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Final project: Scandinavian translations of the Qur'an

A contested issue among Islamic scholars is whether or not the Qur'an should be translated from Arabic into other languages. In the context of a multicultural Scandinavia, translating the holy text that applies to many recent migrants to these countries provides a chance to promote more cultural understanding and context for the values many of these people hold. However, some would argue that translation is either blasphemous, offensive, culturally insensitive, unnecessary, or otherwise a fruitless endeavor. While there are merits to both sides, translation for the promotion of multiculturalism in Scandinavia ultimately reframes concerns about the validity of such translations.

For many Qur'anic scholars, the Qur'an is seen as the direct word of God. As it was originally written in Arabic based on oral traditions about the teachings and revelations of Mohammed, it would hold that translating the Qur'an out of Arabic would essentially be changing the word of God. Between languages, there are often issues of non-equivalence, particularly between languages as distant as Arabic and the Scandinavian languages. Non-equivalence generally refers to an issue that arises when there is no direct translation for a word, either because the concept does not exist within that culture or because no word exists to describe the concept at hand. Instances of non-equivalence can be seen as barriers to translation that, some would argue, mean that the Qur'an cannot be translated out of Arabic and retain its original linguistic meaning. However, multiple strategies exist to help mitigate instances of

non-equivalence, developed by translators, listed as follows: “1. Using a hypernym. 2. Using a more neutral/ less expressive term. 3. Cultural substitution. 4. Using a loan word or a loan word plus explanation. 5. Paraphrasing. 6. Illustration and exemplification. 7. Omission of the problematic concept” (Ahmad et al 166). Using these strategies, one may overcome some of these barriers of understanding that impede translation.

However, as Nora Eggen argues, “while translators make efforts to represent the Qur’anic text, they inevitably communicate their own interpretations and outlooks to the target audience through their translations: their opinions on what the Qur’an is and how it should be read, and their attitudes towards the text” (Eggen 66-67). In this way, it could be reasoned that since all translators have bias, the text should not be translated so as to not inflict undue bias upon the holy text itself. Eggen also argues that the purpose of translating the Qur’an is not to replace the Arabic version, but to compliment it in a way that aids mutual understanding between the cultures that the languages belong to. Because the Qur’an is originally an oral text, the writing down of this oral tradition serves more as a “communication tool, or a mediator—where God is the speaker and human beings are the addressees,” so, by its very nature, it is meant to help human understanding and interpretation of the word of God, which is exactly what a translation does (Eggen 66). Once the text is translated, “the linguistic sign is split in order for the meaning contained to be expressed in a different language and through a new sign” and thus, “part of the explicating and interpretational work; part of reception, not of text,” while the Arabic Qur’an remains the appropriate mode for liturgical use, such as in prayer (Eggen 66). Once the purpose of the translation is established in this method, it may not be seen as a form of blasphemy, but rather, a method in aiding understanding and communication.

Regarding Scandinavian translations of the Qur'an, they come from a multitude of motivations and purposes. The earliest Scandinavian translation of the Qur'an dates back to 1843, and was done by Fredrik Crusenstolpe into Swedish (Eggen 68). The first three translations in Scandinavia were into Swedish, many of which were the product of scholars studying Arabic and translating the Qur'an into Latin, the academic language of the era (Eggen 54). These translations were then created from Arabic to Latin and then to Swedish. Crusenstolpe was motivated by what he perceived as the ignorance of the Swedish population about the Prophet Mohammed. He sought to rectify these misconceptions, which he saw as "a general ignorance and superstitious mentality" (Eggen 69). He was also a staunch believer that Muslim scholars were needed to consult on these translations, and he did so himself, guided by the translations of the Qur'an into other European languages (Eggen 69). His intentions and methods are rather progressive for the time period, and would reflect many of the later practices employed by Scandinavian translators of the Qur'an in years to come.

The first translation of the Qur'an into Danish appeared much later, in 1967, and was done by Abdus Salam Madsen. Some selected passages had been translated in the 1920's prior to this, but this was the first complete translation of the Qur'an into Danish. Madsen was a part of the "Islams Ahmadiyya movement, which was established in Denmark in the late 1950s" (Eggen 61). His translation was clearly based on the theological outlook of this group, though "there is little information as to the sources or guiding principles for the translation" (Eggen 69-70). However, one of the guiding principles behind translating the work seems to be securing the proper understanding of Islam among the Danish people.

As for Norwegian, the first translation of the Qur'an came last in 1980 from the work of Einar Berg. By this point, "there was also a nascent Muslim community in Norway,

predominantly first-generation immigrant workers from Pakistan, Morocco and Turkey” (Eggen 71). Berg’s target audience, however, seemed not to be them, but to be the general Norwegian public instead. He emphasizes intuition and human cognition in his translation, as this was a scholarly pursuit. His stated purpose, similar to Crusenstolpe over one hundred years prior, is to “help further respect and understanding” (Eggen 72).

From 1843 to 2015, each translation has been redone, to date leaving “14 complete translations have been published: six in Swedish, five in Danish and three in Norwegian,” many of which are still in use today (Eggen 65). This includes some unique translations, notably a Danish audiobook of the Qur’an that seeks to bring to life some of the original oral tradition of the Qur’an. The author concedes that “although only the recital of the Arabic Qur’an may convey the experience of the original listeners, with this audiobook he aims at recreating some of that” (Eggen, 75). Many of these modern translations aim not only at delivering the Qur’an to popular Scandinavian audiences, but also to those second and third generation migrants who might benefit from such a translation. Now that these multicultural societies are here, it is necessary to provide translations for those who may be culturally Muslim, but who do not speak Arabic.

In a case study by Shahzaman Haque, the researcher interviewed a Norwegian man with immigrant origins who practices Islam in Scandinavia in an effort to learn about his linguistic liturgical practices (Haque 402). His guiding question was as follows: “Are religious practices confined to Qur’anic Arabic, or do they utilize other languages for specific purposes in religiosity?” (Haque 402). Haque’s findings about the Norwegian man, Faiz, were that Norwegian was rarely used for his religious practices, and that he utilized Urdu and Qur’anic Arabic as the languages of his faith. However, for his children growing up in Norway, these

translations might be more relevant. Regardless, for him, Qur'anic Arabic was not the only language used for liturgical purposes at home or at the mosque, and Urdu was also included in this, in particular since he was from India, where Arabic is not the predominant language. The case of Faiz shows how multilingualism is important in the lives of these migrants and how translations might assist in the promotion of understanding between cultures and languages alike.

In the Scandinavian context, translation as a form of assistance in understanding the culture of many migrants to these countries is an important endeavor. However, these translations should not be taken as a replacement for the Qur'anic Arabic in which prayers and liturgical services may be conducted, as this remains important for many people's religious doctrines. Instead, it is important that these translations be created for the children of these migrants, the newer generations who may have these Scandinavian languages as their mother tongue, or for those of Scandinavian descent who would like to learn more about the religion. These translations should be done using consultation from Muslim scholars, and should be rooted in the translation methods mentioned earlier when non-equivalence occurs. These translations help to maintain and promote a multicultural Europe, which is an increasingly important reality.

Works cited

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