

Translation and the Holy Text

International Conference

Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University

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Translation: Christianity and Judaism

The translation of the Holy Text has elicited sundry and delicate questions that emanate from the attitudes and relationships of communities of peoples to their languages and to the founding texts of their identities, to the sacred and to the world, with its flora and fauna.

The Holy Text constitutes a “literary” artifact on its own that throws into relief the inherited identity of a community. The question of its translation “has differed” widely according to the varieties of religions and beliefs. If we consider the three Abrahamic monotheisms: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, we notice a radical difference among these three offshoots of the Abrahamic tradition in relation to the place accorded to the translation of their Holy Texts.

Accordingly, the second Epistle to Corinthians underlines the fact that revelation has an ineffable character and that it cannot be expressed in human language. Translation would thus be a blasphemy. Steiner indicates that “Judaism conceals an extreme taboo, the *Megillat Taanith* of the first century, which relates how the world darkened for three days while the Law was being translated into Greek (Ballard, M. 2007:38). Thus, translation is considered as a breach of the forbidden communication incarnated by the curse of Babel that the diversity of languages represents.

Moreover, the refusal of the Judaic clergy to take part in the Ecumenical Translation of the Bible confirms the permanence of this radical position of Judaism.

For Christianity, on the other hand, we notice that translation and interpretation were constitutive elements of the New Testament (NT). Indeed, if Christ spoke Aramaic, the New Testament was written in Greek as early as the first century; however, the prevalence of Latin

in Gaulle and Africa created the need for Latin translations of the Bible, a task which was undertaken by Saint Jerome (Eusebius Hieronymus, born in 347). The Bible was later translated into vernacular European languages; some of these translations laid the foundations of national languages and identities (for example, German with Martin Luther). This religious dimension brought to the limelight the central place that translation and interpretation hold in the Christian tradition.

The problem of religious translation has brought to the fore questions that deal with the notion of “Religions of the Holy Books”, a notion that is not accepted wholeheartedly by the different monotheisms.

Translation of the Koran

So far, there is hardly any survey of translations of the Koran, either in Islamic countries or in the West. Such an endeavor has had to come up against two limitations. On the one hand, it is taken for granted in orthodox circles that the translation of the Koran should be limited to the translation of the “meanings” of the text. Accordingly, reciting the Koran while praying must be in Arabic, namely in the language revealed to the prophet of Islam. Still, the Koran has been translated into Berber, Persian, and languages of Asia and India. These translations were not undertaken in a spirit doomed to failure, despite the dogmatic belief in the “inimitability of the Koran.” On the other hand, there is, as Régis Blachère stated in his ‘introduction to the Koran,’ some “confusion on the part of non-Arabic readers” vis-à-vis the traditional translations of this text. The earliest translation was in Latin by Robert Ketton, alias Robert von Ketton, about 1143. Later versions in Italian by Andrea Arrivabene in 1547 and German by Salomon Schweigger in 1616 were undertaken from Latin and sometimes had titles that referred to Turkish threats to Europe. Even when the Koran was first translated from Arabic into German in 1772, it was considered as the “Turkish Koran.” Likewise, these translations echoed reservations of the church.

Hence, we can distinguish between translations designed to form the *vulgates* (translations that projected to refute the claims of Islam or Christianity) and scientific translations. The latter comply with academic conventions that this conference will throw into relief. Hence we can assess translations in Germany by Max Henning(1901), rudi Paret (1962), and in France by Régis Blachère, André Chouraqui and Jacques Berque.

The overall objective of this first conference on Translation and the Holy Text is to present, as far as Islam is concerned, a mapping of translations available in Islamic countries as well as those scientific translations of the Koran.

It is also projected to map a history of translations of the Koran within the framework of monotheist religions, and to raise specific questions that relate to the “holy text” vis-à-vis the “profane text. Translation of the holy texts sometimes partakes of a history of misunderstanding and the polemic surrounding the “founding” texts. Still, writing a history of

the translation of the holy texts at the academic level stems from diffusing a spirit of religious and cultural dialogue.

To sum up, the aim of this conference is to reflect on the problem of religious translation, making the best out of the available bibliography in the *Hermeneutica Sacra* and in the *Reforming movements*, while underlining the points of exegetic convergence among the different hermeneutic, linguistic, traductological, and theological contributions.

Suggested axes:

1. Theoretical perspectives in religious translation.

- Translation, exegesis and interpretation.
- Hermeneutics and religious exegesis
- Revelation and inspiration.
- Translation, human language and divine discourse.
- Translation, the language of revelation and profane languages

2. Translation and Religious dialogue

- Language, Identity and Otherness
- Foundational narratives and languages- cultures
- Myths, beliefs and religions
- Literalism and fundamentalism
- Translation, faiths, and being-together
- Monotheism and polytheist culture

3. History of religious translation

- Biblical translation
- Translation in the Reform movement and the hermeneutics of the sacred.
- The history of the translation of the Koran.

In addition to English, papers can be presented in French and Arabic. The deadline for the submission of proposals is January 30, 2012.

For the GRITI (Interdisciplinary Research Group in Translation and Interpreting).

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