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Translating Quran for today

By **Laleh Bakhtiar**
Published April 15, 2007

After spending 40 years studying, writing and translating books related to the Quran, I realized that something was missing: an objective, universal and inclusive translation of the Quran from its classical Arabic into contemporary English. Most of the 17 English translations I had seen included some interpretation of the verses—making a direct comparison between the English and Arabic extremely difficult. Plus, many of the English translations continue to use Arabic words and names, such as Allah for God, which can be confusing or even off-putting to new readers.

I wanted an English translation that would be readily understood regardless of a person's faith, perhaps because mine had evolved over time. I grew up in America with a Protestant mother while my father, a Muslim, lived in Iran. She brought me to America when I was 6 months old and sent me to Catholic school in Washington, where for years I worshiped as a Catholic. It was many years later when I went to Iran that I met my mentor, the author and professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr. He asked me what religion I practiced. I said that I had grown up as a Catholic and admitted that I knew nothing about Islam. He said: "Well, learn!"

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That encouragement to learn has spanned more than four decades. I eventually earned a master's degree in religious studies, studied classical Quranic grammar, taught Islam at the Lutheran School of Theology (part of the University of Chicago). I wrote 20 books on Islam, and translated 25 books about Islam and the Quran from Persian to English. The method I used for this new translation of the Quran is actually the same method used by

the translators of the King James Version of the Bible. Like them, I looked at each instance of a word in context throughout the text before determining the most appropriate English translation. Unlike my 17th Century counterparts, however, I had the benefit of a computer, and I used it to create a database containing the 40,000 nouns and verbs of the Quran (known as the Arabic Concordance) and the 50,000 particles of speech. This helped me to be accurate and consistent.

When news of my English translation of the Quran spread, I wasn't surprised that some Islamic scholars dismissed me as lacking in academic scholarship. It is interesting that the translation by Yusuf Ali is one of the most popular in English while, according to his only biographer, he was not a scholar of Islamic studies, but, rather, a leading

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Indian Muslim who represented British India on the world stage. Another popular translation is by (Mohammed) Marmaduke William Pickthall, a famous English writer and Muslim convert. Could it be that the issue wasn't one of academic rigor but related to my gender instead?

I also wasn't surprised when people asked me if mine was a "feminist" translation of the Quran. Actually, it is the translation of a "spiritual advocate" (*fatat* in Arabic). A spiritual advocate is someone who rises above gender issues seeking fairness and justice for all, constantly striving for the sake of others and struggling to replace vices like jealousy, greed, lust and anger with virtues of mercy, compassion and forgiveness.

My vision, ultimately, is to see my database used by publishers throughout the world, so that other translators can go through the same process I did to bring the Quran fully into their own language and culture. Then we shall have the resources for a true, cross-cultural understanding of Islam. And we shall, I hope, have a better basis for understanding each other, Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Laleh Bakhtiar is a former lecturer at the University of Chicago. Her translation of the Quran from classical Arabic to contemporary English will be in bookstores this week.

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