

The Qur'an: A New Translation

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Speech given at the launch of The Qur'an: A New Translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem

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Main speakers:

HRH Prince El-Hassan bin Talal of Jordan

Professor David Ford, University of Cambridge

Address by Professor David Ford:

It is a great delight and a privilege to be able to take part in the launch of this important translation.

Before sitting down to read it last month – and what a read it has been! – I had a foretaste of it. Last year Professor Haleem and I were in a group (a fascinating one that included Sheikh Zaki Badawi from here, Professor Ellen Davis the American scripture scholar, and Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald who is in charge of interfaith affairs at the Vatican) that spent three days mainly studying the Qur'an and the Christian scriptures alongside each other. Whenever we began a new passage in the Qur'an we would ask Professor Haleem, who is a hafiz, to recite it from memory. Then, as we engaged with it in his then unpublished translation, we would not only get the benefit of the many years he has spent on Quranic interpretation and translation; but also every so often as a phrase was discussed he would excitedly (and humbly) say: 'That's better! I must change my translation!'

Well, now it is beyond such changes, and we have this remarkable book, beautifully produced by Oxford University Press – it is a consummate publishing achievement, which even feels good to the touch (I say this as a member of the Cambridge University Press Syndicate – this is a coup for Oxford!). And it is a gripping read – written in strong, vigorous, clear and flowing language that is, I suspect, the most helpful way to try to achieve that extraordinarily difficult task of rendering the Qur'an into English – or any other language.

That this fine translation should come out at this time is of considerable significance. I was talking about this with my Muslim colleague in Cambridge, Tim Winter, and he said: 'What better thing could a scholar do than to make the Qur'an more widely and more reliably available to those who do not know Arabic?' – Or, I would add, who do not know Arabic as well as Professor Haleem. I suppose that the two most influential books in the world at present are the Qur'an and the Bible. Each tradition has had very different attitudes to translation, and there are many more translations of the Bible; but it must be a good thing for many who will never be able to read it well in Arabic to be able to engage with this scripture in as clear and trustworthy a form as possible.

One knows so many settings where this is important. Just in my own current experience, I think of courses in our Faculty in Cambridge on Islam and on interfaith issues – only a minority of students study Arabic, but such courses are very popular. I think of a range of projects in our Cambridge Interfaith Programme, which engages with Judaism, Christianity and Islam together and is constantly needing to refer to good translations of all three scriptures. I think of a group of Muslim, Christian and Jewish academics in a society called Scriptural Reasoning, that for the past eight years has studied and interpreted the three scriptures and related them to a range of current issues to do with how the core identities and convictions of each tradition are to be worked out in the contemporary world. This translation will be my recommendation to them.

But I also think back to that group in which Professor Haleem and I studied together. It met in the Gulf, in Qatar during the second Gulf War – we had the whole CNN team staying in the hotel where we met. As we wrestled with texts and interpretations in that setting, two things were clear to us. The first was that there are in our scriptures and their traditions of interpretation and ethical application resources for peace, understanding, and trust, not only among Muslims and Christians but also more widely; but, second, that the fundamental need is for wise interpretation – if the scriptures are not drawn upon wisely then either they will be drawn upon unwisely – with disastrous results; or they will be ignored in favour of solutions that, because the rich resources of these traditions have not been taken seriously, are less likely to bring healing and flourishing that is deep enough, strong enough or sustainable long-term.

That meeting in Qatar was chaired by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and earlier this week I had an e-mail from a member of his staff asking me specially to convey his delight at the publication of this translation and in particular his warmest congratulations to you, Professor Haleem, on a major scholarly achievement.

Let me in conclusion say three further things about this translation.

There is a saying: ‘We know a book for the first time in translating it.’ It refers to the familiar experience that wrestling to translate a book leads us deeper into its meaning. Professor Haleem seems never to have ceased growing in his understanding of the Qur’an. This has been a massive labour of love and scholarship together, and one which it seems has been fruitful in both directions: the Qur’an has been opened up in an unprecedented way to many readers of English; but at the same time, this is a new interpretation of the Arabic, Professor Haleem has come to know the Qur’an better through translating it, and he has given us a version that can illuminate the original.

The second thing is about the content of the Qur’an. It does have a central concern, one that is utterly radical, comprehensive and challenging. It is so easy to ignore or take for granted what is most obvious and most important. Its concern is with God. Rowan Williams in Qatar, in the presence of the Amir, the diplomatic corps and the media, said: ‘We are here to discover more about how each community believes it must listen to God, conscious of how very differently we identify and speak of God’s revelation... Listening to God and listening to one another as nations, cultures and faiths have not always had the priority they so desperately need.’¹ What this translation does above all is to allow more people to attend to what is at the heart of Muslim listening to God. This is important for Muslim readers, but also for other ‘People of the Book’, for other religious traditions and for anyone, agnostic or

atheist, who is concerned with what is most important for fellow human beings. In that lovely phrase of Professor Haleem's translation that recurs many times: 'Be mindful of God'. So, finally, here we are, launching a book that is one of the most intensive affirmations of the reality and purposes of God, and we are doing so in this most distinguished academic institution which is secular. I think we should appreciate the symbolic significance of that. Tomorrow, I fly to Amman to take part in the World Economic Forum. There will be a meeting there of a West-Islamic World Dialogue that the Forum has set up for three years, and one of the main topics this weekend is religion and secularism. Our world, and our society in Britain, is not simply religious and not simply secular, but complexly both religious and secular. We therefore need places, like the World Economic Forum or SOAS, where the understanding of both the religious and the secular can be broadened and deepened. In the coming century it may be that the peace and even survival of our world depend as much on the complex negotiations and settlements that need to happen between religious and secular forces as on anything else. One aspect of what is happening this evening is the launch of a book that has the capacity to contribute a wisdom that, in Rowan Williams phrase, we 'desperately need'. As Sura 4 says: 'We gave the descendants of Abraham the Scripture and wisdom.'

¹ *Scriptures in Dialogue. Christians and Muslims studying the Bible and the Qur'an together*, Edited Michael Ipgrave (Church House Publishing, London 2004) pp.xi-xii

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