

Preface to the Revised Edition

There has been a demand for a revised edition of my English Translation and Commentary of the Holy Qur'ān since the end of the Second World War. Conditions have changed so rapidly since I first took this work in hand in 1909 that I myself felt the need for a revised edition. In fact, it is not only the change of circumstances that called for a revision; by own knowledge of the Holy Book has since increased to a very large extent owing to the fact that I have been engaged day and night in further research in this line, studying the Holy Qur'ān, the Ḥadīth and other religious literature of Islām. During this interval of about 33 years — the first edition was published in 1917 — I made substantial contribution to the religious literature of Islām both in English and in Urdu. After the English Translation I wrote a voluminous Urdu Commentary, the *Bayān al-Qur'ān*, in three volumes, and this kept me occupied for another seven years. It extends to over 2,500 pages and is much more explanatory than the notes in the English Translation. During the same period I also wrote a life of the Holy Prophet in Urdu, which was later translated into English under the name of *Muḥammad the Prophet*. A little later was issued a history of the Early Caliphate both in Urdu and in English. About the year 1928 a smaller edition of the English Translation without Arabic Text and with briefer notes was published. Then came the translation and commentary in Urdu of the *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, the well-known Ḥadīth collection. In 1936 was published another voluminous work in English, *The Religion of Islām*, which contains full information on almost all Islamic questions of modern days. *The New World Order*, *A Manual of Ḥadīth* and *The Living Thoughts of the Prophet Muḥammad* were added after 1940.

Owing to the extensive study which I had to make for these writings I myself felt that I had received more light and was bound to give the English-reading public, which extends over a vast part of the world, a deeper insight into the Holy Qur'ān than I had given in my younger days. I began the work of revising the translation and commentary of the Holy Qur'ān some time late in 1946, but the year 1947 was a critical year for the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent and, on 29th August, 1947, I myself had to flee for my life from Dalhousie, where I used to work in the summer months. The literary work that I was doing there suffered considerably but I took it up later at Quetta, where I passed the summer of 1948. Before making much progress, however, I fell seriously ill and the work had again to be put off for more than six months. The manuscript was ready by the middle of 1950, but another serious illness overtook me at Karachi, where I was then carrying on this work. I was spared, however, by God's grace, to see the work through the press, and to give it the finishing touches; perhaps also to render some further service to the cause of Truth. Though still on my sick-bed I am able to go through the proofs and revise the Introduction.

Before stating what changes I have made in the Revised Edition I quote a few paragraphs from the old preface relating to the chief features of this Translation:

“As regards the translation I need not say much. That a need was felt for a translation of the Holy Book of Islām with full explanatory notes from the pen of a Muslim in spite of the existing translations is universally admitted. Whether this translation satisfies that need, only time will decide. I may, however, say that I have tried to be more faithful to the Arabic Text than all existing English translations. It will be noticed that additional words as explaining the sense of the original have generally been avoided, and where necessary — and these cases are very few — they are given within brackets. Wherever a departure has been made from the ordinary or primary significance of a word, reason for this departure has been given in a footnote and authorities have been amply quoted.

“There are some novel features in this translation. The Arabic Text has been inserted, the translation and the text occupying opposite columns. Each verse begins with a new line in both the Text and the translation, and verses are numbered to facilitate reference. Necessary explanations are given in footnotes, and generally either authorities are quoted or reasons given for the opinion expressed. This made the work very laborious, but I have undertaken this labour to make the work a real source of satisfaction to those who might otherwise be inclined to be sceptical regarding many statements which will appear new to the ordinary reader. I have tried to avoid repetition in the explanatory footnotes by giving a reference where repetition was necessary, but I must confess that these references are far from being exhaustive. When the significance of a word has been explained in one place it has been thought unnecessary, except in rare cases, to make a reference to it. For the reader’s facility I have, however, added a list of the Arabic words explained, and the reader may refer to it when necessary.

“Besides the footnotes, ample introductory notes have been given at the commencement of each chapter. These introductory notes give the abstract of each chapter in sections, at the same time showing the connection of the sections and also explaining that of the different chapters with each other. This feature of the translation is altogether new, and will, I hope, in course of time, prove of immense service in eradicating the idea which is so prevalent now that there is no arrangement in the verses and chapters of the Holy Qur’ān. It is quite true that the Qur’ān does not classify the different subjects and treat them separately in each section or chapter. The reason for this is that the Holy Qur’ān is not a book of laws, but essentially a book meant for the spiritual and moral advancement of man, and therefore the power, greatness, grandeur and glory of God is its chief theme, the principles of social laws enunciated therein being also meant to promote the moral and spiritual advancement of man. But that there exists an arrangement will be clear even to the most superficial reader of the introductory notes on these chapters. It will be further noted that the Makkan and Madinan revelations are beautifully welded together, and there are groups of chapters belonging to about one time and relating to one subject. The introductory notes also show whether a particular chapter was revealed at Makkah or Madinah, and also the probable period to which it

belongs. Exact dates and specified order of the revelation of different chapters are often mere conjectures, and therefore I have avoided this useless task.

“The references to the authorities quoted in the notes are explained in the Key to References. Among the commentators, I have made the greatest use of the voluminous commentaries of Ibn Jarīr, Imām Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī, Imām Athīr al-Dīn Abū Ḥayyān and the shorter but by no means less valuable commentaries of *Zamakhsharī*, *Baiḍawī* and *Jāmi’ al-Bayān* of Ibn Kathīr. Among the lexicons, *Tāj al-‘Arūs* and the *Liṣān al-‘Arab* are voluminous standard works and have been freely consulted, but the smaller work of Imām Rāghib Iṣfahānī, known as *Mufradāt fī Ḡharīb al-Qur’ān*, has afforded immense help, and it undoubtedly occupies the first place among the standard works in Arabic Lexicology so far as the Qur’ān is concerned. The valuable dictionaries of Ḥadīth, the *Nihāyah*, of Ibn Athīr and the *Majma’ al-Biḥār* have also proved very serviceable in explaining many a moot point. It will, however, be noted that I have more often referred to Lane’s *Arabic-English Lexicon*, a work the value of which for the English student of Arabic can hardly be overestimated; this has been done purposely so that the reader of this volume may have the facility to refer to an easily accessible work. It is a pity that the great author was not spared to complete his work, but up to the letter *fā*, Lane has placed the world under the greatest obligation. Besides commentaries and lexicons, historical and other works have also been consulted. Among the collections of Ḥadīth, *Bukhārī*, *Kitāb al-Tafsīr*, or chapter on the commentary of the Holy Qur’ān, has been before me throughout, but the whole of *Bukhārī* and other reliable Ḥadīth collections have also been consulted. And lastly, the greatest religious leader of the present time, Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmad of Qādiān, has inspired me with all that is best in this work. I have drunk deep at the fountain of knowledge which this great Reformer — *Mujaddid* of the present century and founder of the Aḥmadiyyah Movement — has made to flow. There is one more person whose name I must mention in this connection, the late Maulawī Ḥakīm Nūr al-Dīn, who in his last long illness patiently went through much the greater part of the explanatory notes and made many valuable suggestions. To him, indeed, the Muslim world owes a deep debt of gratitude as the leader of the new turn given to the exposition of the Holy Qur’ān. He has done his work and passed away silently, but it is a fact that he spent the whole of his life in studying the Holy Qur’ān, and must be ranked with the greatest expositors of the Holy Book.

“The principle of the greatest importance to which I have adhered in interpreting the Holy Qur’ān is that no word of the Holy Book should be interpreted in such a manner as to contradict the plainer teachings of the Holy Qur’ān, a principle to which the Holy Word has itself called the attention of its reader in 3:7; see 3:7a. This rule forms the basis of my interpretation of the Qur’ān, and this is a very sound basis, if we remember that the Holy Qur’ān contains metaphors, parables, and allegories side by side with plain teachings. The Practice (*Sunnah*) and Sayings of the Holy Prophet, when contained in reliable reports, are the best commentary of the Holy Word, and I have therefore attached the greatest importance to them. Earlier authorities have also been respected, but reports and comments contradicting the Qur’ān itself cannot but be rejected. I have also kept before me the rule that

the meaning to be adopted in any case should be that which suits the context best, and the only other limitation to which I have subjected myself is that the use of that word in that sense is allowed by the lexicons or by Arabic literature. Existing translations have rendered me great help, but I have adopted an interpretation only after fully satisfying myself and having recourse to original authorities. Many of the stories generally accepted by the commentators find no place in my commentary, except in cases where there is either sufficient historical evidence or the corroborative testimony of some reliable Saying of the Holy Prophet. Many of these stories were, I believe, incorporated into Islamic literature by the flow of converts from Judaism and Christianity into Islām. I must add that the present tendency of Muslim theologians to regard the commentaries of the Middle Ages as the final word on the interpretation of the Holy Qur'ān is very injurious and practically shuts out the great treasures of knowledge which an exposition of the Holy Book in the new light reveals. A study of the old commentators, to ignore whose great labour would indeed be a sin, also shows how freely they commented upon the Holy Book. The great service which they have done to the cause of Truth would indeed have been lost to the world if they had looked upon their predecessors as uttering the final word on the exposition of the Holy Qur'ān, as most theologians do today."

It is a matter of no small pleasure to me that many of the special features of my Translation as noted above have been adopted by later Muslim translators of the Holy Qur'ān, the introductory notes to the chapters, giving the abstract of each chapter and showing its connection with what has gone before, have been specially appreciated. Even in the matter of interpretation, most of the views adopted by me have found acceptance with them. The following quotations from *The Moslem World*, July 1931, Revd. Zwemer's quarterly, would furnish interesting reading in this connection:

"A careful comparison of Mr. Pickthall's translation with that of the Ahmadiyya translator, Maulvi Muhammad Ali, shows conclusively, that Mr. Pickthall's work is not very much more than a revision of the Ahmadiyya version" (p. 289).

"We have made a thorough examination of about forty verses in the second chapter, sixty verses in the third, forty verses in the nineteenth, and all of the last fifteen chapters, comparing his renderings with those of Sale, Rodwell, Palmer and Muhammad Ali; as well as with the Arabic. From this careful investigation we have come to the conclusion that Mr. Pickthall's translation, in all that part of his work which we have examined, resembles very closely the version of Muhammad Ali, the difference between the two versions in many passages being merely verbal" (p. 290).

"Now if we compare the above passage (3:57–63) with the versions of S, R and P, we shall see that Mr. Pickthall is very much nearer to MA than he is to any of the three previous translators, so that one gets the impression that although he may have taken a word here and there from R and P, yet he has not followed them so closely as he obviously followed MA" (p. 292).

“The dependence of Mr. Pickthall upon the work of MA is also indicated in an occasional footnote, and those who will compare these footnotes with the notes in the 1920 edition of MA, which contains his commentary, will find that throughout chapter 2 almost every footnote is based on the Ahmadiyya Commentary” (p. 293).

“We think it will now be evident to the reader how much Mr. Pickthall is indebted to the version of Maulvi Muhammad Ali, not only for his footnotes but also for the translation itself” (p. 293).

“By comparing these two passages with Mr. Sarwar’s rendering given on page 133 of the last issue of this journal, it will be seen that both Mr. Sarwar and Mr. Pickthall have followed MA very closely” (p. 294).

“In the passages which we have examined carefully, namely the verses at the beginning of the second, third and nineteenth suras, and the last fifteen, the translation of Pickthall follows MA so closely that one finds very few evidences of original work” (p. 297).

Similar views have been expressed by other writers. Thus the author of *Islām in its True Light* calls this Translation “a leading star for subsequent similar Muslim works” (p. 69) and mentions both Mr. Sarwar and Mr. Pickthall as following closely this Translation. The reason is not far to seek. My work was a work of labour. For every rendering or explanation I had to search Ḥadīth collections, Lexicologies, Commentaries and other important works, and every opinion expressed was substantiated by quoting authorities. Differences there have been in the past, and in future too there will be differences, but wherever I have differed I have given my authority for the difference. Moreover the principle I have kept in view in this Translation and Commentary, i.e., seeking the explanation of a problematic point first of all from the Holy Qur’ān itself, has kept me nearest to the truth, and those who study the Qur’ān closely will find very few occasions to differ with me. The Christian writer of the article in *The Moslem World*, from which I have quoted above, concludes with the following words:

“One cannot read far in the translation of Maulvi Muhammad Ali or in his notes without being convinced that before he began his work on the Koran he was already widely read in the Arabic Authorities listed on page lx, to which frequent reference is made in his notes; also his quotations from Lane’s Lexicon indicate that he was not altogether oblivious to the results of European scholarship” (p. 303).

And then it is added:

“It is a pity that his work is so saturated with the peculiar doctrines of the Ahmadiyya sect and with bitter denunciation of Christian teachings that the results of his Oriental scholarship have been seriously vitiated.”

I may here add that it is not only in having recourse to Lane’s Lexicon that I have taken advantage of European scholarship. For full nine years before taking up this translation I was engaged in studying every aspect of the European criticism of

Islām as well as of Christianity and religion in general, as I had specially to deal with these subjects in *The Review of Religions*, of which I was the first editor. I had thus an occasion to go through both the higher criticism of religion by advanced thinkers and what I may call the narrower criticism of Islām by the Christian missionaries who had no eye for the broader principles of Islām and its cosmopolitan teachings, and the unparalleled transformation wrought by Islām. The talk of Aḥmadiyyah doctrines is, however, nothing but false propaganda. The faith of Islām is one and all sects of Islām are one so far as the essential doctrines of Islām are concerned. There are differences in interpretation but they all relate to minor and secondary points. The Christian reviewer's combining together "the peculiar doctrines of the Ahmadiyya sect" and "bitter denunciation of the Christian teachings" lets the cat out of the bag. So far as the criticism of the false church doctrines of Trinity, Sonship and Atonement is concerned, the doctrines are so emphatically denounced in plain words in the Qur'ān itself that no commentator need be bitter. What offends the Christian missionary and what he calls the peculiar doctrines of the Aḥmadiyyah sect is no more than an expression of opinion that Jesus Christ did not bodily ascend to heaven and is not alive there and that he died a natural death like other prophets. There is not a single *doctrine* of the religion of Islām in which this Translation differs from orthodox views. I hope to be excused for clearing up this point by a quotation from Mr. Pickthall's review of my book *The Religion of Islām in the Islamic Culture* for October 1936:

"Probably no man living has done longer or more valuable service for the cause of Islamic revival than Maulana Muhammad Ali of Lahore. ... In our opinion the present volume is his finest work ... It is a description of Al-Islām by one well-versed in the Qur'ān and the Sunnah who has on his mind the shame of the Muslim decadence of the past five centuries and in his heart the hope of the revival, of which signs can now be seen on every side. Without moving a hair's breadth from the Traditional position with regard to worship and religious duties, the author shows a wide field in which changes are lawful and may be desirable because here the rules and practices are not based on an ordinance of the Quran or an edict of the Prophet." (p. 659)

Mr. Pickthall was an orthodox Muslim, and what he has said of *The Religion of Islām* is true of this Translation. There is not a hair's breadth departure from the essentials of Islām, and this Translation does not contain anything contrary to the views of the great Imāms and learned *Ahl Sunnah* that have gone before. That there have been differences in the interpretation of the Holy Qur'ān among the greatest commentators, among even the Companions of the Holy Prophet and the great Imāms, cannot be denied. But these differences do not relate to the essentials of the faith of Islām on which all Muslims are agreed; they relate to minor or secondary points. All Muslims believe in the Unity of God and the prophethood of Muḥammad. They believe in all the prophets of God and in His Books. They believe that Divine revelation came to perfection with the Prophet Muḥammad who is thus the last of the prophets — *Khātam al-Nabiyyin* — after whom no prophet will come, and the Holy Qur'ān is the last Divine message to the whole of humanity. All these doctrines find clear expression in my translation and the explanatory footnotes.

The only important matter wherein I may be said to have differed with the majority relates to the death of Jesus Christ. But in the first place the belief that Jesus is alive somewhere in the heavens has never been included among the essentials of Islām. It has never been included among the religious doctrines of the faith of Islām. There are Muslims who still believe that four prophets are alive, Khidr, Idris, Elias and Jesus Christ, but that is not an article of faith with any Muslim. Many learned Muslims have held such belief regarding the first three to be based on Israelite stories and as having nothing to support it in the Holy Qur'ān and authentic Ḥadīth. They are not looked upon as unorthodox for that reason. Why should this Translation be looked upon as unorthodox for saying the same thing about a belief in Jesus Christ being alive? I may call the reader's attention to another fact as well. Most learned Muslims all over the world, if not all, are today convinced that Jesus Christ died like other prophets and many of them have given expression to such views, among them being the famous Mufti Muḥammad 'Abdu-hū and Sayyid Rashīd Raḍā' of Egypt.

I may be excused for quoting two other orthodox views about this Translation. Maulānā 'Abdul Mājīd Daryābādī, editor, *Such*, Lucknow, who is a recognized leader of orthodox Muslim opinion, wrote on 25th June 1943:

“To deny the excellence of Maulvī Muḥammad 'Ali's translation, the influence it has exercised and its proselytizing utility, would be to deny the light of the sun. The translation certainly helped in bringing thousands of non-Muslims to the Muslim fold and hundreds of thousands of unbelievers much nearer Islām. Speaking of my own self, I gladly admit that this translation was one of the few books which brought me towards Islām fifteen or sixteen years ago when I was groping in darkness, atheism and scepticism. Even Maulānā Muḥammad 'Ali of the *Comrade* was greatly enthralled by this translation and had nothing but praise for it.”

Here we have the view of not one but two great orthodox leaders of Islām. I would add only one more orthodox leader's view to show that there is not the least ground for the false propaganda that this Translation is saturated with any unorthodox or heretical views. It is the Urdu paper *Wakil*, which was published from Amritsar and of which both the editor and the proprietor were orthodox Muslims. Its review of this Translation when it was first issued was in the following words:

“We have seen the translation critically and have no hesitation in remarking that the simplicity of its language and the correctness of the version are all enviable. The writer has kept his annotations altogether free from sectarian influence with wonderful impartiality, and has gathered together the wealth of authentic Muslim theology. He has also displayed great skill and wisdom in using the new weapons of defence in refuting the objections of the opponents of Islām.”

As I have already stated, I have throughout this Translation quoted authorities wherever I have differed with previous translators or commentators or with certain views generally held by Muslims but which are not supported by the Holy Qur'ān or by authentic Ḥadīth of the Holy Prophet. In the revised edition I have laid even

greater emphasis on this point. In the case of Ḥadīth collections I have now given exact references, to book and chapter, which were wanting in the first edition, and have moreover made greater use of reliable ḥadīth when they explain the Qur'ān, giving the greatest importance to Bukhārī — *Aṣṣaḥḥ al-Kutub ba'da Kitāb Allāh* — the most correct of the books after the Book of God. Lexicons have also been resorted to on a vaster scale, and a complete index of the Arabic words and phrases explained has been added. The general index has been amplified, and headings have been added bearing on important subjects dealt with in the Qur'ān.

Changes have been made in many footnotes and a large number of new notes has been added. As regards the Translation itself, I have tried to make it simpler, though still adhering to the principle adopted in the first edition of being faithful to the Arabic text.

Changes have also been made in the subjects discussed in the Introduction. The subject of the Purity of the Quranic Text was very important as throwing light on the collection and arrangement of the Holy Book and it has been retained with some changes. But the summary of the teachings of Islām and details of the Islamic Institution of prayer are now obtainable separately and have been omitted from the Introduction. In the place of these, new and important subjects have been inserted to afford facility to the reader in understanding the Holy Qur'ān itself.

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