

مُطَهَّرَةٌ بِأَيْدِي سَفَرَةٍ كَرَامٍ بَرَّةٍ  
 فَالْإِنْسَانُ أَكْفَرُ مِنْ رَبِّهِ  
 شَيْءٌ خَلَقَهُ مِنْ رُطْبَةٍ خَلَقَهُ  
 فَقَدَرَهُ ثُمَّ السَّبِيلَ لَيْسَ لَهُ ثَمَرٌ  
 أَمَانَةٌ فَاقْبِرْهُ ثُمَّ إِذَا شِئْنَا دَعَاكَ  
 كَلَامًا يُقْضَى أَمْرٌ فَلْيَسِّرْ

ISLAM is a universal faith intended for all of humankind. Thus the Qur'an declares: "Surely the [only true] faith in the sight of God is Islam (3:19)", and therefore "Whoever seeks a faith (*din*) other than Islam, [that faith] shall not be accepted from him, and on the Last Day he shall be among the losers (3:85)". This universal faith, however, was born in a society with its own particular language and culture. This was the language and culture of the society of the Arab peninsula, and particularly that of the holy cities of Makkah and Madina which provided the framework within which Islam was formed.

Thus while the Qur'an has transcended the limitations of place and time, shaping the history of all Muslim societies and leaving its indelible mark on the rest of human history, it still reflects the particular circumstances in which it was revealed. Its miraculous character (*i'jaz*) has been seen by Muslim scholars, Arab and non-Arab alike, in its Arabic structure and expression. Thus the Qur'an itself challenges all rational creatures, that is both humankind and *jinn*, to compose even one single *surah* or chapter like it - "but", it confidently declares, "... they shall not be able to bring the like of it, even if they diligently assist one another".

If the Qur'an is inimitable in its original language, and if the miraculous character of the Qur'an is proved above all by the perfection of its Arabic language, then how can it be translated into another language without subtracting at least some of those miraculous qualities? Yet, without some form of translation or interpretation of the Qur'an into languages other than Arabic, would not Islam have remained only Arab, a particularistic religion?

It has been a great challenge to Muslims to convey the Islamic message to all the peoples of the earth in their different languages and within the frameworks of their diverse cultures, while yet preserving the integrity of the original message. This challenge has been most crucial with regard to the Qur'an, which is accepted in its Arabic form by the Muslim community as the foundation of its faith and social order, its eternal Divine message as well as the medium through which this message is expressed and transmitted. The aim of this study is to examine the problems which this challenge has presented, and the ways in which they have been

# Translating the Meanings of the Qur'an: Traditional Opinions and Modern Debates

**Mohammad Ayoub** examines the work and ideas of classical scholars and outlines the modern controversies surrounding the difficulties in rendering the Divine Words into another language

met by Muslim thinkers.

It is reported that two of the Prophet's companions, 'Umar b. al-Khattab and Hisham b. Hakim, differed sharply on the reading of a *sūrah* which each claimed to have learned directly from the Prophet. They came to him with their dispute, and he listened to both in turn. After each reading, it is related, he said approvingly, "Thus was it sent down". He then declared, "The Qur'ān was sent down in seven *ahruf* (modes or dialects). Recite, therefore, whichever one is easiest for you".

It is generally believed that 'Uthman, the third caliph, had the Qur'ān collected from scattered fragments preserved in private collections and 'the breasts of men'. More accurately, in our view, the committee which 'Uthman appointed for this task produced an official and fixed text of the Qur'ān and united the community around it.

'Uthman's action was largely necessitated by the spread of Islam far beyond its original home in Madina, among diverse peoples who did not speak the dialect of Quraysh in which the Qur'ān was revealed. As Islam spread, however, it encountered more and more peoples who did not even know the Arabic language. The problem of communicating the Qur'ān to a growing non-Arab Muslim population raised further problems. The first practical point at issue was whether or not non-Arab Muslims who did not know Arabic, and hence were unable to recite the Qur'ān in Arabic in their prayers, could recite it in another language. This was at first argued in strictly juristic and theological terms. Soon, however, political considerations were brought to bear, and eventually played an equally determinative role in the discussion.

The first to raise the question of the use of languages other than Arabic in the prayers was Abu Hanifah, who was himself of Persian origin. He ruled that the Qur'ān could be recited in Persian in prayer, even by those who were able to recite it in Arabic. Abu Hanifah's arguments are presented and analysed by the well-known Hanafi jurist Shams al-Din al-Sarakhsi [d.1097]. Sarakhsi writes: "It is lawful (according to Abu Hanifah) that a man pronounce the *takbir* [that is the formula *allahu akbar*, 'God is most great'] in Persian" Abu Hanifah cites in support of his opinion the injunction to remember God, as instanced in the Qur'ānic verse: "Prosperous indeed is he who purifies himself, mentions the name of his Lord and

performs the prayers" (87:14 and 15). Since it is remembrance of God which is at issue, he concludes, this may be achieved in any language. It is reported that the Persians who accepted Islam wrote to Salman the Persian the noted Companion of the Prophet asking that he translate the *Fatihah* for them into Persian. "Thus they continued to recite it until their tongues became used to Arabic", the report concludes. This precedent provided further support for Abu Hanifah's controversial ruling.

Abu Hanifah agreed that it is incumbent on a non-Arab Muslim to recite the miraculous (*m'ujaz*) Qur'ān. But, he argued, the inimitability (*i'jaz*) of the Qur'ān is in its meaning, and not in its sounds, in whatever language they may be. Moreover, the Divine challenge of the inimitability of the Qur'ān is addressed to all human beings. Persians as well, therefore, will not be able to bring "the like of it" in their tongue. "The Qur'ān is the eternal uncreated speech of God, while languages are all temporal and created. We can thus infer that it is unlawful to regard the Qur'ān as being the Qur'ān in any one particular tongue. How could it be otherwise when God says, 'It (the Qur'ān) is surely in the scriptures (*zūbur*) of the ancients (26:196)'." A person may recite the Qur'ān in Persian, according to Abu Hanifah, but only when he is certain that the words he is uttering convey precisely the meaning of the Arabic. It is not lawful, however, for him to recite an interpretation (*tafsir*) of the Qur'ān, because it cannot be ascertained that such interpretation actually conveys the precise meaning of the Arabic text.

Abu Hanifah's two disciples Abu Yusuf and Muhammad al-Shaybani adopted a less flexible attitude than that of their master towards the question of discussion. They both ruled that it is lawful only for those who do not speak Arabic to recite the Qur'ān in Persian in their prayers. They argued that the Qur'ān is inimitable (*mu'jaz*), and that its inimitability (*i'jaz*) is in both its Arabic structure and its meaning. If, therefore, a person is capable of expressing them both, then his prayers would not be valid without reciting the Qur'ān properly conveying both its miraculous structure and meaning. If, on the other hand, he is unable to do so, then he ought to do only what is in his power. Abu Yusuf and al-Shaybani used the analogy of one who is physically incapable of performing the genuflections and prostrations in

prayer, and who is therefore permitted to pray only with the gestures of these movements.

In sharp contrast to Abu Hanifah, Malik, the scholar (*'alim*) of Madinah and founder of the Maliki legal school, thought it reprehensible for a non-Arab Muslim even to make an oath by God in a language other than Arabic, let alone to recite the Qur'ān in a foreign tongue. A later Maliki scholar and Qur'ān commentator, Abu Bakr Muhammad Ibn al-'Arabi d.5431, succinctly expressed the Maliki view. Commenting on verse forty-four of *sūrah* forty-one, "Had we willed a non-Arabic (*a'jami*) Qur'ān, they would have said, 'would that its verses were varied, some Arabic and some non-Arabic' (41:44)...", he says, "Our scholars have said that this would refute Abu Hanifah's view that it is lawful to translate the Qur'ān into Persian. This is because this verse absolutely negates the possibility of non-Arabic (*ijmah*) approaching it". He thus concludes that "elucidation (*bayān*) and inimitability (*i'jaz*) can only be attained in the Arabic tongue. If, therefore, the Qur'ān is transformed into another form, it would no longer be a Qur'ān, or [a book of] elucidation. Nor would it have any claim to inimitability".

According to the founder of the Shafi'i school, Muhammad b. Idris al-Shafi'i [d.204/820], it is in no way lawful for a non-Arab Muslim to recite the Qur'ān in prayer in Persian, and, by implication, in any other language. If such a person, however, does not know Arabic, or if he is unlettered (*ummi*), then he must perform the prayer without recitation. This is because, al-Shafi'i asserts, the Qur'ān in the Persian tongue is not Qur'ān. He cites a number of verses in support of this argument. The prayer obligation demands that the Qur'ān, and not a translation, be recited. Since the Qur'ān in any other language would be simply human speech, then reciting it in any other tongue would invalidate the prayer.

The famous *hadith* commentator Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani [d.852/1449] discusses the problem of translation from both a theoretical and practical point of view. Although he himself was a Shafi'i scholar, al-'Asqalani adopts a fairly liberal and realistic approach by recognising the unavoidable need for some form of Qur'ān translation if the Muslim community was to have any relations with other peoples. He observes that the Prophet wrote to Heraclius, the Byzantine emperor, in Arabic. The letter which he wrote,

moreover, contained the Qur'anic invocation: 'In the name of God, the All merciful, the Compassionate' and verse sixty-four of *sūrah* three, a verse directly addressed to the People of the Book. It must be assumed, Ibn Hajar argues, that the Prophet expected this letter to be translated into Greek, as the tradition related on the authority of Abu Sufyan b. Harb, who witnessed the event, clearly indicates. Ibn Hajar quotes the Qur'anic verse "Say, 'Bring forth the Torah and recite it, if you are truthful' (3:39)". He then cites a tradition related on the authority of the famous traditionist Abu Hurayrah, who said, "The people of the Book used to read the Torah in Hebrew and explain it to the people of Islam in Arabic", inferring from this that Muslims might also explain the Qur'an to non-Muslims in their own languages.

Hanbali jurists have also insisted that the Qur'an is authentic only in Arabic. Thus the noted jurists Muwaffaq al-Din b. Qudama [d.620/12231] presents in his important work *al-Mughni* the usual discussion of the different opinions concerning the matter under consideration. He argues against not only the view of Abu Hanifah, but the Hanafi position altogether. He argues, along with Shafi'i and Maliki jurists, that the Qur'an is the Qur'an only in Arabic. But he goes even further, asserting that, "Recitation is not lawful except in Arabic. Nor is it lawful to substitute similar Arabic words for the original words (of the Qur'an). This is the case whether a person is or is not capable of reciting in Arabic". According to Ibn Qudama, the Qur'an rendered in another language can only be regarded as *tafsir*, or interpretation. It is neither the Qur'an, nor is it "the like of it".

*Ibn Qudama then goes on to discuss the main issue, namely whether or not a person might recite the Qur'an in any other language than Arabic in his prayers. "If he does not know Arabic well enough", he writes, "he ought then to learn it. If he does not, yet is capable of so doing, his prayers would be invalid. If, however, he is unable to learn the Fatihah in Arabic, or is afraid to miss the time for prayers (in the process of learning), and if he knows only one verse of the Fatihah, then he must repeat that verse seven times. Likewise, if he knows more than one verse, he must repeat all that he knows to the measure of the seven verses of the Fatihah. It is possible for him to complete the number of verses required with other verses of the Qur'an".*

It is the commentator on Ibn Quda-

ma's *al-Mughni* Shams al-Din Muhammad b. Qudama al-Maqdisi [d.682/1283] who for the first time in the course of this long controversy discusses the problems within the context of the actual practice of the community. He begins by asserting that Abu Hanifah was reported to have abandoned his original legal opinion allowing that the Qur'an be recited in Persian without any restrictions. Al-Maqdisi observes, however, that no one of Abu Hanifah's followers, or the followers of the other three legal schools, had actually followed this opinion. "Thus", he concludes, "the practical consensus of the *ummah* has remained that the Qur'an be recited only in Arabic in prayers, as well as that all additional related devotions (*adhkar*) be recited in Arabic as well. This practice has continued in spite of the increasing number of non-Arab Muslims, until some apostatizing non-Arabs in our time began to call for the translation of the Qur'an and other devotions of the prayers, and for the use of such translations in their daily worship. Their true aim is, however, to use this as means of facilitating apostasy for the rest of their people, and 'the casting of the Qur'an which was sent down from God behind their backs (2:101)'."

Al-Maqdisi thus regards abandoning the Qur'an in its original language to be tantamount to abandoning it altogether. This is because the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic and was conveyed to non-Arabs and used to warn and guide them to Islam in Arabic. He continues: "The Prophet had neither translated the Qur'an, nor did he permit that it be translated. Nor did his Companions, the caliphs or kings of the Muslims allow it.

While classical Muslim scholars discussed the problem of translating the meanings of the Qur'an strictly in a theological or juristic context, modern scholars have debated this problem as principle. The question for them has been whether or not the Qur'an should in fact be translated. The question, moreover, has been debated and decided in accordance with the political views of the thinkers involved and the political circumstances prevailing at the time. They have all, however, turned to classical scholars for support of their views and criticism of their opponents.

The first thinker to debate this issue in a systematic way and to give a comprehensive *fatwa* (legal opinion) concerning it was Muhammad Rashid Rida [d.1935], the noted disciple and successor of Muhammad 'Abduh. Rida

was motivated by the effort in 1920's of the new Turkish republic to make Turkish the sole language of worship, including for the purposes of Qur'anic recitation. This meant, of course, producing an official Turkish translation of the Qur'an that would take the place of the Arabic text in public devotions.

Rida begins with a discussion of the history of and reasons for the idea of translating the Qur'an. His argument in this regard is instructive because it clearly indicated his view of Muslim history. Rida writes: "The weakness of the Qurayshite caliphs, which was manifested in the weakness of the caliphs themselves and their foolishness, extravagance and corruption, was a cause of disunity and slackness among the Muslims. Thus they became weak". This led in turn, Rida explains, to the rise of Islamic dynasties which fought among themselves for power. The consequence of this was the gradual erosion of the authority of the Arabic language, and finally its abandonment by non-Arab Muslims. This process led at first to the translation of some religious books. This was then followed by the feeling of the need for translating the Qur'an itself. The need was then felt for translating the Qur'an into all languages in order that others might be invited to Islam by means of such translations. Finally, under the influence of nationalism, Turks sought to weaken the Arabic language, and consequently translated the Qur'an into their own language, thus obviating the need for the Book of God as it was sent down".

Thus motivated by this sequence of events in Muslim history, Rashid Rida felt compelled to oppose strongly any attempt to translate the Qur'an. In answer to certain queries by a Russian Muslim, Shaykh Ahsan Shah Afandi Ahmad, concerning the permissibility of translating the Qur'an, Rida issued his long *fatwa* absolutely forbidding such an undertaking. The arguments which this *fatwa* presents summarise clearly the major objections of all those who shared his opinion.

Rida begins by distinguishing between translation and interpretation. He allows the latter, but strictly for the guidance of non-Arabs, on condition that such translations not be used in worship. He then declares that the Qur'an is the foundation of the religion of Islam. Thus he argues as a jurist (*faqih*) against Qur'an translation as follows: "Personal reasoning (*ijtihad*) through analogy (*qiyas*) must be based on the original text. The

Lawgiver, however, has not designated translation as an actual (or 'received') text. Moreover, general consensus of the people requires specific supporting evidence. Yet no translation can fulfill this requirement. Thus anyone who regards a translation of the Qur'an as the actual Qur'an would not attain any of the fundamentals of Islam". Rida argues further that to regard any translation of the Qur'an as the Qur'an itself, means following the opinion of (*taqlid*) the translator; this religion does not permit.

Having presented the legal arguments against Qur'an translation, Rashid Rida goes on to enumerate the benefits which Muslims would obtain from learning the language of the Qur'an. Learning Arabic is necessary, he argues, for the understanding of the prophetic tradition (*sunnah*) and the history of early Islam. Furthermore, anyone who delightfully strives to learn the Qur'an and *sunnah* and abides by them, would be richly rewarded by God in the hereafter, even if he errs. The Qur'an is an infinite source of the Divine sciences which its readers have deduced for themselves through successive generations. A translation, however accurate, would keep the reader away from this source because any translation reflects the understanding of only one person, the translator.

Rida next argues on the basis of the difficulties of translating the Qur'an accurately both from the point of view of meaning and content. He first asserts that it is impossible to always find synonyms in other languages for Qur'anic terms and expressions. This may lead to misunderstanding and hence to the acceptance of notions which the Qur'an does not intend. Thus a translator may render a phrase or expression of the Qur'an literally into another language, while God may have intended it metaphorically. Grave errors may result from this, especially with regard to the attributes and actions of God.

Finally, Muhammad Rashid Rida presents the argument of the inimitability of the Qur'an: its recitation, diction and structure and meaning. The mere recitation of the Qur'an, he asserts, can draw a non-Muslim to Islam, even if he does not comprehend its meaning. A translation would deprive the Muslims of this great benefit. An important aspect of the miracle of the Qur'an is its uniqueness and singularity. The proliferation of Qur'an translations, therefore, would mean the appearance of numerous *qur'ans*. This would necessarily lead in

the end to alteration and variation (*tahrif*) in the Qur'an.

Rashid Rida, as we have seen, was reacting to a specific situation. In principle, however, he would have been the first to recognise the need for interpretative translations of the meanings of the Qur'an as aids to the study of the sacred text. The need for such minimal translations of the Qur'an has been recognised by scholars throughout Muslim history. Disagreement has, therefore, focused on the status and use of Qur'an translations, and the implications these may have on the status and use of the Arabic language, which is the language of the Qur'an, and indeed of all the Islamic sciences.

A near contemporary of Rashid Rida who addressed this problem was the well-known rector of al-Azhar Shaykh Muhammad Shaltut Shaltut who was a truly liberal and modernist thinker. He approached the problem of Qur'an translation from the same starting point as did Rida, namely the weakness and backwardness of the Muslim community in all areas of scientific endeavour. It was this which had led, in his view, to the curiosity and ambition of non-Muslim scholars to themselves investigate all aspects of Islamic civilisation. This finally led to the appearance of many translations of the Qur'an into other languages, translations which were not free from error. Thus a certain group of Muslim reformers saw the need for producing an Islamically authoritative translation. Shaykh Shaltut agreed with this proposal. Such a translation, he hoped, "...would present the meanings of the Qur'an accurately and comprehensively. It should then be distributed throughout the world in order that it may on the one hand spread the guidance of Islam and its genuine principles, and thus, on the other, obviate other (inadequate) translations. But as soon as this idea was put forth, some Muslims began to fight against it with a vehemence and irresponsibility that neither sincerity in Islam nor objective and scientific investigation would condone. It was this fury which led Shaykh Shaltut to write his own treatise on the subject of the translation of the Qur'an. He wished to present the opinions of religious scholars on the issue so that people might begin with proper understanding of all the issues involved.

Shaltut begins by defining and delimiting 'translation' in three ways. The first is "...transferring the style of the Qur'an into another style which equals it in all respects, and which may fulfil its function of inimitability

and transmission to others". He comments: "This kind of translation is beyond the power of human mortals; it does not, therefore, fall under any juristic legislation". Such translation, Shaltut concludes, need not be the subject of disagreement, or even discussion. The second kind is the translation of the original words of a text into parallel words and expression in the language of translation as closely and accurately as possible within the limitations of the translator's ability and the scope of the language concerned. The third is a free interpretation of the text, where the meaning rather than the accuracy of a literal rendering is aimed at. Both these kinds of translation are possible, Shaltut states, whether such an interpretation is into another language, or in the language of the Qur'an itself.

Shaltut then asserts that no translation can be regarded as the Qur'an, and thus cannot be used in worship. The inimitability (*i'jaz*) of the Qur'an is in both its diction and its meaning. The first remains in its original Arabic, and is not subject to any discussion. Shaltut continues: "There is no doubt that a translation cannot preserve the inimitable eloquence of the Qur'an. Yet it can preserve those aspects which are of great worth and incalculable benefit. They should not, therefore, be veiled from the souls which yearn for them, nor should humanity be deprived of them.

After presenting the opinions of classical jurists, Shaltut concludes that conveying the message of the Qur'an to non-Muslims through some form of *tafsir* or translation would be the best course, this being the duty of every Muslim (*fard kifayah*) when there is no obstacle preventing him from so doing. He then states with evident impatience with those who object to any form of translation at all of the meanings of the Qur'an: "God would not in His bounty create humankind with diverse tongues and languages, make this as one of His manifest signs to His creatures, then send the 'seal of the prophets' with a sacred law (*shar-i'ah*) that would abolish this diversity and demand unity of the world in one language". It is the task of the state authorities, Shaltut argues, to sponsor a standard translation. This "does not mean that it should be an earthly writ which must be recorded in heaven".

Another contemporary religious thinker who belongs to the same modernist school was the famous Shaykh of al-Azhar Muhammad Mustafa al-Maraghi. His important treatise dealing with the rules and possibilities

of translating the meanings of the Qur'an remains the most scholarly work on the subject. Maraghi was himself a Hanafi, and therefore devoted much space in his treatise to Hanafi views. He wrote his treatise in support of a project sponsored by the Egyptian Ministry of Education to translate the Qur'an into all the major European languages. It was just such a project that Shaltut had had in mind. Sad to say, the project was never carried out.

No doubt many Muslims who object to the Qur'an being read and studied in any but its original Arabic tongue, cherish the hope that Arabic should become one day the international language of the Islamic world. But, Maraghi asks, until this great hope can be realised, what should the majority of Muslims, who are non-Arab, do? Should they recite only the *Fatihah* in their prayers, or should they prolong their devotions with a near-literal translation of Qur'anic recitation? He concludes: "This in reality is the issue, regardless of any sanctions or prohibitions". The issue was decided, he observes, twelve hundred years ago by the jurists. But, "Should the Qur'an be veiled from civilised Christian nations, or should it be made available to them in an authentic form in order that scholars may study its social systems and its ideas of Divine Oneness and Divine transcendence, as well as its ethical system?"

Maraghi finally observes that contemporary society, in contrast with that of early Muslim history, is narrow-minded and insecure. Modern thinkers are likewise unimaginatively bound to tradition. He writes, "The further back one goes in investigating the earliest jurists and their opinions, the more one finds a spirit of broad-mindedness, clearly visible on the horizon. One finds also a spirit of free enquiry. The closer you come, however, to the time in which we now live, the situation becomes entirely the reverse. This phenomenon represents forcefully the life of the Muslim nations in the past and present, and distinguishes clearly between the two eras".

The insecurity and narrow-mindedness of which al-Maraghi spoke are in large measure due to the political, military, social and scientific dependence of the Muslim world on either the Eastern or Western block worlds. Thus a noted professor in the Faculty of Islamic Law at the Syrian University in Damascus writes, "The call for the translation of the Qur'an must be regarded as the first link in

the long chain of plotting which Western colonialism began since the end of the nineteenth century". Some Muslims do in fact see translation as part of a missionary conspiracy to destroy Islam.

The ideal cherished by those who oppose the translation of the Qur'an is that of unity among all Muslim nations under the banner of one faith and one language. The natural way to bring others to Islam, they believe, is to urge those who wish to know Islam to learn the Arabic language. Thus would they come to know the Qur'an in reality and discover its majesty and beauty.

This ideal is one which all Muslims share, but unfortunately it is only an ideal without historical reality. The truth is, as Shaykh Shalut reminded his readers, that Western scholars have for centuries studied and translated the Qur'an, but only to polemicise against its style and message. The Qur'an is not a secret book, nor is Islam a secret religion. Muslims must have a study tool of the Qur'an, which is the foundation of their faith, the constitution and law of their society, and their guide through this life and into the next. We shall in the remaining few pages of this study attempt to present some suggestions which may help Muslims to fulfil their duty in conveying the message of the Noble Qur'an to their fellow human beings.

It is not a mere coincidence that the first Muslim scholar to lay down specific principles for translating and interpreting the meanings of the Qur'an himself hailed from Granada, where Muslims, Christians and Jews lived and interacted, studied and taught, and together carried the torch of Islamic learning to the Western world. Abu Ishaq Ibrahim al-Shatibi al-Ghirnati [d.790/1388] was a noted jurist and Qur'an scholar. He begins his discussion of the issue of translation of the Qur'an by distinguishing two levels of meaning in any language, including the Arabic language. This first is what he calls, "general terms and expression indicating general meanings, these being the primary or essential purport (of such words and expression)". The second is "specific or delimited words and expressions with secondary or auxiliary meanings". The first level is one in which all languages share, and it is the primary tool for human speech and communication. It is possible on this level to report the history of bygone peoples and nations. On the second level, however, the peculiar culture and idiom of the Arabs, the events nar-

rated, the narration itself and the source of the narration must all be taken into consideration. This would make any direct and literal translation of a report narrating any bygone event impossible. Shatibi then concludes: "If this principle is accepted, it will not be possible from the point of view of this level for anyone to translate Arabic speech into the (exact) speech of a non-Arabic tongue. This is not possible in any case, let alone in translating the Qur'an from Arabic into another tongue, except if the two languages are exactly parallel to one another". It is therefore, Shatibi concludes, impossible to translate the Qur'an from the point of view of the second level of meaning. "But on the first level it is possible. It is on this level that the meanings of the Qur'an may be interpreted and explained to the people, and particularly to those who have no sufficient knowledge of the Arabic language enabling them to discover for themselves its meanings. This is unlawful, as all Muslims agree. This consensus stands as an argument in support of the legal sanction to translate the root or primary meaning (of the Qur'an)".

Al-Shitabi's principles are as sound and applicable today as they were when he first laid them down. He was, however, a scholar who took for granted the general training and depth and breadth of knowledge of any scholar embarking upon the task of translating the Qur'an. Having thorough knowledge of all the major Islamic sciences, including Islamic history, law and tradition, must be one of the first requirements for anyone who wishes to undertake such a responsibility. A Qur'an translator is in reality only an interpreter. He should, therefore, have a thorough knowledge of the *tafsir* tradition. It is in this tradition that the Qur'an has been kept alive and relevant to the needs of the people of every age. Such a person must also have a thorough knowledge of the Arabic language and all its sciences, as well as the language into which he or she wishes to translate the meanings of the Qur'an.

The Qur'an is not an archaic book; rather it is a literary masterpiece. Any translation of its meanings must preserve the dignity and literary qualities of the Qur'an. It must not be translated into the archaic language of the King James Bible, as Pickthall has done in his translation, nor should it be rendered into vulgar language. It should rather be rendered in a good literary style and idiom which may be understood by the general educated

reader.

The Qur'an uses many words and expressions which have more than one meaning, or which would mean nothing when translated into another language. To give a few examples: the word *qir'* means both the menstrual cycle of a woman and the purification following it. A translator must determine which of these two meanings is intended in each instance where this word occurs. The first five verses of *sūrah* 79 are incomprehensible even in Arabic without *tafsir*, and they are thus bound to be meaningless in a translation unaccompanied by exegesis. Otherwise, what is the English reader to make of references to the 'pluckers' (*al-nazi'at* the 'swimmers' (*al-sabihat*), the 'outstrikers' (*al-sabiqat*), and so on?

The problem of most modern translations of the meanings of the Qur'an, at least in English, is that they are purely lexical. The word *'asbaha'*, for example, literally means to wake up in the morning. In common usage, however, including Qur'anic usage, it means 'to become'. More problematically, the verb *Kawwara* means to fold up, as one would wrap a turban around his head. But in the Qur'an this and another meaning is possible. When the word is used to describe the sun disintegrating along with the stars of heaven, then *kuwwirat* may mean, by implication, to be darkened.

Finally, a translator must have the intellectual integrity to accept the Qur'anic worldview without either distorting it to make the Qur'an look more 'rational' and 'modern', or to show that the Qur'an is archaic and primitive, according to his own particular prejudice.

The Qur'an requires, at least of a Muslim scholar, an attitude of reverence and purity of heart and intention. It is in the end this attitude, or the lack of it, which determines the worth and even usefulness of a translation.

All these considerations bring us back to an idea which was long ago proposed and is still contemplated. This is the idea of appointing committees of experts in the Qur'anic sciences, in Arabic and in the various major languages of the world, to produce authoritative and accurate study-translations of the meanings of the Qur'an. This is an international responsibility which the Muslim *ummah* must fulfil to the glory of God and for the service of mankind. ■

Illuminated page from a tenth century manuscript of the Qur'an

