mufti Mahmood Hasan Gangohi (d. 1996), the Grand Mufti of India, also discussed this issue at length in his monumental 20-volume *Fataawa Mahmoodiyah*. Gangohi not only expressed the prohibition against printing or publishing just the translation but also articulated his apprehensions by describing the long-term effects of such a practice. Besides, to lend credibility to his verdict he also made a mention of the four canonical imams of Sunni jurisprudence:

The Holy Qur'an was revealed in Arabic. Its translation and interpretation is acceptable in any language but preserving and printing the actual Arabic text is mandatory. Removing the actual text and providing the exact numbering of sections and chapters may result in the illusion of equating a translation with the Holy

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(1) Ibid., 103.

(2) Yousaf Shabbir, *Prohibition of Publishing a Translation of the Qur' ān Without the Arabic Text*, available at: < <https://nawaader.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/can-Qur'an-translation-be-published-without-the-arabic-text-dec-2016.pdf> >. Retrieved on April 8, 2017.

(3) Muhammad Shafi`, *Jawahirul Fiqh*. Vol. 2, (Karachi: Maktaba Darul-Uloom, 2010), 113.

Qur'an itself. This is a strong possibility. It is probable that, over time, the ritual prayers also begin to be recited in translation and so on and so forth. Given these probabilities, this practice is impermissible according to the four canonical Imams [as well].<sup>1</sup>

To a question whether it is permissible to read the Holy Qur'an in Urdu, he replied that it is impermissible to read the Holy Qur'an just in Urdu. However, if the Arabic text is given, then it can be read in Urdu but that too as a translation. Printing, publishing, selling or buying just a translation of the Holy Qur'an is prohibited.<sup>2</sup> Gongohi has also cited other Muslim scholars such as Imam Shami and Ibne Humam. Gangohi's treatment of the subject is very elaborate and in his fatwa he dedicates about eleven pages to the discussion of this issue. So much so that he has proscribed writing the Holy Qur'an in any script other than the canonical 'Uthmanic Script: "One must follow the script of 'Uthmanic version. Using any other script, even Arabic script, is prohibited and proscribed. The four canonical Imams have consensus on this issue, nay, the whole Muslim Ummah has consensus on this issue".<sup>3</sup> Muhammad Taqi Usmani (1943- ), a renowned Hanafi scholar from Pakistan, Head of Darul Uloom Karachi and one of the former judges of Federal Shariat Court, also issued a fatwa prohibiting the printing or publishing of the Holy Qur'anic translation without the Arabic text. This is how he worked out his rationale:

Ulama [Muslim scholars] have clarified that it is not allowed in Sharia to print or publish the translation of the Holy Qur'an without its Arabic text. It may be observed that the people of other religions have allowed to publish the translation of their holy books without the original texts and, consequently, the translations have spread so widely that the original texts was lost and are not available today. In order to avoid such a fate, it was held by the Muslim jurists that a translation of the Holy Qur'an should always be accompanied by the Arabic text of the Holy book.<sup>4</sup>

Another notable Deobandi scholar from Pakistan who expressed a categorical prohibition against printing or publishing the translation without providing the corresponding Arabic text is Mufti Abdul Haq (1949 - ), Grand Mufti at Darul Uloom Jamia Haqqania Akora Khattak, one of the most famous seminaries in Pakistan. According to him, "The scholars

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(1)Mahmud Hasan Gongohi, *Fatawa Mehmoodiya*. Vol. 3, (Karachi: Darul Ifta Jamia Farooqia, n.d.), 219.

(2) Ibid., 509.

(3) Ibid., 508

(4)Taqi Usmani, *Fataw-e-Usmani*. Vol. 2, (Karachi, Maktaba Ma'ariful Qur'an, 2010), 278.

of Ummah have arrived at the consensus that translating the Holy Qur'an without giving the corresponding Arabic text is prohibited. Such an act has to be strictly avoided".<sup>1</sup>

Last fatwa which merits mention from the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent is from Jamia Farooqia Karachi, another leading seminary in Pakistan. It is by far the most detailed fatwa in this regard and has been issued not by a single mufti but by a panel of scholars (*Darul Ifta*). The fatwa describes not just the prohibition of printing the Holy Qur'an without the actual Arabic text but also gives a detailed account of its ramifications:<sup>2</sup>

- Reciting the Holy Qur'anic text entails reward for the reciter which is obviously not the case with reciting just a translation.
- Such translations would in time distance Muslims from the actual scriptural text.
- Such translations are more likely to be taken by the masses as non-sacred or less than sacred and, as a result, bear a greater chance of sacrilege and disrespect.
- This will be going the ways of Jews and Christians who eventually lost their actual scriptures by embracing this practice.
- It will lead to the erroneous beliefs and the difference found among the translations would, in time, be thought to be the differences enshrined in the Holy Qur'an.
- In the end, it will lead to the distortion of the Holy Qur'an.
- It will lead to the fragmentation of the Holy Qur'an which by definition is a whole (*kul*). The Holy Qur'an will be fragmented as per different genres present in it i.e. stories, commandments, ethical injunctions, etc.

One might be surprised at the number of fatwas about this issue coming with remarkable consistency from one place-the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent. This however becomes clear when the historic fact is taken into account that it was in the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent where the first notable, widely acknowledged translation of the Holy Qur'an was done by Shah Waliullah (d. 1762), a notable theologian and reformer.<sup>3</sup> It is also important to note that in many ways Shah Waliullah's translation was a

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(1) Abdul Had, *Fatawa-e-Haqqania*. Vol. 2, (Akora Khattak: Darul Uloom Jamia Haqqania, n.d.), 171.

(2) "Kia Farmate Hein Ulam-e-Deen?", 2015, available at: <<http://www.farooqia.com/ur/lib/1436/07/p35.php>>. Retrieved on April 8, 2017.

(3) Shah Waliullah translated the Holy Qur'an when the Mogul Empire was declining and the European maritime powers were making their presence felt all over the Indian Subcontinent. He undoubtedly exercised a great influence on Muslim religious thought (See, Prashant More, *Muslim Identity, Print Culture, and the Dravidian Factor in Tamil Nadu* (London: Orient Longman, 2008), 106.

kind of prime mover as before him, there was hardly a notable translation of the Holy Qur'an, not just in the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent but also in the rest of the world, which earned that much popularity and theological acceptance. Most of the translations done before him came from Christian polemicists who were actuated more by an animosity against Islam than a genuine urge to understand the meaning of the Holy Qur'an.<sup>1</sup> None of them could find any remarkable favor with the Muslims at large.

Waliullah's was a Persian translation and was central to his grand mission—taking Muslims back to the Holy Qur'an. Nevertheless, how could they go back to the Holy Qur'an if they did not understand it? This is what informed Waliullah about the inevitability of translation and he set about rendering the Holy Qur'an into Persian, the cultural and academic language of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Indian Muslims. This elucidation can help us understand the reasons as to why so many Muslim scholars from the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent devoted so much of their energies and time to the question of (im)permissibility of translating the Holy Qur'an and the 'right' mode of its printing or publication.

Finally, outside the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent, mention must be made of Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Muhammad Mustafa al-Maraghi (d. 1945) who issued a fatwa in 1936 which stipulated that the "translations of the meanings [of the Holy Qur'an]... should be printed next to the text concerned".<sup>2</sup> It is largely due to this fatwa that most of the translations published thereafter, not just in Arab countries but also elsewhere, were in the form of parallel texts, with the actual Arabic text facing the translation. Parallel translation format of this kind performed different functions such as asserting the secondary nature of translation and ensuring the quick access to the source text for crosschecking. Parallel translations have traditionally been proposed for comparative linguistics and literary studies where translation is a sensitive issue (e.g. with biblical texts).<sup>3</sup>

Lastly, the indispensability of form in the context of the Holy Qur'an can be appreciated by this also that some of the Muslim theologians prescribe that even if a translation is intended for non-Muslims, it must have the Arabic text. They contend that the visual ambience wrought by the actual Arabic text possesses a miraculous effect of its own and a mere

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(1) Lynne Long, "The Translation of the Sacred Texts", in Millán & Bartrina, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Translation Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 364.

(2) Ahmad Ibrahim Mehanna, *Dirasa Hawl Tarjamat al-Qur'an al-Karim* (Cairo: Al-Shab Publications, 1978), 22.

(3) Anke Lüdeling & Merja Kytö, *Corpus Linguistics: An International Handbook*. Vol. 2, (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009), 141.

glance at the Qur'anic words and sentences has the potential to transform the hearts of men.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Notion of *Lingua Sacra***

To further appreciate the inextricability of the form and the content with reference to the Holy Qur'an, it is imperative to realize the *lingua sacra* status of Arabic in Islam. It may sometimes appear difficult for Western scholars of religion to appreciate the significance of a *lingua sacra* and the role it plays in certain religious traditions probably because there is not sacred language in Christianity.<sup>2</sup> The same is the case with Buddhism, another Eastern religion with considerable appeal in the Euro-American world.

There are French, English, German, Urdu, Czech, Mandarin, Zulu translations of the Bible without containing the actual Greek text and these translations are used by the local Christians speaking these languages for liturgical, devotional and catechetical purposes. It is because of the fact that in Christianity the Word of God (*Logos*) is not the Testament but Christ Himself.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it matters little whether someone offers mass in German, Urdu or for that matter in Spanish.<sup>4</sup> Even Ecclesiastical Latin has been a liturgical language, not a sacred language.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, with reference to Buddhism, there are Spanish, Hindi, Japanese, Malay translations of the Tripitaka without including the actual Sanskrit or Pali text and, likewise, a Buddhist can perform the ritual functions in any of the translated languages. In Buddhism there is no notion of God, let alone His Word. One does not need to perform the Buddhist rituals in either Sanskrit or Pali and the religious texts can be read in any language.<sup>6</sup>

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(1)Yousaf Shabbir, *Prohibition of Publishing a Translation of the Qur' ān Without the Arabic Text*, available at: < <https://nawaader.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/can-Qur'an-translation-be-published-without-the-arabic-text-dec-2016.pdf> >. Retrieved on April 8, 2017.

(2)Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), 32.

(3) Colossians 1:19; 2:9

(4) To John Sawyer, Christian rituals, rites and ceremonies are not commemorated in any single sacred language. Various denominations with origin dating back to the early Apostles continued employing the standard languages for a certain period of time. Among them include: Koine Greek, Ecclesiastical Latin, Church Slavonic, Classical Armenian, Old Georgian, Ge'ez, Syriac and Coptic (See, John Sawyer, *Sacred Languages and Sacred Texts* (New York: Routledge, 2000). 124-132.

(5)Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (Manchester: George Allen and Unwin, 1970), 34.

(6)Jack Maguire, *Essential Buddhism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs and Practices* (London: Pocket Books, 2001), 119-126.

Nevertheless, the case of Islam is different as the status of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is that of a messenger (*Rasūl*). Therefore it is crucial that there has to be a sacred language—a providentially chosen vehicle of expression to be used by a messenger. In this context, Islam resembles Judaism and Hinduism as both of them have their respective sacred languages and all ritual functions are required to be performed in these languages i.e. Hebrew and Sanskrit.<sup>1</sup> This indispensability of Hebrew to Judaism and Sanskrit to Hinduism has been summed up by Seyyed Hossein Nasr:

An orthodox Jew could write Jewish philosophy and theology in Arabic as Maimonides did, but he could not perform his rites or read the Torah ritually in anything but Hebrew. He could make a philological or philosophical analysis of the Torah in another language, let us say Greek as was done by Philo, but he could not participate in the “Divine Presence” of the Book of God except through the sacred language of Judaism. In Hinduism, one could read the Vedas a hundred times in Bengali, but again, in the religious rites, a Brahmin must chant the Vedas in Sanskrit.<sup>2</sup>

In this way, with regard to the role of a sacred language, what is true of Judaism and Hinduism is also true of Islam. Thus, these three religions have their *lingua sacra* which renders the relation between form and content inseparable and which is responsible for turning a sacred text into a ‘scripture’. It is also important to note here that the literal meaning of the word *Qur’an* is “Recitation”; hence the crucial role played by *Qira’at* (“Recitation”) in Islam from rituals to everyday conduct of life. The correct rendering of this recitation also requires the intactness of the form of the Holy Qur’an for all time to come. In this way, form appears to be not just a locus of Qur’anic orthography but also a place of its structural aesthetics, its systemic elegance and organizational artistry.

### Conclusion

The Holy Qur’an is the definitive reference point for Muslims the world over who venerate it as the ultimate expression of the divine. Besides furnishing Muslims with a central worldview from which Islamic

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(1)To various scholars, Hinduism is conventionally deemed to have two liturgical languages: Tamil and Sanskrit. The Sanskrit language is the scriptural language of Bhagavadgita, the Vedas, Puranas like the Upanishads and Bhagavatam as well as some other liturgical and devotional texts i.e. Chamakam, the Sahasranama and Rudram. It is also the language of most of the Hindu rites and rituals. An ancient myth has it that Tamil and Sanskrit emerged from the either side of Shiva’s Drum of Creation (See, Vasudha Narayanan, *Hinduism* (Philadelphia: The Rosen Publishing Group, 2010). 37.

(2)Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), 35.

culture and civilization have originated, it has deeply influenced a wide range of disciplines and perspectives. Here we see literature, arts, criticism, lexicography and syntax all influenced by the Qur'anic text both in their form and content. Calligraphy on the orthographic plane and recitation<sup>1</sup> on the oral plane reiterate the centrality of the form to the meaning and grace which inheres therein.

In this paper, by undertaking a historic study of notable fatwas by the classicists and neo-classicists, we have surveyed the mainstream Muslim theolinguistic attitudes towards the publication of Qur'anic translations. In the context of the Holy Qur'an, form and content are inextricable to the extent that both are seamlessly wedded and divinely ordained to be as such. By taking into account such notions as inimitability, untranslatability and *lingua sacra*, we have shown how Muslim theologians and scholars have proscribed printing or publishing translation of the Holy Qur'an without the actual Arabic text. In the context of the Holy Qur'an, there exists a complex mix of the sacred, the semantic and the semiotic. The "Inimitability of the Holy Qur'an" (*i'jaz al-Qur'an*) is as much of the form as of the content. If the form and the content are so deeply connected then evidently any attempt to sever the one from the other is not just an act of serious transgression but also a recipe of the destruction for God's Word (*Kalimatullah*). In *Ilmutafsīr* (Muslim hermeneutical-exegetical proto-tradition) precise principles were laid down in order to ensure that translations are not in any way deemed at par with the Holy Qur'an. It is because of these apprehensions that Muslim theologians called for special protocols when it came to the printing or publishing of Qur'anic translations and the presence of the source text was taken as a syntactic, paradigmatic and discursive template against which all translational moves were to be assessed and negotiated.

To this effect, we have presented and discussed the fatwas of such renowned Muslim theologians as Abu Hanifa, Hasan Bin Ammar al-Sharnbali, Ibne Humam, Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, Ashraf Ali Thanawi, Muhammad Shafi`, Taqi Usmani, Abdul Haq, etc. The prohibition laid down by these theologians and scholars is both oral and verbal i.e. a Qur'anic translation cannot be printed or published without providing the actual Arabic text and the Holy Qur'an cannot be 'recited' in any other language except Arabic. This is due to the dual status of the Holy Qur'an according to which it is the Speech (*Kalām*) as well as the Book (*Kitāb*). To these theologians, the omission of the Arabic text from the translation would result in the same fate which the previous religious scriptures have

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(1)At times, it takes the form of ecstatic mystic chanting based upon abstract modular improvisations that arrange motifs in complex vocal genres.

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met—loss of the actual text. Lastly, the presence of the Arabic text was considered a constant semiotic and impressionistic reminder for the reader that whatever he or she is reading is not the actual word of God, but its human interpretation.