

Review of Readings in the Qur'an, by Kenneth Cragg

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Readings in the Qur'an. By Kenneth Cragg. Pp. 389. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1999 (reprint of original 1988 edition).

Teachers (or students) in religious studies seeking a brief initial introduction to the Qur'an are necessarily forced to choose between the close study of a few key *sūras*, or an 'anthology' offering a wider selection of purportedly representative passages and themes. Bishop Cragg's translation, which offers colloquial prose versions of rough-

ly two-thirds of the Qur'an, divided among eight broad thematic chapters, is probably the most elaborate effort at following the latter pedagogical approach. His entirely unannotated selections are relatively long (typically 10–20 verses apiece). They are supplemented by a short glossary of unfamiliar Arabic place and personal names and topical index of key themes, and are complemented by indexes enabling readers to locate quickly both the omitted sections and his versions of particular *sūras* and verses.

The translator has also provided a long (seventy-page), four-part Introductory Essay which is definitely *not* directed toward or suitable for readers approaching the Qur'an or the study of Islam for the first time; those teachers wishing to use this particular translation for such lay audiences would need to supplement it from the many handbooks and explicitly introductory volumes now available in English. In fact, each of the opening essays – on 'The Qur'an at First Meeting', 'The Qur'an in Its Themes: The Logic of Selection', 'The Qur'an into English: A Translator's Apology', and 'The Qur'an For Today: Contemporary Concerns' – reflects the author's own lifelong intellectual concerns with Christian-Muslim dialogue. As such, each of those sections is a highly condensed, erudite, generally irenic explanation designed to explain and justify the translator's own carefully balanced positions vis-à-vis the very different approaches and understandings of traditionally-educated Muslim and Christian religious scholars and some more recent academic textual, historical and interpretive approaches. A familiarity with those multiple highly-specialised audiences and their respective assumptions (and presumed interests) is assumed throughout, in ways that would be alternately baffling and (more dangerously) highly misleading for the uninitiated.

The more learned reader, though, will probably be most interested in the author's two essays explaining his own method of selection and arrangement, and his personal approach to the issues of translation. As Bishop Cragg points out, his order of exposition is largely inspired by the works of al-Ghazālī and the traditions of *kalām* underlying that classical theologian's approach in his masterworks of religious pedagogy. Thus the translator's eight major sections begin with God and the divine attributes; move through creation and the special role of humanity to the earlier prophets; and then turn successively to the role of Muḥammad in Mecca and Medina, to the general precepts of faith, and to legal and social passages, concluding with eschatology. Within each larger section, the selected Qur'anic passages are ordered according to the translator's own expository ends (i.e., not according to their original chapter or chronological order), but the considerable length of each selection means that readers are not spared the necessity of coming to terms with the distinctive interpenetration

of ideas, themes and forms of expression so typical of the Qur'an. Indeed, since this version does include roughly two-thirds of the Qur'an, there is some uncertainty as to what principle was actually used to choose verses *not* translated: only an avoidance of 'repetition' is mentioned explicitly, although presumably many passages normally demanding an involved commentary (since there are no footnotes) may also have been set aside.

The author's discussion of translation issues covers a range of very basic problems which will be familiar to anyone involved with the interpretation and communication of the Qur'an in any context. However, here again the uninitiated reader would have no idea that the central problems of Qur'an translation (into English or other Indo-European languages) have to do not so much with general qualities of the Arabic language, but with precise and *unique* characteristics of Qur'anic form and expression which are integrally connected to its meanings and interpretation. Nor is there any suggestion that this translator has reflected on the multiple ways those distinctive Qur'anic features continued to shape and inspire the creative 'translation' of Qur'anic forms and meanings in the visual, poetic and musical traditions of the Islamic humanities into other languages and cultures down through the centuries; in this respect, in particular, the contrast with the breadth of perspective and insight underlying Arberry's translation is radical and fundamental. Nor, finally, is there any indication of a consideration of comparable examples – and translation challenges – of 'revealed' oracular, metaphysical speech from other religious and poetic traditions around the world; here the comparison with T. Cleary's recent comparable anthology of *The Essential Koran* (1993) is particularly striking.

Finally, the concluding essay takes up two distinct issues. 'The Qur'an in Commentary in Our Time' is a salutary critique of the 'scientising', painfully apologetic thread in many recent 'modernist' Qur'an commentaries, while 'The Qur'an in a Converse of Faiths' situates this translation in the author's own lifelong concern for inter-religious understanding, reflected in his prolific books and other efforts in that domain. The usefulness of this remarkable translation in that respect is something that readers will need to judge for themselves: modern translations of the Qur'an – like their more creative and spiritually effective equivalents in the manifold traditions of the Islamic humanities – necessarily have to focus on communicating particular dimensions of meaning in ways accessible to particular audiences. In this case, nothing in the translator's introductory discussions really prepares the reader for the radically prosaic, 'uncomplicated' simple expository form of the resulting translation, entirely devoid of footnotes and even of cumbersome verse divisions – not to mention any hint of the distinctive Qur'anic interplay of multiple voices, perspec-

tives, time-shifts and ambiguous pronominal references, or the multiple meanings and irreducible mysteries of even the most basic and recurrent Qur'anic vocabulary and symbolism. Instead, the unsuspecting reader will encounter here something as close as could possibly be imagined to the straightforward expository, fluid narrative prose of a modern English-language Bible, a discovery that will certainly ease any anxieties of students encountering the Qur'an (and Islam) for the first time. While this approach to Qur'an translation may facilitate certain kinds of elementary understanding, it also risks giving rise to all sorts of more profound (both intellectual and spiritual) *faux amis*.

On the other hand, those readers – of whatever background – who are not so persuaded that the distinctive forms of Qur'anic expression are radically separable from its meanings, or so convinced that Qur'anic vocabulary is unproblematically mirrored in today's English (e.g., that *īmān* is even remotely related to 'beliefs') will certainly view our common human tasks of communication and understanding in a different, and undoubtedly much more demanding, light.

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