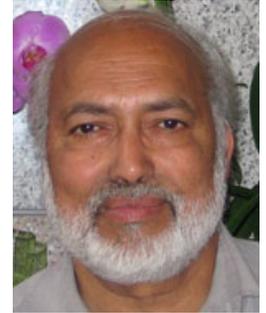


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## Lost in translation

By Iftekhhar Hai

During this holy month of Ramadan, millions of Shiite and Sunni Muslims alike read the entire Quran — in Arabic — section by section at the mosque every night. Because 90 percent of Muslims do not speak or understand Arabic, translation plays a very important part of their education.



The trouble is, the world's 1.2 billion Muslims are subjected to hundreds of interpretations, to the point there are various schools of thought in direct opposition to each other. From the beginning, this tendency toward interpretive disagreement caused the violent rift between Sunni and Shiite scholars.

These two branches of Islam have been at theological war for the last 1,420 years, since the death of the Prophet Mohammed. The majority of his followers, called the Sunnis, believed in "mutual consultations" (42:38) to pick his successor (. The supporters of Ali, the other group favored Prophet Mohammed's son-in-law, Ali, because they believed the true leader of the Islamic state must come from the divine family of the Prophet Mohammed.

The difference in these interpretations has resulted in an often violent rivalry. The recent Fatwa by the Organization of Islamic Conference to erase the divisions between Sunni and Shiite Muslims has a long way to go because the leaders of the mosque have their own little self-interest.

### Persistent beliefs:

In modern days, the pattern continues with the existence of more than 1,300 English translations of the Quran. Several, which I will not repeat here, are really bad. Some translations refer to people from other faiths as infidels or kafirs, with the ensuing interpretation that Muslims are obligated to convey the message to people of other faiths to prevent them from going in the wrong directions. (to hell).

A better interpretation is that pluralism is part of God's creation and that Muslims should never judge people of other faiths because God is the only judge.

During the month of Ramadan, the need to look into the Quran with right interpretation and explanation becomes all the more important. This means which is the best or most perfect interpretation. NONE yet. Here are some

### Popular versions found in USA:

- 1) The Quran by Yusuf Ali, a Shiite Muslim from India
- 2) Noble Quran by Al Hilali and Dr. Mohsen Khan, a Saudi Arabian version

3) Translations of the Quran by Mohammed Pickthal, a Christian convert to Islam

4) The Message of the Quran by Mohammed Asad, a Jewish convert to Islam

Out of these four, I never recommend the Saudi Arabian version, although it is prevalent all over the world. The translation and interpretation is subjected to learned people who lived in the span of 1200 years beginning from year 632 C.E. I prefer the arrangement of verses and it's British English in the Yusuf Ali version, although I have found Mohammed Asad's to be the best overall because he sees through the prism of The Torah, and The Gospels.

My greatest wish is for one good translation coming from America's Muslims seen through the Yusuf Ali, Mohammed Asad and human rights for world community seen through a "Global Conscience."

**Iftekhhar Hai**, South City resident is president of the United Muslims of America Interfaith Alliance. He and three other local columnists take turns writing for the Faith page.

Next week: The Rev. James Garcia defends the Vatican's position on homosexual seminarians.

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## COMMENTS FROM READERS ON MY ARTICLE:

### **1) Comments from United Religions Initiative member of Utah (Christian activist)**

Hi Iftekhhar:

Thank you for sharing your most interesting article. I think it is helpful for people of other faiths to read this to understand the internal conflict origin among Sunni's and Shia's.

In response to your question about Jesus I have no doubt that his message was likely both mistranslated and misinterpreted.

First of all the New Testament Gospels were written some 30 to 100 years after the events took place. Obviously this causes problems for accurate reporting.

Second Jesus spoke in Aramaic yet the book New Testament was written in Koinia Greek and then later translated into English. You can imagine the difficulty in keeping accuracy when you translate from just one spoken language to a different written language. Going to another written language after that makes the accuracy even more difficult.

Third, there is no one complete text that is accepted and the New Testament alone has some 300,000 variations. While most of the variations are not significant, a few are and some scholars are just unsure which variation is more accurate.

Finally, Jesus did not have the same mentality or values as most Americans and that makes the understanding and translation even more difficult still.

Hope this response helps. Be Well

**Dave Randell (Email address: [whale@globalhealing.net](mailto:whale@globalhealing.net))**

2) Br. Iftekhar,

In your description of the differences between the Sunnis and Shi'a, you give the standard Sunni summary, and, in historical terms, it is probably accurate, since the split was political.

Nevertheless, it would be more accurate "theologically," at least in my opinion, to say that the Sunnis wanted to create an "Islamic state," which, of course soon mutated into tyrannical empires. The Shi'a, on the other hand, according to the majority of Shi'a scholars over the centuries taught that Ali, *'alayhi wa salam*, was the spiritual successor to the Prophet Muhammad, and that logically a successor would have successors in turn. This is not different than any Sufi tariqa.

Ali accepted the consensus among the Muslims at the time (though many Shi'a would say he was robbed) to elect Abu Bakr, *radi Allahu anhu*, as the political leader. This set the standard among the Shi'a ever since in distinguishing between the spiritual guide for individual Muslims and the political leader of the community, with an occasional aberration (the worst of which was the so-called *wilayat al faqih*) ascribed to Imam Khomeini, by his followers who, in my opinion, wanted nothing less than to reinstitute the Western institution of the divine right of kings with the Iranian head of the "Church" in charge - an institution first introduced into Christendom in 326 by the Emperor Constantine after he had gotten control of the Church.

Salam, Bob Crane or (Farouk ul Haq) (Convert to Islam from Christianity)

**Robert Crane (Islamic name Faruk ul Haq)** Principal foreign policy adviser from 1963 to 1968 to President Nixon. On January 20, 1969, Nixon appointed him as Deputy Director of the National Security Council for Planning, and in September, 1981, President Ronald Reagan appointed him as U.S. Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates.

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From: caroline keeble [jurist\\_s@yahoo.com](mailto:jurist_s@yahoo.com) (**convert from Christianity to Islam**)  
To: Iftekhar Hai <umah82@hotmail.com>, Transcendentlaw@aol.com, muqtedar@yahoo.com, Sheilamusaji@aol.com  
Subject: **Re: Lost in Translation (Quran)**  
Date: Thu, 15 Dec 2005 07:56:11 -0800 (PST)

Brother Iftekhar, the Shia of Imam Ali follows him because they believe that at Ghadeer Khum, the prophet Muhammad (sa) named Ali (as) as his successor. Many Sunni, and Shia attest to that. Also, the original dispute was not only between the followers of Ali (as) and those who believed that Abu Bakr (rah) should be the successor. The Ansar also felt that the successor should be from among the Ansar, and fielded a candidate for the position, and Umar (rah) and Abu Bakr(rah) met with the Ansar, and argued that the successor could only come from Bani Quraish, and the Ansar accepted this idea and gave up their claim to succession rights. **The prophet Muhammad (sa) was also one of the Quraish, which makes it pretty clear that the issue was not blood succession, since tribal succession is also blood succession. I don't see why this discussion is relevant to a discussion of the various different translations of the**

Qur'an. There is no different Qur'an for Sunni and Shia, we all follow the same **Qur'an**. Also, I would be careful in giving the impression that knowledge of Qur'an is controlled by the teaching of people. The Qur'an itself refutes this idea that mankind is capable of distorting the Qur'an to the extent that

Islam can be subverted. This is the wishful thinking of some people, but not possible. This happened with other Holy Scriptures because they were not the word of God in many cases, but compilations of epistles written by witnesses, and collectors of information about the life and experiences of Prophet Issa (sa). Some claimed to receive inspiration and others did not, and said that they were writing from their own views, minds and hearts. The old testament was corrupted to some extent by the Pharisees who God said, hid much of what had been revealed to them. Sura 5, Al-Maidah, explains most of this for us. Also, I would be careful of saying things that attributes, or implies bad motives to any group, or sect, or Muslim nation that undertakes translation. To attribute bad motives to someone who may have made a mistake with a good intention is wrong, in my opinion, especially when we are discussing Muslims with non-Muslims. Whereas we understand, and feel the love and unity that are in our hearts for one another even when we criticize and disagree with one another, it sometimes comes off to others that we are competing, or fighting one another. I believe that it is this type of talk that causes our adversaries, upon every opportunity to attempt to turn us against one another. We may sometimes provide the ammunition for such campaigns. **The differences in the various Qur'anic interpretations are not that serious, and mostly express different political perspectives in English through commentary and notes, yet the Arabic text is not changed. Those notes, etc., are not Qur'an, and that might also be an important point to make. Only God revealed the Qur'an, and what these translations have added are obviously commentary, and few Muslims are likely to believe that these additions are "Qur'an." As for the number of non-Arabic speakers and readers who read translations, most are taught by Arabic speakers originally. In respect to extremist ideas coming through teaching of the Qur'an, that is a different topic. We have a problem in the West with people not adhering to the Sunnah of how Qur'an is to be taught, who is qualified to teach, etc. In my opinion, this is the bigger problem.** I pray that Allah will guide you, and that your every word will be to glorify God, and help people to understand our Ummah, its diversity, and more importantly the difference between the Qur'an, and translation of Qur'an, and commentary.

Anisa