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Qur'an Translation and the Challenges of Communication: Towards a 'Literal' Study-Version of the Qur'an

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1. Introduction

We live in an era in which the wider significance and demand for translations of the Qur'an, among Muslims and non-Muslims alike, has become far greater than at any time in the past. To begin with, the recent dramatic global growth in multicultural communities, which can only increase in coming generations, means that a much wider, essentially non-Muslim audience in many different parts of the world is inevitably obliged to turn to the Qur'an – almost always *in translation* – in the search for the bases of deeper mutual understanding. No less importantly, in much of the traditionally Islamic world the traditional primary educational forms (the *maktab* schools) of initiating Muslims (especially non-Arabic speakers) into the basics of the Arabic script and the sounds and recitation of Qur'anic verses have been abandoned or inadequately replaced, so that an increasingly significant proportion of those non-Arab Muslims also are obliged to turn to translations of the Qur'an for all the multiple roles it necessarily plays in the practice and deepening of their faith. While the examples given below usually refer to issues in translating for English speakers, that restriction is only for the sake of brevity; the same types of issues normally arise in translating into any non-Islamic language. Moreover, it is especially important to keep in mind that many of the broader problems discussed below are not simply language-specific, but are more deeply embedded in the specific cultural assumptions and expectations of *different audiences* sharing the same language.¹

The concern of this essay is not primarily with particular learned issues of the text and detailed understanding of the Arabic Qur'an itself. Rather, it is with the other, far more complex and multi-faceted, side of the communication equation: the *audience*, and its understanding (or, unfortunately, more often its profound misunderstanding) of the translated version. The underlying problem, which is a pitfall familiar enough to all of us who spend much of our time translating from one religion, culture, or language to another, is that the published translators of the Qur'an seem to have been so concerned with efforts and interpretations of earlier translators and commentators, and with the learned reactions of their scholarly colleagues and potential critics, that

they seem to have ignored the primordial question of the actual effects of their versions on their wider audiences. The resulting failure in communication, which teachers in Islamic and related religious studies have to deal with anew each semester,² can be summed up in the basic observation that (a) many of the most fundamental dimensions of the Qur'an are simply not getting across to their audiences; and (b) what is coming across, especially through the use of familiar (but overcharged and grossly misleading) Biblical English expressions, completely distorts the most essential Qur'anic ideas and expressions.

This last point deserves further expansion, given the fact that virtually all the extant English Qur'an translations are still profoundly rooted – whether consciously and intentionally, or simply by following earlier models – in a semantic universe of allusions and parallels to the language and symbolism of Bible translations, a procedure which was once both natural and unavoidable, given the centrality of the King James version and associated Protestant ideas and interpretations, at the most widespread popular, everyday level, in the cultural and religious life of most English-speaking nations over the past four centuries. Yet teachers in religious studies, whatever their specialisation, are painfully aware that we now live in the first generations in which the large majority of university graduates complete their education not only with no significant reading contact with *any* portion of the Biblical canon, but certainly without the constant, everyday liturgical and practical religious contact with Bible translations in the way that is necessary both for illuminating their spiritual meanings and reference points, and for 'correcting' and refreshing the essential connections between their symbolic language and the perennial realities of spiritual life. The outcome of this revolutionary cultural transformation, however, has not at all been to return the meanings of the Biblical English vocabulary to some pristine, dictionary-defined state of linguistic innocence, but rather to leave the central everyday religious vocabulary of English-speaking cultures still powerfully charged with often highly complex – and almost always unconscious, taken-for-granted, and closely intertwined – meanings and associations shaped both by deeply embedded cultural givens (e.g., notions of 'original sin' and 'religions' defined by beliefs) and by a hodge-podge of potent (and again largely unconscious) mass-media-based images slowly accumulated from childhood onward. Without entering into the obvious dilemmas this dramatic cultural development poses for those teaching about Christianity or Judaism, it suffices to observe that virtually *nothing* in the contemporary semantic fields of English Biblical vocabulary corresponds to the affective, symbolic and wider semantic fields of Qur'anic Arabic. The natural result is that the recurrent usage of a few basic English terms such as 'belief' (a notion which is completely non-existent in the Qur'an), 'faith' (semantically assumed to be the opposite of knowing and reason), 'slave' or 'hell' can be guaranteed to render serious understanding of the Qur'an, not

to mention all the other dimensions of Islamic civilisation rooted in the language and world-view of the Qur'an, utterly impossible.

Here it is important to keep in mind that the same wider cultural transformations, both globally and more locally within many new nation-state regimes (often defined in historically new linguistic and religious terms), also raise analogous challenges of translation even for traditionally Islamic languages. Wherever regimes or powerful socio-political movements have succeeded in relatively monopolising the local definitions of Qur'anic language in the restrictive, locally-defined socio-political terms of their particular ideology, anyone attempting to teach, translate or communicate the universal meanings and language of the Qur'an is likewise obliged to reinvent or discover a 'new', alternative vocabulary and forms of expression that can continue to convey spiritual realities outside the confines of the traditional language that has been reduced to ideology. The phenomenon in question is widespread enough, throughout new Muslim nation-states, that there should be no need to specify the languages in question.

Finally, on a more positive note, Qur'anic scholars cannot help but note that a host of new *technological* options for communication, especially ones with a radically new potential for integrating the distinctive visual, aural and structural dimensions of the Qur'an, have just begun to open up the opportunity for a wide range of more inventive, experimental and self-consciously challenging efforts of translation designed to reach different audiences who cannot undertake years of apprenticeship in the original Arabic.

2. Dimensions of communication

Whether as a teacher or a student of the 'English Qur'an', it is clear that there are many potential, equally legitimate dimensions of Qur'anic communication which have so far been largely neglected in the existing efforts of translation. Distinguishing those different aspects of the Qur'an-experience helps to highlight both the severe challenges and limitations, but also the as-yet-unexplored possibilities, of efforts of translation focused more specifically on each of those respective dimensions. And even a cursory description of each of these aspects suggests something of the inevitable practical incompatibility of certain of those aims, and the resulting necessity for very *different* efforts, experiments and forms of expertise and collaboration in attempting to communicate a wider spectrum of the many facets of the Qur'an.

One absolutely essential dimension of the Qur'an can be summarised globally as its music, sound and rhythm. As a teacher, I have been surprised each year by the extraordinarily lasting spiritual impact, on so many sensitive souls, of their initial encounter with excellent recitations of the Qur'an; time and again I have seen lifelong vocations apparently awakened simply by the effects of listening to a few verses in a

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superbly moving recitation. This is also an area in which technology, initially in the form of readily available CD-ROMs and internet sites combining recitation simultaneously with screens of the Arabic text and several translations, has already opened up remarkable pedagogical possibilities which one could not even have imagined a decade ago. More importantly, this is a domain where one can only hope that the Qur'an will eventually attract the type of inspired poetical translators who have been drawn to other challenging masterpieces of world literature. But precisely in such cases, it is unlikely that the gifted poetic translator who truly succeeds in capturing something of those deeper musical dimensions of the Qur'an will also be equally successful in communicating other dimensions of meaning.³ (One need only think of the instructive example of Coleman Barks' transforming, but far from literal, versions of Rumi to grasp both the possibilities and the inherent dilemmas that are connected with this dimension of Qur'anic communication.)

A second dimension of the Qur'an that would once have seemed almost hopelessly lost in translation is that of the combined impact of the actual Arabic script and its underlying mathematical/symbolic (*jafr*) equivalents, an area where the wider artistic, cultural and interpretive influences and possibilities of the Qur'an have so deeply marked different domains of subsequent Islamic cultures. While this is a vast and fundamental domain one might consider particularly resistant to any form of traditional book-translation, it is also a dimension that has an immediate impact and attraction on certain artistically sensitive students, and it is a field in which new possibilities in the area of computer graphics and design may eventually transform our notions of what constitutes an adequate translation of sacred scripture.

A third fundamental area of Qur'anic understanding still essentially cut off from the English-speaking audience is the vast complex of later Islamic fields of learning – *asbāb al-nuzūl* ('occasions of revelation'), *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth*, tales of the prophets, rhetoric and certain fields of *fiqh* – which have of course provided one key matrix for learned Islamic interpretation and understanding in the past. Rather than surreptitiously importing fragments of those vast literatures into the actual Qur'an translations and footnotes (as most notably in the popular Yūsuf 'Alī translation), what one would like to see developed in the future, at least for teachers of Islamic and religious studies, is a kind of scrupulously layered, hyper-text version of the Qur'an in which students would have immediate access to reliable, self-contained translations (including all necessary explanations) of key ancillary works from those disciplines of traditional Islamic learning as they might bear on a particular verse, passage or *sūra* of the Qur'an. While the existing state of English (or other Western-language) efforts in these fields might lead one to despair of ever realising such an adequate reference apparatus, one may note that such comprehensive reference tools do largely exist in cognate areas of classical (Greco-Latin) and Christian and Jewish scholarship, and

that the technological means to combine them with the Qur'an already do exist, as one can see in the development of increasingly complex CD-ROMs partially combining such reference tools – although still only in Arabic – in both Sunni and Shi'ite contexts in the past few years.⁴

Finally, the fourth dimension of Qur'anic translation, which is the focus of our discussion in the following section, has to do with the communication of as much as possible of the internal *meanings* of the Qur'an – or, to be more precise, of those particularly *textual*, verbal aspects of meaning which have not already been mentioned – as it has been read and studied for over a millennium. This aspect of Qur'anic communication is important not simply because it is indispensable, in any academic context, for understanding the integral relations between the Qur'an and the classical Islamic humanities it so frequently inspired. It is also because there is an increasingly significant proportion of Muslim intellectuals the world over, and of non-Muslim intellectuals trying sincerely to understand the foundations of Islam, who are necessarily limited, for all practical purposes, to non-Arabic versions of the Qur'an. The era of the traditional *maktab*, in which virtually every Muslim's first experience of reading (or recitation) and writing, whatever their vernacular mother tongue, was intrinsically bound up with the experience of the Arabic Qur'an, is clearly past and not likely to return.

Here again, before entering into specific areas and examples of concern, it is helpful to point out the ways in which the particular approach or intention outlined here actually mirrors the most traditional developments in earlier Islamic cultures. Specifically, I have often been struck, in retrospect, by the ways in which my own gradual, improvised efforts to help students avoid misunderstandings and grasp essential meanings through translations of the Qur'an have so frequently mirrored an essential development in the Islamicisation of each non-Arabic speaking Muslim community in the past, i.e. the gradual anglicisation of the essential Qur'anic and Islamic religious vocabulary, in the same way that key Arabic terms gradually became part of the native languages of Muslims in many parts of the world. In fact, it is striking to discover how so many fundamental Qur'anic (or derivative Islamic) expressions – *īmān*, *ṣabr*, *taqwā*, *tawhīd*, *walī*, *kufr* and so on – are very quickly adopted and understood by students in religious studies, after only a cursory introductory acquaintance, precisely because they provide a needed and effective expression for living, essential spiritual realities which today have no accurate English equivalent. Those classroom experiences would suggest that we may actually be witnessing only the first small steps towards a genuine 'Islamicisation' of the English language, beginning of course in Muslim and scholarly circles, but one which will quickly carry over in unforeseeable ways into the wider emerging global civilisation.

3. Areas for consideration in a study-version of the Qur'an

The following is simply a brief list, in a very approximate order of importance, of some of the most fundamental and recurrent considerations encountered in trying to communicate essential Qur'anic meanings to students in English and French over the past two decades. Since our purpose here is simply to provoke discussion and raise awareness of issues which are necessarily encountered, in any case, by anyone teaching the Qur'an in translation, we have been obliged to summarise complex problems which could in reality be the subject of entire monographs in many cases. And we can only allude to possible solutions or approaches to those dilemmas, which in any case would necessarily require a detailed discussion of the targeted audience and specific intentions of any particular translation project.⁵ Hopefully the audience here, as specialists in the matter, will readily grasp the larger parameters of each of these particular issues without further detailed elaboration.

3.1 The Qur'an as a whole

One of the most difficult challenges, when one is trying to teach the Qur'an as it has actually been read and lived by Muslims for over a millennium, is to counter two fundamental obstacles or unconscious assumptions shared, before any teaching begins, by virtually all English-language readers (whether Muslim or not): (1) the notion of a 'book' as inevitably a progressive narrative proceeding smoothly from a beginning to middle to end (something naively self-evident to most first-time readers of Qur'anic translations); and (2) a complex of various 'historicist' assumptions shared by many readers (and translators) who naturally approach the Qur'an with habits of thought and interpretation drawn from the entrenched modern sciences of Biblical philology and interpretation. This pervasive historicism – which makes it impossible to understand the Qur'an as it has actually inspired the ongoing creation of the Islamic humanities, in increasingly diverse languages and cultural contexts, over the past fourteen centuries – is only further compounded by presentations which imply or openly present as somehow authoritative much later Muslim schemas of interpretation (in *tafsīr*, *fiqh*, *asbāb al-nuzūl*, etc.) which relied on their own distinctive historicist assumptions and political purposes.⁶

With serious students in religious studies, of course, one can consciously frame comparisons, instead of unconsciously using the English Bible, with more pedagogically useful scriptures such as the *I Ching* (where the challenges of translating and interpreting ancient Chinese and Qur'anic Arabic so closely overlap), and Buddhist and Hindu texts (or certain classics of pre-modern Christian and Jewish mysticism) whose essentially metaphysical perspectives and emphases are far more intrinsically suited as paradigms for approaching the Qur'an.⁷ To take another relevant example from my own Islamic teaching with generations of younger students whose basic intellectual/aesthetic formation is now profoundly audio-visual instead of textual, I have found

certain contemporary films – themselves reflecting in all their dimensions the structures, teachings, and assumptions of Qur'anic expression – to be indispensable and incredibly effective tools in awakening those students to the universal spiritual dimensions of both Qur'an and *sīra*.⁸

But the translator (and teacher) cannot rely on the availability of such individualised pedagogical aids and relatively specialised background to 'de-construct' all the reading habits and even more profound Biblical associations of vocabulary and meaning which virtually any English-speaking reader will bring to their experience of Qur'an translations. The Qur'an, as it has been read, studied and lived for centuries, is a wholistic, indeed essentially holographic, experience – one which is far more readily comparable with the tools and possibilities of the modern cinema than with our familiar, book-based literatures – and the translator hoping to create a useful study-Qur'an must constantly strive to capture this particular distinctive *Qur'an-experience* in which every relevant part of the text resonates with every other – not only the overtly repetitive leitmotifs and themes, but also the deeper, even more fundamental consonantal root structures and inimitable rhythms in which the reader/reciter/interpreter have deeply present in their actual experience of a given verse a host of essential associations and comparisons which must somehow be conveyed in translation. It is no accident that most of the points mentioned separately below are basically discrete aspects of this central problem of conveying *essential unities* of the Qur'an which tend to disintegrate (or entirely disappear) in the process of naive English reading and translation.

3.2 Avoiding 'false friends' – and discovering effective equivalent expressions

By far the most pervasive problem in teaching and translating the Qur'an is surely the question of equivalent key terms, one which English translators have traditionally approached by seeking apparent Biblical equivalents which may once have communicated something of cognate Hebrew or Greek expressions, but which, as we have already mentioned above, have taken on vast burdens of implicit meanings that immediately render much of the available English Qur'ans meaningless, incoherent and thoroughly self-contradictory, not to mention appallingly offensive in multiple places, to anyone without serious acquaintance with the underlying Arabic. Teachers who encounter hundreds of undergraduates (or church study-classes, inter-faith groups, etc.) know how absolutely impossible it is to de-construct effectively the immediate, unconscious associations of such familiar English expressions.

The most surprising fact here, as we have already suggested, is that the Qur'anic Arabic itself actually expresses, for the most part, universal spiritual realities which are intimately familiar in most cases even to the most avowedly atheist among one's students. In general, the foundational expressions and symbols of the Qur'an do

reflect essential categories of spiritual experience, and the primary pedagogical task is always to remind students, which is what the Islamic humanities were brought into being in order to accomplish, of the actual corollaries of those expressions in their own experience. For once students begin to grasp what the underlying Arabic is actually talking about, they can for the most part readily re-translate the translation into terms that make sense and, perhaps more importantly, readily detect those places where the existing English version is in fact clearly conveying a false, misleading or incoherent impression of the Arabic. Practically speaking, I have found that a few weeks' intensive work explaining key Qur'anic Arabic expressions, combined with practical exploratory exercises built around Kassis's invaluable, Arabic root-based concordance of the Qur'an⁹ normally enables motivated and diligent students to begin to get beneath the more literal existing translations (of which Arberry's remains the most reliable) to often astonishing discoveries and insights. At the same time, though, it is difficult to see why Qur'an translators should not begin to employ much more daringly and comprehensively either appropriately anglicised forms of the underlying Arabic or alternatively, intentionally cumbersome and thought-provoking English neologisms which would force the reader to return to the actual Arabic meaning – in either case, with an initial explanatory footnote and comprehensive summary glossary keyed to the longer initial explanations of each key term. The goal, in either case, would be to facilitate a kind of subtle apprenticeship in the essential Arabic concepts and vocabulary of the Qur'an, wherever no adequate English equivalent exists.

One further essential test for 'false friends' or misleading cognate expressions that seems to be systematically ignored by all Qur'an translators is the fundamental necessity of conveying to the English reader the whole 'semantic field' (to borrow Toshihiko Izutsu's indispensable expression) that connects together the underlying Arabic roots of the Qur'an in semantic families by way of opposition, contrast or complementarity (relations which may be binary, ternary or even more complex in underlying structure). Since quite naturally English language, and more particularly the familiar English Biblical language, does not at all reflect these essential linguistic/conceptual constellations of meaning, this is one of the strongest arguments (among others detailed below) for moving over as quickly to possible to an anglicisation of the underlying Qur'anic Arabic terminology in any serious study-translation.

3.3 Conveying and re-creating Arabic root structures

An essential corollary of the larger issue of the distinctive *unities* of the Qur'an is the necessity of making some effort in translation to communicate the network of underlying interrelations based around the Arabic root-structures, in as many of their grammatical expressions as possible (a challenge we will return to in other guises below). Since the technical vocabulary of the Qur'an is for the most part both so distinctively unique (in comparison, for example, to the more 'ordinary' Arabic usages of the

ḥadīth and early poetry) and relatively limited, any effort which is made to convey to the English reader this essential unifying dimension should quickly bear enormous fruits. This is true not only because of the underlying verbal/conceptual unities that reappear, but also because the underlying Arabic roots are typically so polysemous, conveying (like the Chinese of the *I Ching* or classical Sanskrit) a multitude of complexly related meanings which the English reader must be carefully and explicitly informed about at each appearance. Striking examples would be the terms *ṣidq-ṣiddiq*, or 'abd-verbal forms of 'ibāda, etc. In each of these cases, the serious translator who wants to convey this essential Qur'anic dimension is eventually faced with three choices: an appropriately modified form of the original Arabic (explained in detail at its first appearance); a long hyphenated English neologism (combining each relevant meaning of the Arabic root); or a single English code-equivalent suitably signed (typographically by italics, boldface, quotes, etc.) so that the reader immediately understands the underlying Arabic root-complex as explained fully at the first appearance of that code-equivalent. All three of these choices are cumbersome, but my own translating and teaching experience suggests that the most economical, and ultimately beneficial, approach may be to stick as closely as possible to the original Arabic term itself, especially as that can help in eventually carrying over those neologistic expressions into the wider English language.

3.4 Rediscovering the verbal and trans-temporal emphases of Qur'anic Arabic

In my years of teaching the Qur'an, I have found nothing that can more immediately and dramatically transform students' appreciation of any translation than suggesting that they carefully transform all the translator's future tense expressions into the present ('imperfect') tense, and that they substitute an implicit gerundive or participial ending (which of course usually constitutes an outward 'barbarism' or neologism in English) for the translator's apparent nouns. I must admit, however, that I was driven to this suggestion not by the more obvious underlying grammatical considerations (which do not have to be explained to the scholarly readers of this journal), but rather by the gradual, cumulative discovery that the classics of the Islamic humanities (mystical poetry, philosophy, etc.) which I was also translating and interpreting, including the constant embedded Qur'anic allusions throughout those literatures, simply did not make any sense otherwise.

In the case of translating Qur'anic time-schemes, it is also quite possible, and dramatically more meaningful, to try to convey in English many of the nuances of the trans-temporal (or 'eternally present') divine Voices [see section 3.5 below] and the events they are describing: this immediately opens up for English readers the essential connections between Qur'anic discourse and similarly metaphysical expressions and perspectives – corresponding to immediately present dimensions of each person's spiritual experience – that are usually more familiar to them in the multi-temporal,

oracular languages of English poetry and (especially for today's students) the normal perspective and time-shifts of cinema. (Incidentally, translating Qur'anic time expressions more accurately only highlights and deepens the shock-effect of those times where the Qur'an actually does address the explicitly future (*sawfa...*, etc.) fate of what is typically, in that specific case, the reader's very own soul (the very *personal* 'you' of section 3.6 below).

The impact of avoiding Indo-European nominal, conceptual, hypostasising expressions in favour of the immediate, verbal impact of virtually all the Qur'anic Arabic is a much greater translating challenge, but one with an even more far-ranging potential impact on the English reader's grasp of Qur'anic discourse and meaning. Qur'anic language, to take only one of innumerable possible examples, doesn't communicate some abstract, conceptual reality of *tawhīd* as 'monotheism' (any more than *shirk* has to do with 'polytheism'); it actually *is* the verbal embodiment of *tawhīd* (the realisation and actual perception of the unicity of all existence), down to its most intricate grammatical details. The translator is challenged in each verse to convey something of the active, *verbal* immediacy of each grammatical component in ways that may well do violence to 'normal' English – but which when used consistently should have a profoundly transforming effect on the committed, serious reader. To take just one particularly recurrent example, students' perceptions of the Qur'an are typically completely transformed once they realise that the family of companion expressions *mu'min*, *muslim*, *mushrik*, *munāfiq* and *kāfir* are not referring to hypostasised, changeless individuals or to specific historically-delimited social groups (as most existing translations would seem to suggest), but to a recurrent series of experiential *states* that each human being passes through and already knows from their own most intimate and undeniable experience in the face of earthly life's recurrent trials.

3.5 Communicating the Qur'anic Voices/perspectives

Nothing can be more distinctive and central to the Qur'anic discourse¹⁰ (and more pervasive in its influence on subsequent Islamic humanities, whether in poetry, music or the visual arts) than the pervasive interplay, often within the same verse, of multiple divine perspectives, voiced in the mysterious tongues of virtually each dimension of creation. Students with an affinity for the languages of poetry, cinema, or metaphysics are simply in awe when the Qur'an is presented in such a way that this fundamental feature of all Qur'anic language and meaning is brought out for them – something that can be done very simply and consistently, in any language, through a consistent typographic *mise-en-page* visually distinguishing the distinctive role of each voice, as well as highlighting those marvellously indeterminate or problematic passages which were often the immediate inspiration for equally incomparable masterworks of later Islamic mystical poetry, music/*dhikr* and miniature painting. Here again, the distinctive structures of the Qur'an, with regard to both time-schemes and

voice-perspectives, are strikingly mirrored in the technical means of modern cinema, as well as the more primordial *musical* techniques of rhythm, repetition and leitmotifs. Once students are accustomed to translations in which those structural voice-perspectives are clearly revealed, they naturally find it artificial and painfully time-consuming to have to decipher those essential structures hidden underneath the ostensible narrative prose of most existing translations; the resulting effect is very similar to being forced to wear out-of-focus lenses.

3.6 The Qur'anic 'you' and other expressions of emphasis

Few features of the Qur'an could be more simple, yet more essential and fruitfully problematic, than the usage of 'you', yet even the most experimental English translations – and this is one area where modern English is uniquely impoverished – have only begun to dance around this central issue. To put it as simply as possible, in the Arabic Qur'an one is almost physically struck by any use of the singular imperative or the singular 'you': what is almost always at question here is the fundamental spiritual question of the underlying connection between the Prophet as 'addressee' (which is in itself rarely in doubt) and the much more problematic further relation of that particular divine address to the individual reader – a mysterious and implicit relation which is nonetheless unavoidable if the Qur'an is to unfold its riches to each reader down through time. That personal 'you' however, could not be more strongly differentiated in the Arabic from the broader, collective forms of address (including plural imperatives), and English translators are challenged to find some way to convey and suitably highlight those fundamental distinctions of meaning.

Although the 'you-question' has particularly important metaphysical and spiritual implications, one can look on it grammatically as a subset of the much larger issue of distinctive forms of emphasis, especially distinctively emphatic verbal forms and highly significant matters of word-order, which are again such pervasive and characteristic features of Qur'anic language and meaning. The importance of these issues can readily be appreciated by all those who frequently have to move back and forth between English (or at least American?) or German, on the one hand, and French: it is readily apparent, where intense emotions are being expressed, that those Germanic languages typically rely on intonation to convey a vast range of essential meanings which have to be expressed in one's choice of words in French (or perhaps in body-language in yet other cultures and language communities). Forms of emphasis, especially word-order, are as absolutely fundamental to one's grasp of meaning and nuance in Qur'anic Arabic as intonation is in everyday English; they are one of those distinctive rhetorical features that make virtually any phrase of Qur'anic Arabic distinctly different (and readily differentiable) from ordinary Arabic prose or poetry alike. Often, as when one is obliged to actually act out a play in public, students find that their 'reading' of a given Qur'anic passage will differ completely depending on

the meaning they actually give to such forms of emphasis.¹¹ If there are multiple, equally persuasive possibilities of emphasis, one can always translate one explicitly while carefully explaining the other(s) in footnotes. And in any case, we now have a rich repertoire of readily-available typographical tools (italics, boldface, small capitals, capitalisation, *mise-en-page*, and different fonts, among others) which conscientious translators can begin to use consistently to translate those essential dimensions and unifying structures of Qur'anic discourse.

3.7 Pronominal reference and gender

Two other, equally distinctive, features of Qur'anic language – and it is important to stress how distinctively Qur'anic these particular usages are, beyond what is normally required by Arabic grammar – are (1) the frequently pregnant ambiguities of pronominal reference, which constantly give rise to multiple, and typically equally interesting, possible meanings; and (2) the pervasive characteristic of what Michael Sells (an accomplished poet and translator) has referred to as 'gender balance',¹² which involves both questions of meaning and of the more poetic and musical dimensions of the Qur'an. In any case, this does present extraordinarily challenging problems in a non-gendered language like English: sometimes it actually works (and helps wake up the reader) to translate 'she' for an Arabic feminine pronoun or form, but often that kind of literalism is impossible or pointlessly confusing.

The case of ambiguous pronominal references, like the related recurrent problem of textual ambiguities as to the reading of phrases and punctuation, should not necessarily present problems of English translation. One should be able to translate the different possibilities either within the body of the translation or in a footnote. But it is astonishing, given the great frequency and characteristic nature of these issues (which are indeed characteristic of Qur'anic language, and can't be resolved textually), how virtually none of that recurrent, inherent complexity and ambiguity – which is so evident, to begin with, in how one chooses to read the very opening of *Sūrat al-Baqara* – is actually apparent in the existing English translations. One dramatic illustration of the impact of taking such questions seriously is when the divine Name *Huwa* – as the most common referent for the repeated Qur'anic litanies of more particular divine Names or Attributes – is simply left in its original Arabic: not only does that eliminate inappropriate questions of gender identity where the divine Essence is in question, but it recaptures for the English reader something of the unavoidable mystery and profundity of this indecipherable reference to this ultimate Source, the underlying Reality, underlying and enfolding all the knowable Names and Attributes. That recurrent Qur'anic expression is the metaphysical *opposite* of what would normally be suggested by the abstract vacuity of any English pronoun.

3.8 What to do with the divine Names?

It is perhaps appropriate, in discussing issues of Qur'an translation, to conclude by raising a particularly intractable and yet central question, one that also underlines the basic truth that scriptural translation is always a matter of a much larger complex of contextual presentation (be it typographical, media-determined, dramatic, interpretive, etc.) and communication that takes us beyond the obvious questions of literal choices of wording. As already noted (section 3.5 above), the multiplicity of Qur'anic voices is often there in existing English translations, but essentially invisible to all but the most determined and inquisitive of well-informed readers. Something of the same sort is true with the treatment of the divine Names in most existing Qur'an translations: even serious readers seem to gloss over them or read past them, as though they were simply (at best) a kind of musical or rhetorical background. Yet we are all aware, as students of Islamic cultures and civilisation, of the absolutely fundamental role this Name-dimension of the Qur'an has played for centuries in areas of life as diverse as ritual, prayer, music and *dhikr*, calligraphy, meditation, philosophy and theology, and so on.

Even without regard to those vast historical traditions, simply by any purely quantitative standard, the Names are surely an absolutely central focus of Qur'anic teaching and expression. One can only wonder if there must not be some much more effective way to begin to bring out their role and importance within each passage of the Qur'an, so that English readers are drawn to the mysteries and realities they represent, rather than simply speeding past...? In this, as with the other problems enumerated above, we hope that these brief allusions will encourage other scholars and teachers as well to undertake the creative, energetic, and necessarily experimental efforts that are so obviously needed to help open up more of the essential dimensions of the Qur'an to readers in English and other non-Islamic languages.

NOTES

1 One dramatic illustration was provided at the conference at SOAS at which this paper was first presented. After mentioning how incomprehensible and alienating the older English second-person singular usages ('thee', 'thine', etc.) had become for the majority of contemporary American students (as is much of the distinctive language of the King James Bible in more fundamental ways), I was later accosted by a British member of the audience who politely, and helpfully, pointed out that this was not necessarily the case for devout members of the Church of England still at home with such usages in their liturgy and prayer life.

2 The translation problems discussed below are ones we have encountered repeatedly over the past two decades in trying to teach hundreds of primarily English-speaking undergraduates, from a wide international range of religious and cultural backgrounds, about the Qur'an and its central role as a model and inspiration for the classic expressions of the Islamic humanities, especially in later Islamic poetry, music, philosophy and the visual arts. Colleagues teaching similar courses in Islamic and religious studies, in a wider range of languages, have repeatedly

verified that they constantly face the same set of problems. One can safely assume that the same translations would normally generate an even deeper set of misunderstandings in the hypothetical general public who normally lack even access to the kinds of essential cautions and controls that can be provided in the classroom setting.

3 Curiously enough, two important discussions of, and partial attempts to translate, this central dimension of the Qur'an – each by scholars of Arabic literature who are accomplished literary figures in their own right – have recently appeared in English and French. Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* (White Cloud Press, 1999) also includes an excellent CD providing a representative sampling of Qur'an reciters, both men and women, and styles from seven countries; and André Miquel, *L'Événement: Le Coran, Sourate LVI* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1992). The approaches of the two authors are also quite complementary, since Miquel focuses on more traditional Arabic rhetorical forms of analysis, while Sells' approach is centred on the challenges of communicating distinctive Qur'anic structures of gender, rhythm, rhyme and pronominal reference to the English audience. In this context, although it is also relevant to many of the issues raised below as well, we should also mention William Graham's pioneering, but more wide-ranging, comparative discussion of the actual liturgical contexts of the Qur'an-experience throughout the Islamic world, in his *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

4 Unfortunately, these efforts, which often appear first in traditional centres of Islamic learning far from Western libraries and publishing circuits, remain largely scattered.

5 One such experiment can be found, with detailed explanatory apparatus, in our article 'Dramatizing the Sura of Joseph: An Introduction to the Islamic Humanities', in the Annemarie Schimmel Festschrift special issue of the *Journal of Turkish Studies*, Harvard, vol. XVIII (1994), pp. 201–224.

6 Here one should stress that of course *both* of those forms of historicist scholarship have often provided indispensable tools and discoveries to translators, and that in any case they have their own justifications and independent scholarly interest. But as indicated in section 2 above, the important thing is to be aware, given a particular goal in translation, of the ways in which such tools can further that purpose or can instead become inadvertent obstacles to particular types and aims of communication.

7 To avoid any possible misunderstandings, we should emphasise once again that what is in question here is not the nature of the Biblical sources or translations as such, but the central *pedagogical* question of the assumptions and associations which non-specialist students actually bring to their reading and study of the translations. Often it can be helpful – again, to help short-circuit the mass of misleading assumptions students typically bring to 'religious' texts and traditions – to shift into literary reference-points without that body of associations. For example, students with a serious literary background often find Pound's *Cantos* are a particularly helpful starting point to appreciate the distinctive structural features and 'audience-text' relations of the Qur'an, as well as providing (along with much other modern poetry) a useful mine of suggestions for ways of experimentally translating the Qur'an which have not yet found their way into print.

8 Specifically, the cinematic art (1) immediately involves the 'syn-aesthesis' of aural, visual-symbolic, and dramatic dimensions essential to the experience of the Qur'an, and (2) radically integrates the distinctive spiritually (and psychically) realistic interplay of multiple dimensions of time and perspective which is likewise integral to the fundamental structures of Qur'anic expression discussed below.

9 Hanna E. Kassis, *A Concordance of the Qur'an* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). While the English terms included in the index are those of Arberry's translation, the

author also includes several other of the most-used English translations in his discussions of each Arabic root.

10 Unless it is the recurrent litanies of the divine Names: see point 3.8 below.

11 *Sūrat Yūsuf* (see our translation cited in n. 5 above) provides especially fruitful and striking illustrations of this phenomenon, and dramatising even a small part of it can radically transform students' appreciation of the distinctive structures and rhetorical richness of the Qur'an.

12 See his essay on 'Sound, Spirit and Gender', pp. 183–207 (summarising several earlier studies) in the recent volume cited in n. 3 above.