

*Centenary of
Maulana
Muhammad Ali's
English Translation
of the Quran*

*Background, History
and Influence on Later Translations*

by

Zahid Aziz

Ahmadiyya Anjuman Lahore Publications, U.K.

CENTENARY OF
MAULANA MUHAMMAD ALI'S
ENGLISH TRANSLATION
OF THE QURAN

“My work was a work of labour. For every rendering or explanation, I had to search Hadith 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 Quran itself, has kept me nearest to the truth, and those who study the Quran closely will find very few occasions to differ with me.”

— Maulana Muhammad Ali, writing in the Preface to the Revised 1951 Edition of his English Translation and Commentary of the Quran, on why reviewers found that his 1917 edition was followed by later Muslim translators (see also page 46).

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Preface

This booklet has been compiled to mark the centenary of the publication of the English translation of the Quran, with extensive commentary, by Maulana Muhammad Ali in 1917. It was, in any practical sense, and in terms of theological scholarship, the first English translation of the Quran by a Muslim. It was certainly the first to be published and to be available in Western countries. Some thirty years after it first appeared, it was thoroughly revised by Maulana Muhammad Ali. It is now a century that it has continued to be reprinted and re-published in different formats, most recently also in digital editions. His translation and commentary has also been used as the basis for producing translations into several other languages.

Later English translations by Muslims were influenced by this work, as we show in the present booklet. In fact, this translation paved the way for them since it broke through the barrier imposed by the orthodox scholars of Islam who held that the Quran must not be translated and who opposed the appearance of any such work.

The most remarkable fact is that a movement which is insignificant in number and meagre in resources, and faces hostility from within the Muslim world and from outside it, has been able to maintain this translation in existence and spread it widely all over the world for a century.

In chapter 1 of this book, we begin by tracing the source of inspiration which led to the producing of this translation and explain the need for such a work. Then its history at Qadian is described till the events of March 1914 which led to the establishment of the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha'at Islam at Lahore. Continuing the

historical account, chapter 2 covers the completion of the translation after the move to Lahore and its printing and publication from Woking, Surrey, England. It goes on to quote many of the reviews which appeared both at that time and in later years. Brief mention is also made in this chapter of the Maulana's Urdu translation and massive commentary, and the English editions without Arabic text, all these appearing in the 1920s.

In chapter 3 there is a somewhat detailed examination of the relationship of the Maulana's translation with certain well-known translations by other Muslims which appeared afterwards. It shows really the great debt which these translators owed to Maulana Muhammad Ali.

Chapter 4 relates the work of thorough revision of his translation and commentary which the Maulana carried out in the years 1947–1951 to produce the 1951, fourth revised edition. It brings the subject up to date with some details of the subsequent reprints and editions after the 1951 revised translation.

Chapter 5 gives excerpts from the writings of Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad on the importance of the Quran to the world, Muslim and non-Muslim. It was his emphasis on the status, qualities and role of the Quran which inspired and motivated the pioneers of the Lahore Ahmadiyya to undertake the task of presenting the Islamic scripture to the world.

In an Appendix are displayed images of title pages of various editions of Maulana Muhammad Ali's translations of the Quran and some typical pages from inside them.

The information brought together and compiled in this booklet, much of it not generally known, will be found indispensable for an accurate assessment of the history of the translation of the Quran into English.

Zahid Aziz, Dr
August 2017

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1. Work on the Translation

Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement sets goal

Shortly after starting to establish the Ahmadiyya Movement, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the Founder, wrote in 1891 of his objective to present Islam to the West, in order to counter the mass of criticism directed at it both by Christian missionaries and modern thought. Appealing to the general Muslim community to render him help and assistance, he wrote in his book *Izala Auham*:

“I have been asked what should be done to spread the teachings of Islam in America and Europe ... It is undoubtedly true that Europe and America have a large collection of objections against Islam, inculcated through those engaged in [Christian] Mission work, and that their philosophy and natural sciences give rise to another sort of criticism. ... To meet these objections, a chosen man is needed who should have a river of knowledge flowing in his vast breast and whose knowledge should have been specially broadened and deepened by Divine inspiration. This work cannot be done by those who do not possess comprehensive vision...

I would advise that ... writings of an excellent and high standard should be sent into these countries. If my people help me heart and soul, I wish to prepare a commentary of the Quran which should be sent to them after it has been rendered into the English language. I cannot refrain from stating clearly that this is my work, and that definitely no one else can do it as I can, or as he can who is an offshoot of mine and thus is included in me.”¹

The Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement thus made it as one

of his most important goals to have the Quran translated into English, with a commentary, and presented to the West. Moreover, he declared that he would re-establish the long-neglected, right principles for understanding the Quran. The resulting true knowledge of the teachings of this Holy Book would equip Muslims to present the Quran to the modern world in a way that would satisfy its doubts about faith and religion and answer its objections to Islam. We summarise the principles which he taught in chapter 5 of this book.

At that time, the only English translations of the Quran that existed had been produced by British Christian critics of Islam. The first one was by George Sale, published in 1734, followed by Rev. J.M. Rodwell's translation in 1861, and Prof. E.H. Palmer in 1880. The first two were well-known, while Palmer's work appeared in the *Sacred Books of the East* series (volumes 6 and 9). These translators represented the Holy Prophet Muhammad as an imposter, deceiving the public in his claim to be receiving revelation, as suffering from mental disorders and serious moral flaws, and as one who was motivated by his low and base desires.

George Sale, in his note 'To the Reader', writes that, except for those who have a very low opinion of Christianity or very little knowledge of it, no one "can apprehend any danger from so manifest a forgery" as the Quran (p. iii). He goes on to add that it is Protestants alone, among Christians, who "are able to attack the Koran with success; and for them, I trust, Providence has reserved the glory of its overthrow" (p. iv). On the next page, he refers to the Holy Prophet in these words: "for how criminal soever Muhammad may have been in imposing a false religion on mankind" (p. v).

According to Rodwell, while "in all he did and wrote, Muhammad was actuated by a sincere desire" to reform his countrymen, but the earnestness of his convictions led him to use "any means, not even excluding deceit and falsehood" (p. xxi, xxii). He adds that the Holy Prophet "was probably, more or less, throughout his whole career, the victim of a certain amount of self-deception. A cataleptic (or, epileptic) subject from his early youth, born — according to the traditions — of a highly nervous and excitable mother, he would be

peculiarly liable to morbid and fantastic hallucinations, and alternations of excitement and depression” (p. xxii). In his translation, Rodwell writes in a footnote near the end of the chapter ‘Joseph’ of the Quran, quoting the opinion of Sir William Muir, that the Holy Prophet, in presenting the events of Joseph’s life as having been revealed to him, “must have entered upon a course of wilful dissimulation and deceit in claiming inspiration for them” (p. 292).

In case of Palmer, in his Introduction he acknowledges that, if we consider the following that the Holy Prophet attracted, this proves “that he could have been no mere impostor” (p. xlvi), but speaking of his first revelations he writes: “From youth upwards he had suffered from a nervous disorder ... the symptoms of which ... are almost always accompanied with hallucinations, abnormal exercise of the mental functions, and not unfrequently with a certain amount of deception, both voluntary and otherwise. ... Persons afflicted with epileptic or hysterical symptoms were supposed by the Arabs, as by so many other nations, to be possessed... Dark thoughts of suicide presented themselves to his mind...” (p. xx, xxi, xxii).

It is quite evident that these translators proceeded with the belief that the Quran, although it may contain some good, was nonetheless at its root a product of deception and mental disorder of the Holy Prophet. They have then tried to find support for their preconceptions when explaining various passages of the Quran. As this was leading to a gross misrepresentation of Islam, Maulana Muhammad Ali wrote as follows in the Preface to his English translation of the Quran:

“That a need was felt for a translation of the Holy Book of Islam 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.”²

In 1891, when the Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement wrote of his desire to have the Quran translated into English and sent to Western countries, he did not know Maulana Muhammad Ali, who

was then a teenager at school. He joined the Ahmadiyya Movement in 1897, and three years later decided to devote his life to serve the cause of Islam under the tutelage of the Founder. Shortly thereafter, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad announced his intention to start a magazine in English, aimed at a Western readership as well as English-educated Muslims in India. In this announcement, he expressed his anxiety and unbearable pain at the fact that “all those truths, the spiritual knowledge, the sound arguments in support of the religion of Islam”, which he was presenting to people in Urdu and to some extent in Arabic, “have not yet benefited the English-educated people of this country or the seekers-after-truth of Europe.” He appointed Maulana Muhammad Ali as editor of this magazine, and it was launched in January 1902 with the title *The Review of Religions*. How this equipped him to produce, later on, his English translation of the Quran is mentioned by him in his Preface to the revised, 1951, edition of that translation. Replying to a Christian missionary critic, he writes:

“For full nine years before taking up this translation I was engaged in studying every aspect of the European criticism of Islam 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 Islam by the Christian missionaries who had no eye for the broader principles of Islam and its cosmopolitan teachings, and the unparalleled transformation wrought by Islam.”³

By 1907 the need for an English translation of the Holy Quran by a Muslim was being widely felt among the educated Muslims, and many Indian newspapers were alluding to it. There was a proposal by two well-known Muslim figures living in the U.S.A., Maulana Barkatullah of Bhopal (d. 1927) and Alexander Russell Webb (d. 1916), that they would translate the Quran into English if Muslims of India could raise the funds for them to do so. The editor of the Ahmadiyya community newspaper *Al-Hakam* wrote an article in this connection in August 1907, in which he stated:

“I do not see any option but to accept that an English translation of the Quran is a dire necessity, but to do this work a scholar is required who, on the one hand, if not a thorough master of the entire breadth of the Arabic language, can at least be called a specialist of Arabic, and along with this he should have full command over the English language and complete mastery in writing it. Besides this, he should have a bond of attachment and love with God the Most High; moreover, his heart should be full of fervour for the propagation of Islam and pain at its present condition... In addition, he should be thoroughly acquainted with the needs of the time and be fully aware of all the objections against Islam that are put forward by heretics, atheists, philosophers, Arya Hindus, Christians, scientists and others, so that in regard to those places in the Quran where these people have stumbled, he should show the light of guidance.”

He adds that such a suitable man is Maulana Muhammad Ali:

“...it is a fact, which, if people do not realise it now, they will do so in the future, that this revered person is the worthy young man Maulvi Muhammad Ali, M.A. By writing in defence of Islam and expounding its truth through *The Review of Religions* he has established the reputation of his pen in Asia and Europe so firmly that figures like Russell Webb and philosophers like Tolstoy acknowledge that the concepts of Islam presented in this magazine give satisfaction to the soul. In Europe and America, articles of this magazine have been read with great interest and valued very highly.”⁴

As *The Review of Religions* was being circulated to the Western English-speaking world, and sent as far as the USA, the producers of this magazine must undoubtedly have realized the need for a reliable English translation of the Quran from the Muslim point of view, and they may well have received enquiries from readers as to a recommended translation that they could study.

Starts work on translating

The Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement had passed away in May 1908 and Maulana Nur-ud-Din had become Head of the Movement. The Maulana was an illustrious scholar of Islam, as

well as being deeply learned in other branches of religious and secular knowledge. Before joining the Ahmadiyya Movement in 1889 he had travelled widely in pursuit of religious knowledge and had stayed in Makkah and Madinah for some time. For his learning, he was held in high esteem by eminent Muslims outside the Ahmadiyya Movement. He had a particularly deep knowledge of, and love for, the Quran which he had studied for many years. His principle of understanding the Quran was that the interpretation of any passage in the Quran should be sought, in the first place, from other passages within this scripture itself. The Quran explains itself. It must also be studied in the light of reason and modern knowledge. The traditional sources, which are Hadith books and classical commentaries, are a valuable help, but they cannot be used to override and undo anything which is clear from the Quran.

It was under the guidance of Maulana Nur-ud-Din that Maulana Muhammad Ali started work on translating the Quran into English in 1909 at Qadian where he lived and worked. At that time, he was secretary of the central executive committee which managed the affairs of the Ahmadiyya Movement (*Sadr Anjuman Ahmadiyya*), and was also editor of *The Review of Religions*. These were his official duties. In May 1909, he placed the proposal for translating the Quran before this committee since, after the completion of the work, it would be funding its publication. He indicated in his proposal that if the committee were unable to bear the expenses of the publication “it is possible that Allah will provide some other means for me”.⁵ The work of translation he carried out on his own, according to his own judgment, under the advice and guidance of Maulana Nur-ud-Din.

Maulana Muhammad Ali worked on the translation often at home during the night. If no electricity was available, he worked by candle light at night. Whenever he went on leave, he took the work with him. Long afterwards, it was stated in the Foreword to the 1963 edition, which appeared after the Maulana’s death:

“Work on the first edition of the English translation of the Quran took him seven long years (1909–1916). The amount of original research that went into tracing the meanings of

the words and verses, finding the underlying sense of Sections and Chapters, and linking it up with the preceding and succeeding text, so that the whole of the Quran was shown to have the thread of a continuous theme running through it — it is simply staggering to think of all this stupendous and most taxing labour put in single handed, day after day, for seven long years. But that is exactly what made Maulana Muhammad Ali's translation the boon of the world of scholarship in the West as well as the East when it appeared in print in 1917. It was a pioneer venture breaking altogether new ground, and the pattern set was followed by all subsequent translations of the Quran by Muslims. ... There is no attempt at pedantry or literary flourishes. Nor is there any pandering to preconceived popular notions or a bid for cheap popularity. It is a loyal service to the Word of God aiming at scrupulously honest, faithful rendering.”⁶

In a report to the committee in 1911, Maulana Muhammad Ali explained that “to publish only a translation is not very useful and the following additions are necessary”. Apart from footnotes, these would be an introductory note to each chapter, a summary of each section within a chapter, and an introduction to the whole work.⁷

Maulana Nur-ud-Din had taken a great interest in the translation. Maulana Muhammad Ali used to visit him regularly to read to him from the place he had reached in the translation, and take guidance from him particularly as regards the commentary.

An incident is reported, probably from 1912, that when Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din came to Qadian after one of his lecture tours of India, he informed Maulana Muhammad Ali that the *Nadwat-ul-Ulama* (a well-known Islamic instruction institution based in Lucknow) was having the Quran translated into English by Syed Husain Bilgrami (eminent Muslim educationist and civil servant),⁸ and that Maulana Abul Kalam Azad was writing an Urdu commentary of the Quran. So, asked Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din: “Who would pay any attention to an English or Urdu translation by you?” Maulana Muhammad Ali mentioned this to Maulana Nur-ud-Din, who replied: “Let them do whatever they are doing. You do your work. Recognition is ordained by God. Whichever translation is accepted by

God, that is the one which will attain renown in the world. During the time of Imam Malik, sixty collections of Hadith called *Muwatta* were compiled, but recognition was given only to the *Muwatta* of Imam Malik. None of the others can be found anywhere today, and people only know of the *Muwatta* of Imam Muhammad after that of Imam Malik. Even the name of any other is not known.”⁹

Even when Maulana Nur-ud-Din fell so critically ill that speaking exhausted him, in that state of the most serious ailment, he would still receive Maulana Muhammad Ali daily to listen to his translation and notes and give advice. Speaking of those last days, many years later, Maulana Muhammad Ali said:

“It was my good fortune that I had the opportunity to learn the Quran from him even in those days when he was on his death bed. I used to read out to him notes from my English translation of the Holy Quran. He was seriously ill, but even in that state he used to be waiting for when Muhammad Ali would come. And when I came to his presence, that same critically ailing Nur-ud-Din would turn into a young man. The service of the Quran that I have done is just the result of his love for the Holy Quran.”¹⁰

The last days of the life of Maulana Nur-ud-Din were chronicled every few days in the Ahmadiyya community newspapers in the form of the latest reports of his condition and engagements on his sick bed. We reproduce below some extracts from these:¹¹

9 February 1914 — ... He said: “Ask Maulvi Muhammad Ali sahib about my knowledge of the Quran. Having worked very hard he comes with hundreds of pages and I abridge them. He sometimes says that my opinion is better than all research.” Then he said: “...Maulvi sahib has pleased me very much, I am so happy. What wonderful research he has done on Gog and Magog... He has searched through encyclopaedias.”

14 February 1914 — He is still in a critical condition... he is getting weaker by the day. He listens to Maulvi Muhammad Ali sahib’s translation of the Quran daily. ... His courage and determination is very great and his love for the

Quran is unequalled. He says: "It is the Quran which is the source of my soul and life."

16 February 1914 — ... When Maulvi Muhammad Ali sahib comes to read the notes of the Holy Quran to him, sometimes even before he begins Hazrat sahib [i.e., Maulana Nur-ud-Din] gives a discourse about the topic of the translation of the day and says that throughout the night he has been consulting books and thinking about it. He does not mean that he actually reads books; what he means is that he keeps running over in his mind what is written in commentaries of the Quran and books of Hadith. Sometimes he quotes from books of Hadith or the Bible, and does it perfectly accurately. He says again and again that his mind is fully healthy and it never stops working on the Quran.

18 February 1914 — While he was in a state of extreme weakness ... Maulvi Muhammad Ali sahib came as usual to read out notes from the Holy Quran. ... Hazrat sahib said: "It is all the grace of God. What has happened is by His grace and what will happen will be by His grace." ... Then he added: "This translation will *inshallah* be beneficial in Europe, Africa, America, China, Japan and Australia."

22 February 1914 — He was very cheerful today. ... When told that Maulvi Muhammad Ali sahib had come to read to him the [translation and notes of the] Quran, he said: "He is most welcome. Let him read it. Does my brain ever get tired of it?" Then he pointed towards his bed and said: "Let Maulvi Muhammad Ali sahib come near me." Then he added: "He is very dear to me."

An announcement dated 3 March 1914, that is, ten days before the death of Maulana Nur-ud-Din, regarding the English translation of the Quran, was published as an appendix to *The Review of Religions*, February 1914 issue. On the first page there is a statement by Maulana Nur-ud-Din in which he says:

"Up to today I have listened to the notes of twenty-three parts, which is more than three-quarters of the work. ... Even during my illness, I have been listening to the notes

and dictating as well. I have spent all my life, from childhood to old age, studying the Holy Quran and pondering over it, and Allah, the Most High, has given me the kind of understanding of His Holy Word that very few other people have. ...

I hope for grace from Allah that He will not let go to waste my efforts in the service of His Word. I am also sure that those people who have a connection with me and who love me have also been granted the zeal to serve the Quran. ... This translation will *inshallah* prove to be beneficial in Europe, Africa, America, China, Japan, Australia, etc.”

A footnote to this announcement provided an update, saying: “By the time this announcement was printed, the footnotes of 26 parts had been completed.”

Later, when the translation was published, the following tribute was paid by Maulana Muhammad Ali in the Preface at the point where he acknowledged his sources:

“And lastly, the greatest religious leader of the present time, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian, 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 Ahmadiyya Movement — has made to flow. There is one more person whose name I must mention in this connection, the late Maulawi Hakim Nur-ud-Din, 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 Quran. 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 Quran, and must be ranked with the greatest expositors of the Holy Book.”¹²

Death of Maulana Nur-ud-Din and subsequent events

On 13 March 1914 Maulana Nur-ud-Din died. With that came a turning point in the life of Maulana Muhammad Ali and his literary and missionary activities, changing their course forever. A split and

schism took place in the Ahmadiyya Movement when Mirza Bashir-ud-Din Mahmud Ahmad, a son of the Founder, was controversially made head of the Movement by his supporters. He proclaimed the doctrine that a person is not a Muslim unless he believes in, and formally acknowledges, the claims of Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. In his view, a Muslim who did not accept Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was, in terms of Islamic theology and law, exactly like the non-Muslim who does not accept the Holy Prophet Muhammad. He declared that social and community relations between members of the Ahmadiyya Movement and other Muslims should be on the basis that the former are Muslims and the latter are non-Muslims just as Christians or Hindus are non-Muslims.

Maulana Muhammad Ali and many others in the Ahmadiyya Movement refused to accept these pronouncements, which they regarded as being contrary to the teachings of Islam, and of the Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement himself, and his successor Maulana Nur-ud-Din. Consequently, in May 1914 they established at Lahore the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha'at Islam. A few days earlier, Maulana Muhammad Ali declared:

“...considering that the doctrine of calling other Muslims as *kafir* (unbelievers) poses a danger to the work of the propagation of Islam and the progress of the Movement, and in order to prevent damage to the work of spreading Islam in Europe that has just now been started [i.e., at Woking, England], it has been deemed advisable that ... an Anjuman be created in Lahore for the purpose of the propagation of Islam whose main aim should be to strengthen the real objective of this Movement, which is the propagation of Islam.”¹³

After fifteen years of scholarly, literary and administrative work for the Ahmadiyya Movement at Qadian, Maulana Muhammad Ali left for Lahore empty handed, but he had with him one thing, and that was the English translation of the Holy Quran which he brought with him from Qadian to Lahore.

Notes:

- ¹ *Izala Auham*, p. 771–773.
- ² In the Year 2002 edition, see page I-10. The wording here was written by the Maulana in the Preface to the Revised Edition of 1951, in which he has quoted from the Preface to the original 1917 edition with some amendments. The words “from the pen of a Muslim” were added by him in the Revised Edition.
- ³ In the Year 2002 edition, see pages I-13 – I-14.
- ⁴ *Al-Hakam*, 17 August 1907, p. 7.
- ⁵ *A Mighty Striving*, biography of Maulana Muhammad Ali, p. 64–65.
- ⁶ In the Year 2002 edition, see page I-3.
- ⁷ *A Mighty Striving*, p. 66.
- ⁸ Abdullah Yusuf Ali writes in the Preface to his translation of the Quran in the section on ‘Translations of the Quran’: “My dear friend, the late Nawwab ‘Imad-ul-mulk Saiyid Hussain Bilgrami of Hyderabad, Deccan, translated a portion, but he did not live to complete the work” (p. xv; 1938 edition).
- ⁹ Article by Dr Basharat Ahmad in the Lahore Ahmadiyya Urdu organ *Paigham Sulh*, 15 October 1942, p. 6, col. 3.
- ¹⁰ *Paigham Sulh*, 28 April 1943, p. 3.
- ¹¹ These extracts appeared in the following issues of *Paigham Sulh* respectively: 15 February 1914, p. 1; 17 February 1914, p. 4; 19 February 1914, p. 4; 3 November 1935, p. 2; and 15 November 1935, p. 2.
- ¹² In the Year 2002 edition, see page I-11.
- In the first edition of his translation, Maulana Muhammad Ali has written a further sentence here about Maulana Nur-ud-Din as follows: “It is a pity that his valuable Arabic commentary has not yet been given to the world, but when that manuscript sees the light, it will reveal that he was one of the master minds” (p. xciv, in the 1917, 1920 and 1935 editions).
- ¹³ *Paigham Sulh*, 2 April 1914, appendix, fourth page, col. 1.

2. Publication and Reviews

Completion and publication of the English Translation of the Holy Quran

At Lahore, Maulana Muhammad Ali was now Head of an organization which started in a state of the utmost destitution, having no office, no funds and no staff. In these difficult conditions, and with many other important, indispensable matters that required his attention, Maulana Muhammad Ali continued to work on the completion and publication of his English translation of the Holy Quran. The last four parts, out of the thirty parts of the Quran, remained to be completed, and then there was revision of the manuscript, getting it typed, writing the introduction, and some other aspects of the work still to be done. Consequently, he buried himself in this work day and night.

Another urgency was due to the fact that, in 1912, Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din, a prominent figure in the Ahmadiyya Movement, had gone to England, and had founded a Muslim Mission at the Mosque in Woking, Surrey. He was presenting the message of Islam to the British people by lectures, correspondence, meetings and articles published in his monthly magazine the *Islamic Review*, launched in February 1913. He was sending reports to Lahore stressing that the English translation of the Holy Quran should be completed as soon as possible because there was an urgent demand for it among converts to Islam as well as Christians and there was no translation available to present the true picture of Islam. In a report of his activities published in May 1914, Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din, referring to a convert to Islam, one Viscount de Potier, wrote:

“The Viscount has asked me to send him a translation of the Quran. I was compelled to send him Rodwell’s translation. ... it is better than the other translations in use. Muslims must learn a lesson from this, and realise how desperately it is required to publish our own translation. Every new Muslim and enquirer has asked me for a translation of the Quran. What can I do except give them Rodwell?”¹

At last, after a labour of about seven years, in April 1916 Maulana Muhammad Ali completed work on the English translation and commentary of the Holy Quran. In his Friday sermon on 28 April he gave the good news to the Lahore Ahmadiyya community:

“Today is a day of happiness for me. For years, I have been busy in the work of translating the Holy Quran into English. By the grace of Allah I have completed it today. I am not happy like a student who, at the end of his examination, feels that now he will have free time and can rest for a few days. I am happy because all the time that I was involved in this work I was worried that life is so fickle and it may be that this work would be left incomplete. Of course, Allah is not short of men and it was His work which would have been completed somehow; if He has given strength to a weak person like me to start this work, there is no reason why He could not get it done by someone else. But it gives great pleasure to a person to complete by his own hand in his own life the work that he had started....

This work is now before you. All of it has been sent to the press. I have received proofs of eight parts (up to this time proofs of 19 parts have arrived — *Editor*). We need very soon to think about the printing expenses. This is not our only work; there are many others that you have to do. Complete this first. It is a service to Islam; rather, it is purely a service to the Quran. So, be concerned about it and prepare resources for it. May Allah grant this to be done. *Ameen.*”²

It was decided to have it printed in England because the printing machines that were required for the high quality, fine paper, to be used to produce it in one volume, were not available in India. At that time Maulana Sadr-ud-Din (d. 1981), who later succeeded

Maulana Muhammad Ali as Head of the Lahore Ahmadiyya Anjuman in 1951, was Imam of the Mosque at Woking, and he was entrusted with the arrangements for its printing, a task which he accomplished extremely well.

Maulana Muhammad Ali spent the whole of the year 1916 preparing the index and the preface and introduction, and at the same time going through the first proofs which came from England. These proofs were initially read by Maulana Sadr-ud-Din in England, and then read and corrected by Maulana Muhammad Ali in his own hand in Lahore. After that stage, the reading of the second proofs, the correction of the Arabic text, and all the other tasks in connection with the printing were done by Maulana Sadr-ud-Din.

In the *Islamic Review*, the monthly magazine of the Woking Muslim Mission, the following progress report was published in the issue for June 1916 on the first page:

“As was expected, the announcement of the publication of an English translation of the Holy Quran, with elaborate notes and the Arabic text, aroused world-wide interest, and we have been doing our best to hurry the publication. But unavoidable circumstances have delayed it, for which the gigantic war is greatly responsible. In fact, if we had not already announced the publication, and if we had not found that there is general impatience to read the translation, we would have postponed the publication till the end of the war. Prices of all the materials required for printing that voluminous Book have gone up. We found it sometimes difficult even to get the material wanted. Delays have been caused in post, and so forth. Then we found that the bulk of the Book would be much more than we had first thought; so it was considered necessary to use India paper, the most expensive thin paper, and to enlarge the size of the book in order to reduce the bulk and make it handy. The pages will now run to about thirteen hundred. The English portion is almost finished, and would have reached the hands of the public if the Arabic text had not been considered necessary to go with the translation of the uncorrupted and uncorruptible Last Testament — the final Gospel.

Because of this war it was found not practicable to use type for the Arabic text. So now an expert copyist in India has been engaged to write out the text on the English pages sent from here. That writing is sent back to our engravers, who photograph it and obtain zincos thereof. Then the printing of the text is done in the space left for that purpose in the English translation. As is obvious, this makes the process very elaborate, and has increased the price of the work; but because the calligraphy of the text will be very handsome, those readers who know Arabic will be much pleased with Arabic writing all done by hand. The Book, besides its precious and holy contents, will form an ornament to any library, and will be a unique work of its description. In the next number of the REVIEW we shall be able to give the specimen pages, which will be exactly as in the Book when ready. The price of the Book cannot now be lower than One Pound, which, considering the increased expenses and the expensive material used, will be nothing. We have no doubt that when the compilation reaches the hands of the public they will fully appreciate the labour of love done over it by our esteemed brother Maulvi Muhammad Ali, M.A., LL.B.”

The following year this much-awaited book was out of the press by September. In the *Islamic Review*, September 1917 (p. 393), its announcement appeared under the heading:

The First English Translation and commentary of the Holy Quran by a Muslim Theologian

It ran as follows:

“THE Maulvi Muhammad Ali, M.A., LL.B., has prepared, after a labour of about nine years, an English translation, with necessary notes and commentary, of the Holy Quran, which has been printed in England and has just come out after unavoidable delays caused by the war. Each copy contains about 1,400 pages, and includes a comprehensive preface showing the special features of Islam as preached in the Holy Book, and an exhaustive discussion of the authenticity of the Holy Book, its original purity and incorruptibility, in which the Maulvi definitely proves that the Holy Book as it stands today is exactly as it was arranged by the Holy

Prophet Muhammad himself. Elaborate indexes are also given. The whole cost has come up to £1,500. The price of a leather-bound, gilt-edged copy on good India paper is 20s., to be had of the ISLAMIC REVIEW Office, The Mosque, Woking, Surrey.

Although it has increased the expense greatly, it was thought very necessary that the original text in Arabic, written by expert calligraphists in India, should also accompany the translation of each verse, as can be seen on the sample pages.

The translation is very faithful. The notes and commentary are fully comprehensive and explanatory, and every objection of Western critics has been met and answered. The mistakes of European translators and commentators have been corrected on the authority of old commentators as well as expert Arabic scholars. The relation of one chapter to the other and the connected context of the verses of each chapter have been fully established. An abstract of both chapters and sections is also given.

To those who know the learned translator his very name would be a guarantee to them that the translation is scholarly, and the commentary is based on the authentic traditions of the Great Prophet as interpreted by the authentic Muslim *savants*. For the benefit of strangers the selection of the sample pages has been such as to give out the characteristics of the translation of the whole, so that the reader of these pages should be able to form some idea of the nature of the whole volume.

It would but be superfluous to dilate upon the need of an English translation by a person who has not only a command over the English language but also over the original (i.e. Arabic) text of a book which holds the most unique position in the world of literature."

The price of the book, in top quality and leather bound, is given above as 20 shillings, which is £1 (one UK Pound). We can get an idea of what £1 would be in the year 1917 by noticing that the price of the above issue of the *Islamic Review* was 7 old pence. This

means that the price of the book is about 35 times the price of one issue of this magazine (as £1 consisted of 240 old pence).

In the same issue of the *Islamic Review*, sixteen consecutive pages from this translation are reproduced in facsimile form, starting at the beginning of chapter 1 of the Quran.

As being the “first” English translation by a Muslim

The heading of the above announcement describes this translation and commentary as “the first by a Muslim theologian”. Before this translation, three English translations of the Quran by Muslims had been published. These were by Abdul Hakim Khan (1905), Mirza Abul Fazl (1911), and Mirza Hairat of Delhi (1912), and were all published in India. They were, however, of limited circulation and little known. In a book *The Student’s Quran*, the author Hashim Amir Ali has listed several English translations of the Quran in chronological order, including those by Abdul Hakim Khan and Mirza Abul Fazl as numbers 5 and 6 in his list. Maulana Muhammad Ali’s is at number 7 and he writes of it as follows:

“7 MUHAMMAD ALI

The first work published by any Muslim with the thoroughness worthy of Quranic scholarship and achieving the standards of modern publications.”³

The author of a review of English translations of the Quran, written around 1999, entitled *Translating the Holy Quran: Is There An Ultimate Translation Of The Quran?*, Dr. A. Nihamathullah of Tamil Nadu, India, has listed some criteria for determining which of the numerous English translations of the Quran are worthy of a detailed review, comparison and examination. On that basis, he eliminates the English translation attempts by Muslims before Maulana Muhammad Ali as being “of just historical interest” and “inconsequential translations”.⁴

The description in the *Islamic Review* announcement quoted above, that Maulana Muhammad Ali’s work is the “*first ... by a Muslim theologian*” is also accurate as the three preceding Muslim translators were not Islamic scholars or theologians. Moreover, it is

a fact that the Maulana's English translation of the Quran was the first by a Muslim to be published in the West, as it was printed at the famous Gresham Press of Unwin Brothers Ltd. in Woking, England, and published in 1917 from the Islamic Review Office at the Woking Mosque in a quantity of 5000 copies. It was thus the first by a Muslim to be available in the world generally.

Authorities, sources and principles of interpretation

It is important to mention the authorities and sources used by Maulana Muhammad Ali in producing his translation and commentary, and the principles he followed in his interpretation. In his Preface he has listed the names of those classical commentaries of whom he "made the greatest use" and the lexicons and other standard works that he consulted, followed by an explanation of his principles of interpretation.⁵ We may here quote him on those principles:

"The principle of the greatest importance to which I have adhered in interpreting the Holy Quran is that no word of the Holy Book should be interpreted in such a manner as to contradict the plainer teachings of the Holy Quran, a principle to which the Holy Word has itself called the attention of its reader in 3:7; see 3:7a.⁶ This rule forms the basis of my interpretation of the Quran, and this is a very sound basis, if we remember that the Holy Quran 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 Quran 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 Islam.

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 Quran 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 Quran, as most theologians do today.”

Reviews

The publication was noticed immediately in the *Literary Supplement* of *The Times* which gave a description of the book from the announcement and wrote: “We have here in an attractive form and bound in flexible leather cover the first English translation and commentary of the Quran by a Moslem theologian”.⁷

About the same time, a reviewer in the *Westminster Gazette* wrote:

“I have always found a fascination in looking through occasional chapters of the Koran ... and have often felt that there was something lacking in editions prepared by Christian editors. The lack is removed by the issue of a very fine edition, ‘The Holy Qur-án,’ by a distinguished Muslim, Maulvi Muhammad Ali, of Lahore, who has devoted seven years to its preparation, which comes to me from the ‘Islamic Review’ office, in the Muslim settlement at Woking. It gives the Arabic text (which, I am sorry to say, is of no use to me) in parallel with the translation; the commentary is

remarkably full and interesting; the preface is both a summary of Islamic teaching and practice and a history of 'the Book'; and — even in war time — the thinnest of thin India paper, gilt edges, beautiful type, and a limp green morocco binding make the volume an unusually sumptuous one.”⁸

In advertisements in the *Islamic Review*, a lengthy review is quoted from *The Quest*, some extracts of which are as below:

“The English and the proof-reading are both remarkably good. It reads as well as any other English version and is superior to them in its systemic arrangement. ... in general appearance and get-up THE HOLY QURAN might have come straight from the Oxford presses of *The Holy Bible*. As to the general reliability of the version ... we have been assured by a distinguished English Arabist that it has on the whole been carefully and well made ... its language is simple, straightforward, and impressive — in short, largely ‘biblical’.

On the whole then we may say that we have before us a version that is not only faithful but dignified; and that is high praise. It is certainly a work of which any scholar might legitimately be proud, and especially an Oriental scholar; it has further been completed in a remarkably short time for so difficult an undertaking. Eight years only have gone to its making, years therefore of such unremitting devotion and strenuous toil as legitimately to compel our admiration and praise.

Maulvi Muhammad Ali, as we have been told by one who knows him intimately, is a man of rare intellectual gifts, who could easily have distinguished himself in any profession and made a very large income. He has preferred to devote himself to the service of religion and to live a life of poverty in that service. The translation is his alone; it has not been done by various hands and simply edited by him. As to the commentaries and the rest of the matter, though he has had the great advantage of being able to consult on all points many living Muslim scholars and theologians of the highest repute, as well as innumerable written and printed sources and authorities, the labour is still all his own, and the skilful

presentation of the results of his researches show further that he has been an apt scholar in the school of Western methodology. Moreover, whenever in his version he departs from a generally accepted rendering, he tells us why he has done so frankly in the notes and sets before us the evidence for and against his new interpretation.”⁹

S.H. Leeder was a British scholar and author who lived for many years in Egypt and wrote the books *The Desert Gateway* (1910), *Veiled Mysteries of Egypt and the Religion of Islam* (1913), and *Modern Sons of the Pharaoh* (1918). A Christian of such a high scholarly calibre and deep knowledge of Muslims, he expressed the following opinion:

“I have received the copy of the Holy Quran, and hasten to congratulate you on the appearance your Scripture, in such a truly beautiful and chaste form. It is pure delight to handle such a book, but when one turns to its treasures of light and learning, one is filled with thankfulness and gratitude for all the labour — it has been, I am sure, a work of love — which has gone to make the production. I rejoice to see the Holy Quran in my own language and explained by a deeply learned and pious Muslim, and I believe that the work will be found to mark a new epoch in the religious life of the world.”

Muhammad Ali Jauhar

One of the most famous Muslim nationalist leaders in India before independence was Maulana Muhammad Ali Jauhar (d. 1931), who was also founder of an English and an Urdu newspaper (entitled *The Comrade* and *Hamdard*, respectively). In his autobiography, he writes as follows about his impressions of this translation:

“It was about this time [December 1918] that a kind friend sent to us a gift than which nothing could be more acceptable, a copy of the Quran for my brother [Shaukat Ali] and one for myself ... with an austere faithful translation in English and copious footnotes based on a close study of commentaries of the Quran and of such Biblical literature as could throw light upon the latest Holy Writ. This was the work of my learned namesake, Maulvi Muhammad Ali of Lahore, leader of a fairly numerous religious community,

some of whose members were doing missionary work in England. ... The translation and the notes which supplied the antidote so greatly needed for the poison squirted in the footnotes of English translators of the Quran like Sale, Rodwell and Palmer, the fine printing, both English and Arabic, the India paper and the exquisite binding in green limp Morocco with characteristic Oriental Tughra or ornamental calligraphy in gold, all demonstrated the labour of love and devoted zeal that so many willing workers had obviously contributed. This beautiful book acted like the maddening music of the Sarod, according to the Persian proverb, on the mentally deranged, and in the frame of mind in which I then was I wrote back to my friend who had sent these copies of the Quran that nothing would please me better than to go to Europe as soon as I could get out of the 'bounds' prescribed by my internment and preach to these war maniacs from every park and at every street corner, if not within the dubious precincts of every public house, about a faith that was meant to silence all this clamour of warring nations in the one unifying peace of Islam." ¹⁰

He also wrote a letter in February 1918 to the sender of the gift, Dr Mirza Yaqub Beg, who was a leading Lahore Ahmadiyya figure. This letter, published in the *Islamic Review*, begins as follows:

"I have to commence this letter with profuse apologies for being so late in acknowledging your most precious gifts on Shaukat's behalf and my own. Need I assure you that you could not have sent to us anything more acceptable than the beautiful copies of the Holy Quran rendered into English by my learned and revered namesake, Maulana Mohammad Ali Saheb. I had read the specimen pages in the ISLAMIC REVIEW, that welcome reminder of our dear brave Khwaja's mission in Europe, and I was anxiously awaiting the announcement that copies could be had in India, or even in England."

He writes later:

"I feel I must express the opinion formed from an examination of the outward form of the publication, the beautiful printing, the excellent India paper, and the sumptuous limp

green Morocco binding, and the several exquisite *tughras*, all indicating the love and affection that those who undertook this great task feel for the greatest Book of all ages and climes. ... I have the greatest possible love and affection for the Great Book, and so naturally I examined this edition with critical and jealous eyes. You will therefore be glad to know that I *am amply satisfied!* This is no empty compliment...

As for the contents, I have gone through the Preface, and here and there through some introductory notes prefacing the various chapters and footnotes, and have, of course, glanced through the sectional headings and the index, and greatly admire the general arrangement. As for the English rendering, I am impressed so far as I have read with the simplicity and precision and the adherence to the text which indicate the reverence due to God's own Word from a true believer. I am a slow reader of things of such tremendous import, and it will take me some time yet to go carefully through the whole Book. But I do not pretend to be a scholar of Arabic, or a theologian, and whatever opinion I shall express hereafter will also be the opinion of a layman, and you must accept it for what it is worth. But the great thing is that the great task has been accomplished, and there now exists in at least one European language a rendering of the holy Quran done by a true believer and not by a scoffer, by one who believes every word of the Book to be God's own, every word to be true and full of light, every word consistent with what has gone before and comes after, every word capable of easy interpretation, and not a rendering done by one whose sole object is to present the Holy Book to Europe as a concoction of an ignorant rhapsodist masquerading as a prophet, and exposing a voluptuary's character and tendencies and an adventurer's opportunism. The difference is apparent on every page, and Europe will not, I hope, be slow to see it."

He ends as follows:

"Well, I must now take leave of you. If you see Maulvi Mohammad Ali thank him for me as a Moslem who feels proud of his devoted and fruitful labours, and shares with

him the privilege of at least the most beloved of names in the entire world.

If you write to my stalwart Khwaja send him my kisses for his shaggy old beard. My best salams to you and also Shaukat's.

Yours very sincerely and gratefully,

MOHAMMAD ALI.

P.S. By the way, offer a suggestion from me to Maulvi M.A. In the next volume let him also include a short history of the Prophet and of Islam in the early days, arranged *purely from the verses of the Quran*, and also a summary of the various *Qasas as told in the Quran*, and a geographical Note.”¹¹

Later reviews

After the publication of subsequent editions of Maulana Muhammad Ali's translation of the Quran and other books, reviews of this translation appeared from time to time. Below we reproduce extracts from the Indian press where Maulana Muhammad Ali's translation was reviewed at various times in later years.

1. “Maulvi Muhammad Ali's name is a guarantee that the translation is as accurate as it could be, and a careful perusal of the work really justifies the expression of the opinion that few translations into English have reached such a high standard. ... The book will not only serve to enable Muslims to know their Islam better, but will also dispel many of the fictions fostered in the minds of the non-Muslims regarding the Quran and the religion it preaches.” — *The Madras Mail*, 15 October 1929
2. “Among human productions of literary masterpieces, the English translation of the Holy Book by Maulvi Muhammad Ali undoubtedly claims a position of distinction and pre-eminence. But the real charm and value of the book lies in its introduction and footnotes which show Islam and its Founder in their true perspective. The book is of immense use and benefit to Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and deserves to be extensively read and mastered by all and sundry.” — *United India and Indian States*, Delhi, 21 December 1929

3. "The book will not only be found interesting by the Muslims but also by non-Muslims who will understand the Holy Quran and its teachings better than through any other translation available so far in the market." — *The Kashmir Times*, Srinagar, 12 November 1933
4. "Maulana Muhammad Ali's name is known to every lover of the holy literature of Islam. ... Very illuminating notes are provided by the translator which will be of great use to students. Maulana Muhammad Ali's language is restrained and eminently suitable for the purpose." — *The Hindustan Times*, Delhi, 6 May 1935
5. "Maulana Muhammad Ali, M.A., LL.B., is a well-known personality, a great scholar, and as a translator he has the good reputation of being accurate and reliable, and his translation in English is of high standard ... We congratulate Maulana Muhammad Ali for this production which has surpassed other English translations. The book is well printed and will prove a substantial addition to all public libraries and institutions." — *The Advocate*, Lucknow, 24 October 1935
6. "As for the translation, it is needless to say that it has been well done, in chaste and simple language. Maulana Muhammad Ali has in a way specialised in this work of translating the Holy Book, for he has devoted nearly 20 years of his life to this very work." — *The Searchlight, Sunday*, Patna, 29 November 1935

In *Atlas of the Islamic World Since 1500* by Francis Robinson, a British academic and historian, first published in 1982, Maulana Muhammad Ali's translation was used when quoting the Quran and it was acknowledged in the following words:

"Notable for its precision is that of Muhammad Ali of Lahore, the version used with one exception throughout this book."¹²

The 1917 edition was reprinted in 1920 as the second edition in a quantity of 11,000, and again in 1935 as the third edition in a quantity of 5000 copies, both as before at the Unwin Brothers Gresham Press, Woking. The 1935 third reprint was the last time

that the original 1917 work of Maulana Muhammad Ali was published in print.

Without Arabic text edition

Another version of the English translation was published in 1928, without including the Arabic text, and with much abbreviated commentary. Again, it was printed at the same press at Woking. In its Preface, the Maulana writes:

“It is now nearly twenty years that I have been specially occupied with the work of translating the Holy Quran. My first work in this direction was the *Holy Quran with Arabic text, translation and commentary*, which saw the light of publication in 1917. It was a big work extending to over about 1400 pages. The first edition of over 5000 copies was exhausted within three years, and a second edition of about 11000 copies was issued in 1920.

In the meanwhile, I was engaged in preparing an Urdu translation with a more exhaustive commentary than that which accompanied the English translation. This work was ultimately brought out in three volumes under the name of *Bayan-ul-Quran*.

There has, however, been a persistent demand for an edition of the English Translation without the text and with shorter notes, so that the Holy Book may be more accessible to the English-knowing public, and it is to satisfy this demand that the present edition is being brought out. But while doing this, I have taken the opportunity to write a new Introduction to this edition.”

Urdu translation *Bayan-ul-Quran*

In the Preface quoted above, he has referred to his Urdu translation of the Quran with its enormous commentary. Although the subject of this present book is his English translation, but a few words about the Urdu work are in order. When Maulana Muhammad Ali was as yet writing the English commentary under the guidance of Maulana Nur-ud-Din, the latter instructed him to make a start on an Urdu translation as well, and by the time of his death in March 1914, Maulana Muhammad Ali had translated six or seven parts and had

read them out to him for approval. This work was done by him more regularly during 1918–1923, and this massive tome was published in the form of volumes, with the third and final volume appearing in November 1923. It is also appropriate to quote here from the article he wrote upon the completion of the Urdu work:

“Monday, 2 April 1923 was a very auspicious day for me as on this day Allah, the Most High, enabled me to reach the completion of the Urdu translation of the Holy Quran, and it was merely by the grace of the Almighty that, after the English translation, the Urdu translation and commentary was finished. All praise is due to Allah Who has enabled a helpless man of limited knowledge like me to do work of this enormous magnitude. Praising Allah for this achievement fills my heart with a delight that cannot be described in words.

It was in 1913, when much of the work on the English translation still remained to be done, that ... [Maulana Nur-ud-Din] instructed me to start the Urdu translation and show it to him little by little. So I translated six or seven parts and showed them to him.... The English translation took some three more years to complete, and due to some other important commitments the Urdu translation remained in abeyance.... Finally, ten years after it was first proposed, and after four to five years of hard labour on the Urdu translation, this work is complete merely by the grace of Allah. ...

I am sure it is not only numerous friends of mine who feel the same spiritual pleasure today as I do, but the departed souls of Hazrat Maulvi [Nur-ud-Din] sahib and also of that holy man [Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad] who, by writing that the English translation and commentary would be done by him or by one ‘who is an offshoot of mine and thus is included in me’, plainly declared me as his son — their souls today will surely be happy at this work. May Allah shower His greatest blessings on these two who set me on this path and made me capable of doing this work.”

Maulana Muhammad Ali’s humility is amply shown by what he wrote at the end of this article:

“I have tried my best to be faithful to the word of Allah but I know I have made errors. So today, after completing this task, if on the one hand I am happy because of Allah’s blessings bestowed upon me in the form of the service to the Quran, at the same time I am afraid in case any errors I may have made, due to human fallibility or because of lacking knowledge, may cause others to stumble. Every single word of the Quran is a guiding light and a conclusive argument for every Muslim. In my translation and commentary, I have tried, according to the best of my understanding, to subject my views to the Word of God, the Hadith of the Holy Prophet, and rules of the Arabic language. But still it is my interpretation and not binding upon anyone else unless it conforms with the Word of God and the authentic Hadith reports of the Messenger of Allah. Any interpretation in which I have made an error by going against the Quran or authentic Hadith should be rejected. My attempt is only to make people study the knowledge contained in the Quran and to turn their minds to its service.”¹³

In an Urdu book published in 1995, *Quran aur Insan*, which quotes verses of the Quran on many subjects, the author writes:

“I have taken the translation of the verses of the Holy Quran mostly from the [Urdu] translation by the late Maulana Muhammad Ali because it is, to a great extent, a translation of the words and not his own interpretation, and for this reason it expresses the Divine will in the Urdu language in a better way.”¹⁴

The Urdu monthly *Islami Digest* of Karachi (editor, Syed Qasim Mahmud), in its March 1996 issue, opened a series entitled *Tashrih-ul-Quran*. Regarding *Bayan-ul-Quran* it says:

“Five years after his [Maulana Muhammad Ali’s] English translation and commentary the Urdu translation and commentary was published, having the title *Bayan-ul-Quran*. ... Expressing her view about this work Dr. Saliha writes:

‘The translation, while being simple, has literary weight. The language is eloquent and chaste. As to the meaning, some people have objections against his

translation and commentary because of his beliefs and views. The fact is that he was the head of the Lahore Ahmadiyya *Jama 'at*. Despite this, we consider that his translation and commentary is almost free of 'wrong beliefs'. He has done the translation very cautiously, with great sincerity, and having kept before him the generally prevailing views. Despite closely following the text and the order of the original words, the translation has continuity and flow.' ”

Notes

- ¹ Lahore Ahmadiyya organ *Paigham Sulh*, 26 May 1914, p. 1.
- ² *Ibid.*, 28 May 1916, p. 6–8.
- ³ Hashim Amir Ali, *The Student's Quran*, Asia Publishing House, India, 1961, p. iv.
- ⁴ This article is available at:
www.scribd.com/document/20171108/Translating-the-Holy-Quran
- ⁵ In the 1917 edition, and its two reprints, this was on pages xciv–xcv of the Preface. The revised 1951 edition, and its later reprints and editions, contain a 'Preface to the Revised Edition', within which Maulana Muhammad Ali has quoted a part of the 1917 preface, including this section on authorities and principles. See pages I-11 and I-12 of the year 2002 edition. In quoting it here, we have divided it into paragraphs for ease of reading.
- ⁶ This is the footnote number in the year 2002 edition, in substitution for the footnote number given by the Maulana originally.
- ⁷ *Literary Supplement, The Times*, 25 October 1917, in the *Islamic Review*, December 1917, p. 494.
- ⁸ *Westminster Gazette*, 12 November 1917, in the *Islamic Review*, December 1917, p. 494.
- ⁹ The *Islamic Review*, October 1919, March 1920, etc.
- ¹⁰ *My Life — A Fragment*, edited by Afzal Iqbal, published by Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore, 1966 reprint, p. 115.
- ¹¹ The *Islamic Review*, December 1919, pages 445–449.
- ¹² *Atlas of the Islamic World Since 1500*, by Francis Robinson, produced by Andromeda Oxford Limited, published by Time-Life Books, 1991, p. 229, column 2.
- ¹³ *Paigham Sulh*, 7 April 1923, p. 2.
- ¹⁴ *Quran aur Insan* by Safdar Hasan Siddiqi, Ferozsons, Lahore, p. 29.

3. Later translations

Hafiz Ghulam Sarwar

For some twelve years after the first edition was published, Maulana Muhammad Ali's English translation of the Quran remained the only such work by a Muslim in the West, and in fact the only one by a Muslim to be generally available to the public anywhere. Then in 1929 an English translation of the Quran by Hafiz Ghulam Sarwar (1873–1954) was published, having been printed at the same Unwin Brothers press in Woking. Two addresses are given on the cover page for obtaining the book, one in Singapore and the other the Woking Mosque. The second edition was published in 1973 in Pakistan by the National Book Foundation, Karachi.

The translator was of Indian origin, who, after graduating from the University of Cambridge, England, served in the Malayan Civil Service of the British colonial empire from 1896 to 1928. He was also Mufti of Penang, and served as District Judge of Singapore from 1923–1928. In the Introduction, he has reviewed at some length the “four notable translations of the Holy Quran in English”: George Sale, J.M. Rodwell, E.H. Palmer, and Maulana Muhammad Ali. His review of the Maulana's translation begins as follows:

“Maulvi Muhammad Ali, like myself, graduated from the Government College, Lahore. For four years (1890–1894) we were in the same college, and for two of these we attended Arabic classes together. Maulvi Muhammad Ali has a very tenacious memory and a mind which is at once subtle and broad. For the last thirty-two years he has devoted himself to the study of Islam, and his writings in Urdu and English, if put together, will form a fair-sized library. The

English translation of the Holy Quran is not the only book he has written, but it is the one by which he will perhaps become an immortal amongst those who have written about the Holy Quran.” (p. xxxvi)

Then he describes various features of the work. Regarding the Maulana’s Preface, he writes that it contains:

“a most elaborate and scholarly exposition on the arrangement and collection of the Holy Quran, which forms a complete answer to the criticisms of Western writers on the Quran. No lover of truth and no student of the Holy Quran can do without this authoritative and masterly essay. ... Ever since this translation was published in 1917 the Preface thereof has become the *vade mecum* * of Muslim students, writers, and lecturers, and there is no doubt as time goes on its value will increase.” (p. xxxvi)

As to the commentary and interpretation, Hafiz Ghulam Sarwar continues:

“The translation is supplemented by very copious notes and commentaries ... A mass of learning and research has been accumulated in these notes and comments which any man might be proud of. It took Maulvi Muhammad Ali seven years to accomplish his work, but it might have taken another man twenty or thirty to do as much and that perhaps not so thoroughly. The whole is topped by an exhaustive index which is a work in itself, the thoroughness and usefulness of which can hardly be exaggerated.

The English of the Preface and the notes is unimpeachable, and Maulvi Muhammad Ali has corrected the mistakes of the previous translators in scores of passages ... Let no man run away with the idea that Maulvi Muhammad Ali has introduced any new meanings into the translation of his text. If one is not hasty one will always find that Maulvi Muhammad Ali is as great an investigator as he is a scholar. I do not say that he is not novel in some of his comments, but

* Meaning a guide that is kept constantly at hand for consultation.

there is no harm in that. Everyone who is honest in his interpretation of the Holy Quran has a right to express his views in his own way. ... the whole book is a labour of love for which Muslims and non-Muslims alike are for ever indebted to Maulvi Muhammad Ali.

There is no other translation or commentary of the Holy Quran in the English language to compete with Maulvi Muhammad Ali's masterpiece. For ten years past I have always carried Maulvi Muhammad Ali's translation wherever I have been to. It has travelled with me round the globe, has been to Mecca on pilgrimage, to the London Conference of Religions of 1924, and to all other places and assemblies of men that I have been to.

It was reprinted in 1920, and both editions have had phenomenal success and popularity amongst all classes of Muslims." (p. xxxvii)

Then Hafiz Ghulam Sarwar adds:

"There is only one thing with which I am not satisfied, and that is the construction of a great many passages in the body of the translation. The English of the Preface and the notes, as I said before, is unimpeachable, but the English in scores of passages in the body of the translation has very poor construction... And the pity of it is that it could have been easily put into proper shape. Maulvi Muhammad Ali is able to do that quite easily. But either respect for literal translation, or lack of time, or both combined, have induced him to leave a good many of his passages in a state of splendid isolation."

He then lists a large number of examples where, he believes, Maulana Muhammad Ali's translation requires improvement and "to be rewritten". He concludes as follows:

"I must repeat the caution that it is the English style of Maulvi Muhammad Ali's translation that I wish to be corrected. I do not for a moment say that Maulvi Muhammad Ali's understanding of the text of the Holy Quran is defective, though, of course, in that respect also, every one of us, including myself, has his limitation." (p. xlii)

We may note here that striking a balance between being faithful to the original Arabic text and maintaining a smoothly-flowing English style is very difficult. When Maulana Muhammad Ali produced a revised edition of his translation, published in 1951, for which see later in this book, he wrote in the Preface: "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."

Abdul Majid Daryabadi rescued from agnosticism

Maulana Abdul Majid Daryabadi of Lucknow, India (d. 1977) was a recognised leader of orthodox Muslim opinion, and a prolific author who himself wrote a commentary of the Quran. In 1934, in the Urdu newspaper, *Such* ('Truth'), of which he was editor, he wrote:

"To deny the excellence of Maulvi Muhammad Ali's translation, the influence it has exercised and its proselytising 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 Islam. Speaking of my own self, I gladly admit that this translation was one of the few books which brought me towards Islam fifteen or sixteen years ago when I was groping in darkness, atheism and scepticism. Even Maulana Muhammad Ali [Jauhar] of the *Comrade* was greatly enthralled by this translation and had nothing but praise for it." ¹

In an autobiographical work, he has also mentioned the influence of Maulana Muhammad Ali's translation as an important factor in rescuing him from atheism and scepticism and bringing him back to Islam. He relates that this period of "heresy and apostasy" in his early life lasted for ten years till late 1918 and then he gradually began to return to belief in Islam. As he writes:

"By these gradual inner changes, I was slowly returning to Islam. In fact, I had become more than fifty percent Muslim when in October 1920 during a journey to the Deccan I had occasion to stay with a relative Nazir Yar Jang, a judge, at Orangabad. In his English library my eye fell on the English

translation and commentary of the Holy Quran by Muhammad Ali of Lahore, the Ahmadi (Qadiani in common parlance). Feeling restless, I took it from the cupboard and started to read it. As I read through it, praise be to Allah, my faith kept on increasing. The necessary result of the Westernised mentality which dominated over my mind at that time was that the very same explanations which, when expressed in Urdu, had no effect on me and seemed uninspiring, in English garb they became effective and life-giving. Whether this be self-delusion or not, in my case it was a reality.

When I finished reading this English Quran, on searching my soul I found myself to be a Muslim. Now I was able to recite the *Kalima* unhesitatingly, without deceiving my conscience. May Allah grant this Muhammad Ali paradise in every way! I am not concerned with the question whether his belief about Mirza [Ghulam Ahmad] sahib was right or wrong. Whatever the case, what should I do about my personal experience? He was the one who put the last nail in the coffin of my unbelief and apostasy.”²

Marmaduke Pickthall's translation

It has been mentioned above that for some twelve years Maulana Muhammad Ali's translation, in addition to being the first, was the only one by a Muslim in publication in the West, and in fact the only such one generally available at all. Shortly after Hafiz Ghulam Sarwar's work appeared, the well-known translation of Marmaduke Pickthall, an English Muslim convert, was first published in 1930. Both of these works provide only little in the form of commentary. In Pickthall's biography by Anne Fremantle, *Loyal Enemy*, published in 1938 shortly after his death, there is reproduced his own account of the difficulties he faced in revising the draft of his translation with the help of Muslim scholars in Egypt. We give below a summary of the events as related by him.³

Pickthall describes the opposition to his work he faced from certain quarters when he arrived in Egypt. In his own words:

“I learnt that all translation of the Quran, however faithful,

was held to be unlawful by a powerful section of the Ulama.”

Pickthall was told by a former Rector of Al-Azhar, who as Rector had been willing to help him in the revision work, that:

“... he had been willing to appoint a committee of the university to revise it with me, but the step had been forbidden by the King [of Egypt], who had somehow been impressed with the idea that translation of the Quran was sinful.”

He discovered that anyone working at Al-Azhar who helped him in revising his translation “ran the risk of losing their posts through helping me, since they belonged to the Al-Azhar and His Majesty was opposed to all translation of the Quran.” Eventually, he was introduced to a lecturer in Chemistry: “a graduate of London University and a close student of the Quran, with whom I worked at the revision happily for some three months.”

When the news of his forthcoming translation became public, an article appeared in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram*:

“...of denunciation of translation and the translation of the sacred Book from the pen of Sheykh Muhammad Shakir, a retired professor of Al-Azhar, who (as I learnt) had been leader of the hue-and-cry against Muhammad Ali’s translation. The translator and all who read his translation, or abetted it, or showed approval of it, were condemned to everlasting perdition according to the learned writer; and I was solemnly advised to give up my nefarious work...”

Regarding this “hue-and-cry” against Maulana Muhammad Ali’s translation that had taken place a few years earlier, Pickthall notes the following strange contradiction:

“I have already mentioned how a former translation of the Quran by a Muslim [i.e., Maulana Muhammad Ali] was publicly burnt and further copies of it were forbidden to be brought into Egypt. Walking in one of the most crowded streets of Cairo, I saw two English translations by non-Muslims very prominently displayed in the window of a European bookshop, one of them having on its paper jacket a

picture representing our Prophet and the angel Gabriel! Where, I asked myself, can be the sense in burning and banning a well-intentioned reverent work while these irreverent translations can, under the Capitulations,⁴ enter freely?"

It can be seen that early translators of the Quran faced stern opposition from orthodox quarters who held that it is forbidden in Islam to translate the Word of God, the Quran. The opposition which Maulana Muhammad Ali had to face on this account was much greater than what Pickthall encountered twelve or thirteen years later. Pickthall writes that before going to Egypt:

"I had heard that a former English translation by a Muslim had been publicly burnt in the courtyard of the Mosque Al-Azhar, and was forbidden entry into Egypt; but had supposed that it was because it was considered to have some flavour of heresy."

The reference here is to Maulana Muhammad Ali's translation. Now in Egypt Pickthall discovered that it had been proscribed, *not because* it was considered heretical, i.e., because of being an Ahmadiyya translation, *but because* a group of powerful Ulama regarded *any translation* of the Quran to be forbidden in Islam. This shows that the early efforts of the Lahore Ahmadiyya under Maulana Muhammad Ali to produce translations of the Quran, and propagate these widely, led the way in breaking the taboo in the Muslim world that the Quran should not be translated into a non-Arabic language. With that bar removed, we see a hundred years later that there are scores of translations of the Quran by Muslims all over the world, there being more than thirty such publications so far in English alone.

Reverting to Pickthall's story of his trials and tribulations in Egypt, in response to the denunciation by Sheykh Muhammad Shakir of translating the Quran, some other scholars of Egypt wrote in *Al-Ahram* supporting the view that the Quran may be translated. Pickthall himself also had a letter published in it raising the question whether it is lawful for an educated English Muslim "to try to expound the glorious Quran to his people in their own language at

the present day.” As a result of all these reactions, Sheykh Muhammad Shakir retracted his original standpoint and admitted that to translate the Quran “might be not only lawful but meritorious.”

The changing of the minds of those who opposed translating the Quran is described by Pickthall as emerging “from the cell erected by the schoolmen of the middle ages of Islam, in which we had been talking until then.” After his translation was published in December 1930, Al-Azhar decided to conduct an examination of it by having it “translated word for word back into Arabic.” Pickthall writes:

“It was certainly a great advance beyond the method of condemning without trial pursued in the case of Maulvi Muhammad Ali’s English version...”

Regrettably, this time the Rector of Al-Azhar declared Pickthall’s translation *on literary grounds* to be “unfit to be authorized in Egypt”. Nonetheless Pickthall calls even this as “something hopeful” because:

“...the position that all translation of the Quran is sinful has been quite abandoned. A translation of the Quran by a Muslim has been examined and a literary reason has been given for its condemnation. That is a great step forward.”

Pickthall and Lahore Ahmadiyya leaders

Pickthall had a link with the Islamic missionary work being conducted by members of the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement in England. A note about him in the *Islamic Review* in 1922 stated:

“Mr. Pickthall declared his faith in Islam in 1918, and has since taken a prominent part in Muslim activity in this country. During the period between the departure for India (owing to urgent reasons of health) of the Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din in the early spring of 1919, and the arrival of the Khwaja’s assistant in the autumn of that year, Mr. Pickthall conducted the Friday Prayers and delivered the sermons at the London Muslim Prayer House; led the Eid prayer and delivered the Sermon, and during the month of Ramadan in 1919 conducted the *traveeh* prayers at the London Prayer

House, while throughout the whole period he was largely responsible for the editing of the [*Islamic*] *Review*.”⁵

At the death of Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din in 1932, Pickthall wrote a letter to his son Khwaja Nazir Ahmad which was published in the *Islamic Review*. He wrote:

“I have had a very clear remembrance of your father in these days as I saw him first in England in his prime, and of the impression which he made upon all who had the pleasure of meeting him. It is less as a missionary that I like to think of him — the word ‘missionary’ has mean associations — than as an ambassador of Islam. His return to India owing to ill-health was a blow to the cause in England from which it has hardly yet recovered.

I differed from him on some matters, as you know — relatively unimportant matters, they seem now — but my personal regard for him remained the same. And now, looking back upon his life-work, I think that there is no one living who has done such splendid and enduring service to Islam. The work in England is the least part of it. Not until I came to India did I realise the immense good that his writings have done in spreading knowledge of religion and reviving the Islamic spirit in lethargic Muslims; not only here, but wherever there are Muslims in the world his writings penetrated, and have aroused new zeal and energy and hope. It is a wonderful record of work, which could have been planned and carried out only by a man of high intelligence inspired by faith and great sincerity of purpose. Allah will reward him!”⁶

Just before his own death in 1936, Pickthall wrote a review of Maulana Muhammad Ali’s book *The Religion of Islam* which had just that year been published. The review was published in the quarterly *Islamic Culture* from Hyderabad Deccan, India, of which Pickthall was editor.⁷ It opened with the following words:

“Probably no man living has done longer or more valuable service for the cause of Islamic revival than Maulana Muhammad Ali of Lahore. His literary works, with those of the late Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din, have given fame and distinction

to the Ahmadiyya Movement. In our opinion the present volume is his finest work... Such a book is greatly needed at the present day when in many Muslim countries we see persons eager for the reformation and revival of Islam making mistakes through lack of just this knowledge.”

Pickthall went on to say:

“We do not always agree with Maulana Muhammad Ali’s conclusions upon minor points — sometimes they appear to us eccentric — but his premises are always sound, we are always conscious of his deep sincerity; and his reverence for the holy Quran is sufficient in itself to guarantee his work in all essentials. There are some, no doubt, who will disagree with his general findings, but they will not be those from whom Al-Islam has anything to hope in the future.”

It is, therefore, perfectly reasonable to conclude that Pickthall was influenced by the Lahore Ahmadiyya missionary and literary work, and thus his production of a translation of the Quran is indebted to that work.

Comparison of translations in *The Moslem World*

The Moslem World was a quarterly founded by a zealous American Christian missionary, Samuel Zwemer, who edited it from 1911 to 1947. His goal and ambition was to convert Muslims to Christianity by refuting the religion of Islam and establishing the truth of the doctrines of the Church. An article appeared in the July 1931 issue entitled *Can a Moslem translate the Koran?* by W.G. Shellabear. The author was a Christian missionary to Malaya (modern Malaysia) who translated the Bible into the Malay language.⁸ It is stated near the beginning that the paper proposes to deal with Pickthall’s translation in view of his claim in the Foreword that “no Holy Scripture can be fairly represented by one who disbelieves its inspiration and its message”. The article sets out to:

“compare three English translations of the Koran made by men who professed Christianity as their religion with three other translations made by those who believe the doctrines of Islam...” (p. 288)

The three Christian translations are by Sale, Rodwell and Palmer, and the Muslim translations are by Maulana Muhammad Ali, Hafiz Ghulam Sarwar and Marmaduke Pickthall. According to the author, a review of Pickthall's translation in the *Egyptian Gazette*, in its issue of 1 January (1931), had stated that "some years ago he had joined the Indian Ahmadiyya Sect". Upon this, Pickthall had written to the editor of the *Egyptian Gazette* strongly denying that he ever joined the Ahmadiyya sect or entertained the desire to do so. Shellabear adds here:

"It appears however from the reply of the reviewer that even though Mr. Pickthall disclaims joining that sect, he has been so closely identified with Ahmadiyya students that they have come to look upon him as 'one of us'. Moreover, 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, with the most glaring peculiarities of the Ahmadiyya doctrines carefully removed, in order that the new version may represent, as we have already quoted above [from Pickthall], 'what Muslims the world over hold to be the meaning of the words of the Koran'." (p. 289–290)

Taking as a sample, 40 verses in the 2nd chapter of the Quran, 60 verses in the 3rd chapter, 40 verses in the 19th chapter, and the last 15 chapters in their entirety, Shellabear compared Pickthall's translation with those of Sale, Rodwell and Maulana Muhammad Ali, and concluded:

"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..." (p. 290)

"Now if we compare the above passage (3:57–63) with the versions of S, R and P, [i.e., Sale, Rodwell and Palmer] we shall see that Mr. Pickthall is very much nearer to MA [Muhammad Ali] than he is to any of the three previous translations, so that one gets the impression that although he may have taken a word here and there from S, R and P, yet he

has not followed them so closely as he obviously has 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. 292)

“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)

“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).

This article concludes as follows:

“Unfortunately Mr. Pickthall appears to have completely ignored all the results of European scholarship in the investigations that have been made as to the meaning of the text of the Koran. 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 cxii, 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)

Maulana Muhammad Ali, in the Preface to his later, 1951 revised edition of the English translation of the Quran with commentary, has quoted most of the above passages from this review to show how later translators had benefitted from his 1917 edition.

Criticism of “Ahmadiyya propaganda”

Then, in that Preface, the Maulana refers to what the reviewer wrote immediately after the words quoted above from page 303, and that comment of the reviewer was as follows:

“It is a pity that his work is so saturated with the peculiar doctrines of the Ahmadiyya sect and with bitter denunciations of Christian teachings that the results of his Oriental scholarship have been seriously vitiated.” (p. 303)

We may add here that the reviewer continued his last sentence above as follows: “and his translation can hardly be viewed as anything more than Ahmadiyya propaganda”.

Maulana Muhammad Ali has given a full reply to this charge in his Preface, a part of which we quote below:

“The talk of Ahmadiyyah doctrines is, however, nothing but false propaganda. The faith of Islam is one and all sects of Islam are one so far as the essential doctrines of Islam 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 denunciations 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 Quran itself that no commentator need be bitter. What offends the Christian missionary and what he calls the peculiar doctrines of the Ahmadiyyah 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 Islam in which this Translation differs from orthodox views.” (p. I-14 of the year 2002 edition)

In support of this, the Maulana quotes the opinions of three leaders of orthodox Muslim opinion — Pickthall, Maulana Abdul Majid Daryabadi and the Urdu newspaper *Wakeel* of Amritsar — showing that they highly approved of his writings and affirmed that his views are not heretical. These quotations show, writes the Maulana, that “there is not the least ground for the false propaganda that this Translation is saturated with any unorthodox or heretical views” (p. I-15, year 2002 edition).

His quotation from Pickthall is from the latter's review of the Maulana's book *The Religion of Islam*, from which we quoted above (see p. 43). From Pickthall's review, the Maulana also quotes the following:

"It [the book *The Religion of Islam*] is a description of Al-Islam by one well-versed in the Quran 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. I-14)

The quotation which the Maulana gives from Abdul Majid Daryabadi has also been given by us earlier (see p. 38), beginning with the words: "To deny the excellence of Maulvi Muhammad Ali's translation, the influence it has exercised and its proselytising utility, would be to deny the light of the sun."

From the newspaper *Wakeel* of Amritsar the review which the Maulana quotes is as follows:

"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 Islam."

Maulana Muhammad Ali emphasized in his reply to the Christian critic:

"...this Translation does not contain anything contrary to the views of the great Imams and learned *Ahl Sunnah* that have gone before. That there have been differences in the interpretation of the Holy Quran among the greatest commentators, among even the Companions of the Holy Prophet

and the great Imams, cannot be denied. But these differences do not relate to the essentials of the faith of Islam 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 Muhammad. They believe in all the prophets of God and in His Books. They believe that Divine revelation came to perfection with the Prophet Muhammad who is thus the last of the prophets — *Khatam al-Nabiyyin* — after whom no prophet will come, and the Holy Quran is the last Divine message to the whole of humanity. All these doctrines find clear expression in my translation and the explanatory footnotes.” (p. I-14, year 2002 edition)

He added:

“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 Islam. It has never been included among the religious doctrines of the faith of Islam. ... 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 Muhammad Abduh and Sayyid Rashid Rada of Egypt.” (p. I-15, year 2002 edition)

Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation

This extremely well-known and popular work was first published from 1934 onwards, appearing initially in individual parts (*paras*). Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1872–1953) mentions in the Preface, dated 4th April 1934, his plan “to issue each *Sipara* as it is ready, at intervals of not more than three months” and his hope “to accelerate the pace” as the work proceeds. The complete work in one volume seems to have been first published in 1938. In this edition, the Preface of 1934 is now called ‘Preface to the First Edition’. It is followed by a brief ‘Preface to the Third Edition (1938)’, which makes reference to his Preface of 1934, but there is no mention of any second edition.

In the introduction of his translation, Abdullah Yusuf Ali has briefly reviewed existing translations of the Quran in various languages. Coming to English translations, in his paragraph referring to translations by Muslims he writes:

“The Ahmadiyya Sect has also been active in the field. ... Its Lahore Anjuman has published Maulvi Muhammad Ali’s translation (first edition in 1917), which has passed through more than one edition. It is a scholarly work, and is equipped with adequate explanatory matter in the notes and the Preface, and a fairly full Index. But the English of the Text is decidedly weak, and is not likely to appeal to those who know no Arabic.” (p. xv, 1938 edition)

To explain the description “decidedly weak”, we may refer to Yusuf Ali’s explanation of his approach to the work of translation. He writes:

“What I wish to present to you is an English Interpretation, side by side with the Arabic text. The English shall be, not a mere substitution of one word for another, but the best expression I can give to the fullest meaning which I can understand from the Arabic text.” (p. iv, 1938 edition)

He has, therefore, given himself much more latitude in the style of language than Maulana Muhammad Ali who constrained himself by the following principle: “I have tried to be more faithful to the Arabic Text than all existing English translations” (p. I-10).

Yusuf Ali has here used the word “Ahmadiyya Sect”. In some editions of his translation published long after his death, a footnote has been added at this point by the editors of the new edition which is as follows:

“The Muslim *Ummah* is agreed that since Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadiyan claimed to be a prophet and messenger of Allah, all those who consider him their religious leader are outside the fold of Islam.”

Of course, this was not the view of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, as in his paragraph reviewing the translations by *Muslims*, he has included the work of the Ahmadiyya Movement, calling it a “sect”.

It may also be added here that currently-available editions of his translation with commentary, as their editors themselves tell us, are revised versions in which his translation and footnotes have been modified in accordance with the views of the sponsors. His preface has also been omitted. In the book *A Biography of Abdullah Yusuf Ali — A Life Forlorn*, the author K.K. Aziz has devoted ten pages to what he calls “the unconcealed tampering with his translation and commentary of the Quran”.⁹ He writes that “the real tampering had begun in 1983” with the publication of an edition by the Amana Corporation of USA. Subsequent editions published by Amana stated that they contained a “revised translation and commentary”. An edition was also published by authority of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The publisher’s preface (signed as The Presidency of Islamic Researches, IFTA, Call and Guidance) states that they wanted to choose a translation “as a base for further work as well as source of reference, with the objective of revising its contents and correcting any faults in view of the objections raised against it”, and they selected Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s translation for this purpose. K.K. Aziz describes this as “tampering amounting to vandalism and intellectual dishonesty”.¹⁰

Yusuf Ali knew well the leading figures of the Lahore Ahmad-iyya Movement. In England, he attended functions organised by the Woking Muslim Mission, and delivered speeches at some of them, and was also a member of the Board of Trustees of the Woking Mosque.¹¹ Articles by him can be read in the Woking Mission’s magazine the *Islamic Review* over a long period of years, and he also appears in one or two group photos published in this magazine. He was in Lahore during 1934–37 to finalise his translation, and during this period he was appointed Principal of Islamia College, Lahore.¹² This famous college, established by the Anjuman Hima-yat-i Islam, is just across the road (Brandreth Road) from Ahmad-iyya Buildings, the centre of the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Lahore from 1914 to the 1970s. Thus Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s place of employment, when he was completing his translation of the Quran, was close to where Maulana Muhammad Ali worked, and also resided

at the time. Some senior members of the Lahore Ahmadiyya Anjuman have reported that Abdullah Yusuf Ali used to send his translation of verses of the Quran to Maulana Muhammad Ali to seek his advice on whether his translation was sufficiently close to the original Arabic text of the Quran.¹³

Be that as it may, it is known that on the issue of whether the Quran says that Jesus died a natural, honourable death, which is the Ahmadiyya view, or he was elevated bodily to heaven by God, without dying while still alive, which is the widely-held orthodox view, Abdullah Yusuf Ali's initial published translation upheld the Ahmadiyya view. Maulana Muhammad Ali, in his 1951 revised edition of the translation of the Quran, writes in a footnote on the words, as translated by him, "When Allah said: O Jesus, I will cause thee to die" (3:55), as follows:

"Yusuf Ali, in his first edition, translated the words as meaning *I will cause thee to die*, but in the second edition he changed it to *I will take thee*."

By "his first edition", Maulana Muhammad Ali means those parts that were published individually before the entire work came out in one volume in 1938. It is also known that Yusuf Ali's brief footnote 394 to these words of 3:55 ended as follows:

"But Jesus completed his life and was when he died taken up to God."

But in the one-volume work this was altered to:

"but Jesus was eventually taken up to God."¹⁴

Interestingly however, a comment by Yusuf Ali still remained which indicates the interpretation that Jesus has died. Translating the statement of Jesus in 19:33 as follows:

"So Peace is on me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the day that I shall be raised up to life (again)"

Yusuf Ali writes in his footnote 2485:

"Christ was not crucified (iv. 157). But those who believe that he never died should ponder over this verse."

Translation by M.H. Shakir

We now come to a most interesting episode, which was for long a perplexing matter. An English translation of the Quran bearing the name M.H. Shakir, consisting of a translation only, without any notes, and bereft of any preface by the translator, or any information about him, came into wide circulation around 1980. It became very popular in print. The first US edition was published by Tahrike Tar-sile Quran, New York, in 1982, who re-published it several times in subsequent years.

When the Internet came into general use, it appeared on several websites, becoming probably the most widely accessible English translation of the Quran available online, including on websites of some US universities. Some academic and other websites made available three translations for comparison which were displayed in parallel for each verse: Pickthall, Abdullah Yusuf Ali, and M.H. Shakir. It was stated in some places that the initials M.H. stood for Mohammedali Habib. Many online sources identified him as an Egyptian judge and religious scholar connected with Al-Azhar.

To anyone familiar with Maulana Muhammad Ali's translation it was obvious that Shakir's language was exactly the same as the Maulana's in his 1917 edition except for certain small changes made to accommodate traditional interpretations. The changes were that titles of a few chapters were altered, the abbreviations known as *muqatta'at* (for example, *Alif*, *Lam*, *Mim*) were shown literally without translation, names of prophets were given in the Arabic form (for example, *Musa* instead of Moses), and some words in the stories of the past prophets were amended to reflect the generally received interpretations. It was rather amusing to find that some changes were not applied consistently. In case of the issue of the death of Jesus, the translation of 3:55 was altered to reflect the belief that Jesus was taken up to heaven alive, but the same change was obviously forgotten to be made in 5:117 and the translation of that verse continued to indicate the Ahmadiyya interpretation that Jesus is not alive. Other than these changes in a few places, the so-called Shakir translation was identical with Maulana Muhammad Ali's 1917 edition of his translation of the Quran.

In October 2005, the writer of these lines, Zahid Aziz, after uncovering the facts outlined above, published an article on the website Ahmadiyya.org.¹⁵ That article concluded that the Egyptian judge Shakir could not possibly have any connection with this translation, as that person is the same Sheykh Muhammad Shakir who is mentioned by Pickthall as opposing the very idea of translating the Quran (and who knew no English). The mystery of who was Shakir remained unresolved.

A few months later, in March 2006, I received an email from someone who had read my article, introducing himself as a descendant of this “Shakir” and informing me that “Shakir” was in fact a very well-known Pakistani banker by the name of Mohammedali Habib of the Habib financial dynasty of Pakistan. The following information which he supplied appears to be authentic and consistent with other facts:

1. “His real name was Mohammedali Habib. He took on Shakir as a pen name.”
2. “The late Mr. Mohammedali Habib was well known throughout the country (Pakistan) for having devoted his life to the cause of humanity. ... This translation was completed by him on the 14th Shaban and the very next day he suffered a severe heart attack and passed away on the 20th of Ramadhan, i.e. 30th March 1959.”
3. “M.H. Shakir did not speak Arabic. He supervised the translation of the Quran which was done by a group of people.”

Thereupon I published a sequel to my first article on the Ahmadiyya.org website, to which the reader may refer for full details.¹⁶ Of course, the descendant’s statement that the translation “was done by a group of people” is not accurate, since they did not do any translation but merely took the 1917 edition of Maulana Muhammad Ali’s translation and made the changes which I have listed above, leaving the rest identical to the Maulana’s work.

Since then, two interesting facts have come to light. There is a comprehensive bibliography of translations of the Quran entitled *World Bibliography of Translations of the Meanings of the Holy*

Quran, 1515–1980, compiled by Ismet Binark and Halit Eren, published in Istanbul in 1986. On page 93 it lists the Shakir translation as having been published by Habib Bank, Karachi, 1968. This confirms the Habib Bank connection.

Even more interestingly, in the biography of Maulana Muhammad Ali, a document written by the Maulana is quoted in which he mentioned funds received for free distribution of his books from external donors. He writes: “Just one such sum of 7,500 Rupees was donated by Seth Muhammad Ali Habib”.¹⁷ This is undoubtedly “Shakir”. It may be added that Maulana Muhammad Ali visited Karachi during 1949, 1950 and 1951, where, among his other activities, he appealed to the prominent Muslims of Karachi for donations for free distribution of his books to Western countries, and Muhammad Ali Habib had settled in Karachi after the partition of India. Describing a special visit in November–December 1949 for just this purpose, it is recorded in his biography:

“...Maulana Muhammad Ali in his second brief stay in Karachi promoted his proposal for the free distribution of five thousand sets of books before government officials, businessmen, industrialists and other affluent persons belonging to the general Muslim community. The Almighty answered his prayers, and those of a large number of members of the *Jama‘at*, and as a result of these efforts arrangements were completed during his stay to enable the distribution of 3500 sets whose total cost was 250,000 Rupees.”¹⁸

It is highly probable that Muhammad Ali Habib was present at one of these appeals, but what is certain is that he made a donation for the free distribution of the books of Maulana Muhammad Ali, the foremost among these being his translation of the Quran.

Muhammad Asad and his *Message of the Quran*

The Message of the Quran by Muhammad Asad is a very well-known translation and commentary of the Quran. A convert to Islam of Austrian origin, Asad (d. 1992) lived in India and Pakistan for a number of years around the time of independence and frequently called upon Maulana Muhammad Ali in Lahore. While

Asad's complete edition was first published in 1980, one volume had been published earlier in 1964 consisting of the first nine chapters of the Quran. The name of the publisher on the title page is: Muslim World League, Mecca (known in Arabic as *Rabita al-'Alam al-Islami*). Inside the volume, Asad begins as follows:

"I wish to express my deep gratitude to the Secretary-General of the Muslim World League ... Shaykh Muhammad Sarur as-Sabban, whose moral and material support, so generously and selflessly accorded to me ... has enabled me to accomplish my task in peace and freedom; to the Council of the Muslim World League, Mecca, who have honoured me by their sponsorship of this publication..."

It was only after its publication that it occurred to the sponsors to go through the views which Asad had expressed in his commentary. Upon examining it, they withdrew their support of his work. The following is stated in an obituary of Asad published in the British Muslim magazine *Impact International*:

"The League had lent its name as a sponsor and had bought several thousand copies for distribution all over the world. Members of the League's Constituent Council, which included some very distinguished and independent Islamic scholars from the Muslim world ... assumed that the League had satisfied itself that the rendering was faithful and its explanations within the range of general consensus since it had been sponsored by a responsible Islamic body... 'No they had not', explained the secretary general. A committee of scholars appointed to review the work found it was too controversial to be distributed on behalf of the Muslim World League." ¹⁹

As the article says, some of his interpretations were controversial, and this was because:

"Asad had been greatly influenced by the liberal apologetics of the late 19th and early 20th century Muslim scholars, specially Shaikh Muhammad Abduhu and his disciple, Rashid Rida, who sought to find a version that they thought would be more easily acceptable to the so called western mind."

The obituary gives the following examples of matters on which Asad took a “rationalistic view” unacceptable to his sponsors:

“...miracles, the historicity of Abraham (sws) passing the test of fire, the nightly journey and ascension of heaven by Muhammad (sws), the recalling of Jesus (sws) alive into Heaven, or even the Heaven (Jannah) itself etc.”

And it adds that:

“Asad is not alone in taking such a ‘rationalistic’ view while reading the Qur’ān. What he seems to have done is to put together a number of individual ‘rationalizations’ under one cover.”

Asad went on to complete his translation and commentary and the full work was published in 1980. He made no alteration to the interpretations published in the earlier first volume, to which such serious exception had been taken by the Muslim World League.

In a letter to a journal published in its issue for October 1981, Asad mentioned this episode. This was the second issue of a new journal called *Arabia: The Islamic World Review*, in which an article about his life and work had appeared in the first issue, and Asad wrote this letter clarifying and commenting upon that article. He presents three examples of those of his interpretations to which “several, although by no means all, of the then members of Rabita’s council took exception ... and condemned the whole work out of hand.” He then explains his reasons for those interpretations. In those three examples, and on the issues mentioned in the obituary quoted above, and on certain other questions, where Asad has differed from the traditional views held by the majority of Muslims, his interpretations are very close to those expressed by Maulana Muhammad Ali, and in fact often they are identical.

We give below a list of such points of agreement, taking first the three examples in Asad’s letter.²⁰

1. Death of Jesus. Asad writes in his letter:

“Other persons, again, objected vehemently to my contention (expressed in my commentary) that nowhere in the

Quran is to be found a statement to the effect that God raised Jesus *bodily* to heaven.... In my note 172 on verse 158 of *An-Nisa* (pp. 134–135) I gave my reasons for the interpretation adopted by me.”

If we refer to that note, Asad had written in it:

“Compare 3:55, where God says to Jesus, “Verily, I shall cause thee to die, and shall exalt thee unto Me.” The verb *rafa’a hu* (lit., “he raised him” or “elevated him”) has always, whenever the act of *raf* (“elevating”) of a human being is attributed to God, the meaning of “honouring” or “exalting”. Nowhere in the Quran is there any warrant for the popular belief that God has “taken up” Jesus bodily, in his lifetime, into heaven.”

Maulana Muhammad Ali translated these opening words of 3:55 as: “When Allah said: O Jesus, I will cause thee to die and exalt thee in My presence”. Asad has translated them in exactly the same way. (See also p. 52 for our earlier discussion in connection with Abdullah Yusuf Ali). In explanation of “exalting”, the Maulana writes under 3:55 in his second footnote:

“*Raf* signifies *raising* or *elevating*, and also *exalting* or *making honourable*. But where the *raf* of a man to Allah is spoken of in the Quran ... it is always in the latter sense, for raising a man in his body to Himself implies that the Divine Being is limited to a place.”²¹

Compare this with Asad’s note quoted above and it will be seen that he wrote exactly the same.

2. Concubinage. Asad writes in his letter:

“Still another member of the *Rabita* objected to my statement that Islam does not permit concubinage.”

In his commentary Asad had written under 4:25 in note 32:

“This passage lays down in an unequivocal manner that sexual relations with female slaves are permitted only on the basis of marriage; ... consequently, concubinage is ruled out.”

Compare this with Maulana Muhammad Ali's note on 4:25:

"This verse lays down the conditions under which those taken prisoners in war may be taken in marriage. I do not find any verse in the Holy Quran or any instance in the Prophet's life, sanctioning what is called *concubinage*."

3. Angels. Asad says in his letter that he has been accused of denying the existence of angels because in his explanation of 3:124–125 relating to angels being sent to aid the believers in battle (note 93 under 3:125) he wrote that this:

"signifies, metaphorically, a strengthening of the believers' hearts through spiritual forces coming from God".

Maulana Muhammad Ali had written as follows:

"What was the object of the coming of the angels? ... to strengthen the Muslims by improving their position in the field of battle and by strengthening their hearts. ... The believers thus being strengthened ... the object of sending the angels was achieved..."²²

"It is nowhere stated in the Holy Quran that the angels actually fought ... as a result of the coming of the angels, calm fell upon the Muslims, their hearts being strengthened..."²³

4. Miracles. The obituary of Asad, from which we quoted above, also mentioned as examples his interpretation of miracles, Abraham being cast into the fire, and the night journey and ascension to heaven (*isra* and *mi'raj*) of the Holy Prophet Muhammad.

On miracles in general, Asad writes under 6:109 in note 94:

"Thus, what is commonly described as a "miracle" constitutes, in fact, an unusual message from God, indicating — sometimes in a symbolic manner — a spiritual truth which would otherwise have remained hidden from man's intellect. But even such extraordinary, "miraculous" messages cannot be regarded as "supernatural": for the so-called "laws of nature" are only a perceptible manifestation of "God's way" (*sunnat Allah*) in respect of His creation — and, consequently, everything that exists and happens, or

could conceivably exist or happen, is “natural” in the innermost sense of this word, irrespective of whether it conforms to the ordinary course of events or goes beyond it.”

This is exactly the same as the Ahmadiyya view, propounded by Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, that a miracle takes place within the laws of God, even though it may appear to infringe the laws of nature as known to man in his imperfect knowledge.

In connection with the miracle granted to Moses, of his rod turning into a serpent, Asad writes that this has a “mystic significance”, while Maulana Muhammad Ali writes in the same place: “What was shown to Moses on this occasion had a deeper significance beneath under it”.²⁴

As to Abraham, Asad writes under 21:69 in his footnote 64:

“Nowhere does the Quran state that Abraham was actually, bodily thrown into the fire and miraculously kept alive in it... On the other hand, the many elaborate (and conflicting) stories with which the classical commentators have embroidered their interpretation of the above verse can invariably be traced back to Talmudic legends and may, therefore, be disregarded. What the Quran gives us here, as well as in 29:24 and 37:97, is apparently an allegorical allusion to the fire of persecution which Abraham had to suffer.”

Maulana Muhammad Ali wrote:

“The fire was turned into *coolness* and *peace* for Abraham. There are many stories related in the commentaries as to the size of this fire and the time Abraham remained therein. Reliable commentators, however, do not accept them as they are baseless.... The Holy Quran does not state anywhere that Abraham was actually cast into a fire.... According to 29:24, Allah delivered him from the fire, ... Verse 71 [ch. 21] states that the delivery was brought about by means of a journey to another land.”²⁵

“As in 21:69, so here, it is not stated that Abraham was actually cast into the fire. On the other hand, the plan was either *to slay* or *to burn* him, and therefore the *fire* may only stand for the opposition which these plans involved.”²⁶

As to the night journey and ascension of the Holy Prophet, Asad explains his conclusions in detail in Appendix IV added to his commentary. We quote from it below:

“The most convincing argument in favour of a spiritual interpretation of both the Night Journey and the Ascension is forthcoming from the highly allegorical descriptions found in the authentic Traditions relating to this double experience: descriptions, that is, which are so obviously symbolic that they preclude any possibility of interpreting them literally, in “physical” terms....

...it is obvious that the Prophet himself regarded this prelude to the Ascension — and therefore the Ascension itself and, ipso facto, the Night Journey to Jerusalem — as purely spiritual experiences. ... there is no cogent reason to believe in a “bodily” Night Journey and Ascension, ...

... the fact of his having had such an experience by far transcends any miracle of bodily ascension, for it presupposes a personality of tremendous spiritual perfection — the very thing which we expect from a true Prophet of God.”

Maulana Muhammad Ali wrote on this subject:

“...the Ascension was not a translation of the body, but the spiritual experience of the Holy Prophet...”²⁷

“There has been a difference of opinion among the learned as to whether the Holy Prophet’s Ascension was bodily or spiritual; the majority adhere to the first view, but among those who hold the latter view there are personages of sound opinion, such as Aishah and Muawiyah. In view of the plain words of the Quran, however, which refer to the Ascension as being *the vision which We showed thee*, the opinion of the majority must be rejected. The sayings of the Holy Prophet support this view. ... and he was shown great wonders, but it was in spirit that he was carried, and it was with the spiritual eye that he saw those wonders, not in body and with the physical eye, for things spiritual can only be seen with the spiritual eye.”²⁸

We may here add four other issues: the nature of the miracles of Jesus, duration of punishment in hell, what are *jinn*, and abrogation of verses of the Quran (*nasikh, mansukh*).

5. Miracles of Jesus. Asad writes under 3:49 in note 38:

“It is probable that the “raising of the dead” by Jesus is a metaphorical description of his giving new life to people who were spiritually dead; cf. 6:122. ... If this interpretation is — as I believe — correct, then the “healing of the blind and the leper” has a similar significance: namely, an inner regeneration of people who were spiritually diseased and blind to the truth.”

Maulana Muhammad Ali writes under the same verse:

“...the use of the word *mauta*, i.e. *the dead*, and of their *being raised to life*, is frequent in the Holy Quran in a spiritual sense: “Is he who was dead, then We raised him to life ... like him whose likeness is that of one in darkness” (6:122). ... The prophets are raised only for quickening to life those who are spiritually dead, and it is to this quickening through Jesus Christ that the Holy Quran refers here.”²⁹

“The prophet’s healing is spiritual, not healing of the physical diseases. The Quran speaks of the blind and the deaf frequently, but it never means those who have lost the senses of seeing and hearing.”³⁰

6. Duration of punishment of hell. Asad writes under 6:128 in his note 114:

“Some of the great Muslim theologians conclude from the above and from the similar phrase occurring in 11:107 (as well as from several well-authenticated sayings of the Prophet) that — contrary to the bliss of paradise, which will be of unlimited duration — the suffering of the sinners in the life to come will be limited by God’s mercy.”

He repeats the same view under other verses; for example, when commenting on 78:23 he writes in note 12 that the suffering of hell shall be for “a limited period of time, and not eternity”.

Maulana Muhammad Ali wrote in his footnote on 11:107:

“The limitation on the duration of abiding in hell ... shows clearly that the punishment of hell is not everlasting.”

The Maulana’s footnote is quite lengthy, providing references and quotations to establish this conclusion. It should be noted that most Muslim theologians have held that the duration of hell is limited only for Muslim sinners, and that for non-Muslims it is for eternity. Therefore on this issue too, Asad differs with the majority Muslim view in the same way as Maulana Muhammad Ali differed from it.

As to paradise, Asad writes in his footnote 135 to 11:108 that the mention in this verse, that those who enter it shall abide in it “except as thy Lord please — a gift never to be cut off”, means they shall abide in it “unless He opens up to man a new, yet higher stage of evolution”. Maulana Muhammad Ali had expressed the same idea under other verses (39:20 and 66:8); for example, under 66:8 he wrote that paradise “is also the starting-point of a never-ceasing spiritual advancement ... spiritual progress in that life will be endless.”

7. Interpretation of *jinn*. Asad’s view is not as clear-cut as that of Maulana Muhammad Ali but still it has reflections of the latter’s opinion that, sometimes, the *jinn* mentioned in the Quran are human beings. Under 6:128, in which Allah addresses the *jinn* as “O community of *jinn*”, Asad writes in note 112:

“Thus, to my mind, the allocution *ya ma’shar al-jinn* does not denote, “O you community of [evil] invisible beings” but, rather, “O you who are [or “have lived”] in close communion with [evil] invisible beings”: in other words, it is addressed to the misguided human beings...”

Under the same verse Maulana Muhammad Ali wrote:

“In this verse *jinn* are spoken of as *friends of men*, and v. 129 speaks of the iniquitous as befriending one another, while in v. 130 men and *jinn* are spoken of as a single *ma’shar* or community, ... The context thus makes it clear that by the *jinn* here are meant the leaders of evil...”

In 46:29–32 and 72:1–14 groups of *jinn* are mentioned as listening to the Quran and accepting its message. These are generally considered to be some sort of beings other than humans. Asad writes in his note 1 on 72:1 that *jinn* here:

“may possibly signify “hitherto unseen beings”, namely, strangers who had never before been seen by the people among and to whom the Quran was then being revealed.”

Maulana Muhammad Ali has interpreted the *jinn* of ch. 46 as “leaders of certain Jewish tribes” and those of ch. 72 as Christians, being called *jinn* because of “living outside Arabia”.

8. Abrogation. Lastly, as to the abrogation of some verses of the Quran by other verses, an entrenched belief widely held among Muslims, Asad rejects this doctrine and puts forward reasons almost identical to those given by Maulana Muhammad Ali. Below we quote extracts from Asad in his note 87 under 2:106 and compare them to the Maulana’s statements in his note on the same verse.

1. Asad: “The principle laid down in this passage — relating to the supersession of the Biblical dispensation by that of the Quran — has given rise to an erroneous interpretation by many Muslim theologians. The word *ayah* (‘message’) occurring in this context is also used to denote a ‘verse’ of the Quran ... some scholars conclude from the above passage that certain verses of the Quran have been ‘abrogated’...”

M. Ali: “It will thus be seen that the reference here is to the abrogation of the Jewish law. That some of the Quranic verses were abrogated by others, though a generally accepted doctrine, is due to a misconception of the words of this verse. The word *ayat* occurring here has been wrongly understood to mean a verse of the Quran.”

2. Asad: “...there does not exist a single reliable Tradition to the effect that the Prophet ever, declared a verse of the Quran to have been ‘abrogated’.”

M. Ali: “Nor is there a single report traceable to the Prophet that such and such a verse was abrogated.”

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- 3. Asad:** "At the root of the so-called 'doctrine of abrogation' may lie the inability of some of the early commentators to reconcile one Quranic passage with another: a difficulty which was overcome by declaring that one of the verses in question had been 'abrogated'."
- M. Ali:** "What happened really was this that when a commentator could not reconcile one verse with another, he held the verse to be abrogated by the other, but another who, giving deeper thought, was able to effect a reconciliation between the two, rejected abrogation."
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- 4. Asad:** "This arbitrary procedure explains also why there is no unanimity whatsoever among the upholders of the 'doctrine of abrogation' as to which, and how many, Quran verses have been affected by it;"
- M. Ali:** "Another consideration which shows the erroneousness of the doctrine that any verse of the Quran was abrogated by another is the hopeless disagreement of the upholders of this view. In the first place there is no agreement as to the number of the verses which are alleged to have been abrogated;..."
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- 5. Asad:** "...the apparent difficulty in interpreting the above Quranic passage disappears immediately if the term *ayah* is understood, correctly, as 'message'..."
- M. Ali:** "Similar words occur elsewhere: 'And when We change a message (*ayat*) for a message (*ayat*)...' (16:101). ...the word *ayat*, occurring there twice, could only mean a message or a communication from God, and the first *message* meant the previous scriptures and by the second *message* was meant the Quran."
-
- 6. Asad:** "...and if we read this verse in conjunction with the preceding one, which states that the Jews and the Christians refuse to accept any revelation which might supersede that of the Bible: for, if read in this way, the abrogation relates to the earlier divine messages and not to any part of the Quran itself."
- M. Ali:** "The two previous sections deal, more or less, with a particular Jewish objection to the revelation of the Prophet, viz., that they could not accept a new revelation which was not granted to an Israelite. The answer is given partly in v. 105, and partly in the verse under discussion. ... In the latter [they are told] that ... if one law, i.e. the Jewish law, was abrogated, one better than it was given through the Holy Prophet."
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- 7. Asad:** "In short, the 'doctrine of abrogation' has no basis whatever in historical fact, and must be rejected."
- M. Ali:** "This seems to be the basis on which the theory of abrogation of Quranic verses rests, and this basis is demolished by the Holy Quran..."
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We have cited at length above the similarity of views between Asad and Maulana Muhammad Ali on issues where they both differ from the traditional, widely-held meanings in the same way. It was on the expression of such views that the Maulana's commentary has been attacked as unorthodox. It was because of these interpretations that the Christian critic writing in *The Moslem World*, as quoted earlier, described the Maulana's commentary as "so saturated with the peculiar doctrines of the Ahmadiyya sect". On account of the same interpretations, the Maulana has been bitterly condemned by Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi in his book *Qadianism — A Critical Study*, who writes that "Muhammad Ali interprets Quranic verses in a highly arbitrary and exotic manner. He goes to a ridiculous length of casuistry in order to support his interpretation on the basis of the feeblest of evidences."³¹ Similar criticism of the Maulana's commentary has been made by some other Muslim writers.

Some have criticized Asad's commentary for the same reason, but many more Muslims are prepared to accept non-traditional views from him than the same views from Maulana Muhammad Ali. A well-known American Muslim organization, CAIR (Council on American-Islamic Relations), has for some time been appealing for donations to "Sponsor a Quran", and selected Asad's *The Message of the Quran* as the translation which it sponsors for distribution from these funds. Thus the Maulana's representation of the teachings of the Quran on many important issues is reaching a wide readership who may be reluctant to study his work directly for fear of its alleged unorthodoxy. It is a pity that people accept or reject an interpretation depending on who has expressed it rather than on the merits of the interpretation itself. There may come a time when the Muslim world in general will realize this injustice and give due recognition to the pioneering work of Maulana Muhammad Ali.

We have established in this chapter that it was Maulana Muhammad Ali who opened the door for Muslims to the work of translating the Quran and he was among Muslims the pioneer in bringing it before the modern world. He trod entirely new ground, and other Muslims followed his lead. The well-known English translations that appeared in the following years were all influenced by his work. Many translators passed through the door which he opened and continue to do so till today.

It is also important to point out that Maulana Muhammad Ali was the head of a religious community, and he constantly urged and motivated that community to the service of the Quran, i.e., to teach it to people, to do research on it, to publish it, and to have it translated into other languages. The path on which he set his community, it still follows.

Notes

- ¹ Newspaper *Such*, Lucknow, 25 June 1934; see *Paigham Sulh*, 3 August 1934, p. 3, col. 2.
- ² *Aap Beti*, Shadab Book Centre, Lahore, 1979, pp. 254 – 255.
- ³ *Loyal Enemy* by Anne Fremantle, Hutchinson and Co., London, 1938, pages 408–419.
- ⁴ The term “Capitulations” refers to the trading and commercial rights given by the Ottoman rulers in their territories to European Christian countries.
- ⁵ *The Islamic Review*, February 1922, pages 42–43.
- ⁶ *The Islamic Review*, April–May 1933, pages 140–141.
- ⁷ *Islamic Culture*, Hyderabad Deccan, India, October 1936, pp. 659 – 660.
- ⁸ *The Moslem World*, v. 21, issue 3, July 1931, p. 287–303.
- ⁹ *A Biography of Abdullah Yusuf Ali — A Life Forlorn*, by K. K. Aziz, Lahore, 2010, pages 70–80.
- ¹⁰ In the publisher’s preface to this official Saudi edition of Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s translation, it is stated that the other option the publishers had, instead of adopting an existing translation, was to “prepare a fresh and independent translation, starting from scratch”, but this option “demanded much time and effort, neither of which were available at the time” (p. vi). What the Saudi authorities with their massive resources of scholars, manpower and money could not procure, individual translators were able to provide! Maulana Muhammad Ali worked largely single-handedly, with the assistance of a

handful of helpers and a small organization, to translate the Quran from scratch, while he was also engaged in many other works of the Movement.

¹¹ See his obituary in the *Islamic Review*, February 1954, p. 35–36.

¹² *A Biography of Abdullah Yusuf Ali — A Life Forlorn*, pages 42–54.

¹³ Such a report is found in an article *Maulana Muhammad Ali — His influence on contemporary and later Muslim scholars* by Choudhry Masud Akhtar, prolific Lahore Ahmadiyya writer and translator, and the report is attributed to Mirza Masud Baig, an eminent officer in the government department of education, who also worked in various administrative and scholarly capacities in the Lahore Ahmadiyya Anjuman from the 1930s till his death in 1983.

¹⁴ This alteration is noted in *Jesus in Heaven on Earth* by Khwaja Nazir Ahmad, original 1952 edition, p. 228, footnote 2; in the 1998 USA edition this is in Appendix 4, p. 471.

¹⁵ See the link: www.ahmadiyya.org/movement/shakir.htm

¹⁶ See the link: www.ahmadiyya.org/movement/shakir-2.htm

¹⁷ Urdu biography *Mujahid-i Kabir*, p. 286, and its English translation *A Mighty Striving*, p. 321. The title *Seth* is used for a financier or businessman.

¹⁸ Urdu biography *Mujahid-i Kabir*, p. 311; *A Mighty Striving*, p. 375.

¹⁹ *Impact International*, 10th April–7th May 1992. Reproduced by the Pakistani monthly Islamic journal *Renaissance* at the link: www.monthly-renaissance.com/issue/content.aspx?id=416

²⁰ *Arabia: The Islamic World Review*, October 1981; see also *The Light*, Lahore, Pakistan, organ of the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Lahore, February 8, 1982, p. 1–2, 19–24; *The Islamic Guardian*, London, organ of the British branch of the Lahore Ahmadiyya Anjuman, July–September 1982, p. 19–21.

²¹ All quotations from Maulana Muhammad Ali's footnotes given hereunder are from his revised edition, first published in 1951.

²² M. M. Ali, note on 3:124.

²³ M. M. Ali, note on 8:10.

²⁴ Asad, note 14 on 20:21, and M. M. Ali, note on 20:20.

²⁵ M. M. Ali, note on 21:69.

²⁶ M. M. Ali, note on 29:24.

²⁷ M. M. Ali, note on 17:1.

²⁸ M. M. Ali, note on 17:60.

²⁹ M. M. Ali, 3rd note on 3:49.

³⁰ M. M. Ali, 2nd note on 3:49.

³¹ *Qadianism — A Critical Study*, by S. Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, Lucknow, India, 1980 edition, p. 140.

4. Revised 1951 edition and later

In June 1947 Maulana Muhammad Ali embarked upon his last major literary work, the revision of his English translation and commentary of the Holy Quran. He completed the main part of this thorough and extensive revision in two years.

Sermon announcing completion of revision

Maulana Muhammad Ali announced the completion in a Friday sermon (*khutba*) in August 1949. When the sermon was published, its heading was: *The Second Important Occasion of Happiness in My Life — Completion of the Revision of the English Translation of the Quran*.¹ Here are some extracts from it:

“The verse I have recited today, ‘Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds’, I have recited on a specially joyous occasion. In my life there have been many other happy moments but this is the second occasion of special happiness. The first occasion was when I completed the English translation of the Holy Quran, and today it is the second when I have completed the revision of the translation. I have come after finishing it at about 1.45 pm today.

Starting such a monumental task and taking it to completion depended entirely on the grace and favour of God. Many friends had been asking me for several years for this revision, but at my age I could not muster the strength required for this stupendous hard work. It was a task both huge and difficult. My earlier experience was there, when I had worked day and night for seven years. But those days were different. Then I had much more physical strength than I have now. I used to work for twelve to fourteen hours daily.

When I got tired sitting down, I would work standing up. Now, firstly due to my age, and secondly the magnitude of the task, I felt I had no strength to take on this work. But Allah's grace and mercy know no bounds, and with His help this work has been completed today."

He went on to stress the importance of service of the Quran:

"The service of the Holy Quran is the work by which we can best serve mankind. It must be remembered, with the fullest faith in the heart, that the welfare and betterment of the world lies nowhere but in the Word of God which He revealed to His last Messenger. Nothing can rescue the world from its present troubles except the Quran. It is absolutely true that the reason for my happiness is not that Allah has granted me some further knowledge of the Quran, but that with His help I had the opportunity to place the Holy Quran before the world in a way which shows that it contains a solution for its present problems. Perhaps this may serve as a source of guidance for the world and illumine the hearts of people with the light of God.

Reading the Quran illuminates your heart, but this depends on the concentration with which you read this word of God. The more you concentrate on it, and the deeper you go into it, the more it will enter your heart. Just as pearls are found in the depths of the oceans, likewise the boundless treasures of knowledge contained in the Quran, which will continue to be unfolded till the Day of Judgment, are to be found in the depths of the meanings of its words. It is an ocean to which no one is denied access, but to obtain those valuable pearls from it, which give us light to solve our problems, is dependent on how much effort and exertion we put in for their acquisition.

Therefore I advise my friends to try to find solutions to the problems of the world from the Holy Quran. Apply thought to these problems and then ponder over the Quran. Remember this principle that the solution of the problems of the world lies in developing faith in God, and nothing else can create as much faith in God as can the Holy Quran. But to develop faith requires a struggle."

Then Maulana Muhammad Ali mentioned the source of his inspiration to study and spread the Quran:

“I must tell you that the true knowledge of the Holy Quran has in this age been disclosed particularly to your community and this blessing is in reality due to that man at whose feet we gained this knowledge [Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad]. ... However, we never accepted him as one to be followed blindly. ... He declared the Holy Quran to be supreme over everything. So if we see something clearly in the Quran, then in a secondary matter we consider it permissible to hold a different interpretation from him, provided it is supported by strong arguments. We have learnt the Quran from him but he did not shut the doors of knowledge upon us; rather, he opened them. ...

Therefore, it is no sin to differ, even with the greatest of persons. Of course, one cannot differ with the founder of the religion, the Holy Prophet Muhammad. After him, one can differ with anyone from Hazrat Abu Bakr to Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. The concept that such differences are not allowed caused Muslims to become stagnant. Prior to that, the Muslims were racing on the path of progress, in terms of both knowledge and deeds. They led the world in all aspects of life. But when this nation got stuck in the mire of taking religious leaders “for lords besides Allah” (the Quran, 9:31), it went into decline.”

He concluded by again urging the study and the propagation of the Quran:

“You must read the Holy Quran, and read it with thought and concentration. Only God knows to whom He will grant knowledge for the benefit of His creatures. Allah has given a brain to everyone and placed a light within each person as well. As you take more and more interest in the Quran, and make your connection with it stronger, the things in it which appear remote and distant will seem to be emerging from your own heart.

There remains another stage, which is the crucial one. ... The Holy Quran is already in our homes. If, after translation,

it remains confined to our homes, will it reach the world? The real objective is its propagation.

I look with amazement as to how the idea occurred to a recluse living in Qadian [Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad], occurring at the same time as he made his claim [of being sent by God to revive Islam], that the Quran should be translated and sent to the peoples of Europe and America. Perhaps the second resurgence of Islam would take place by their hands. It would not be surprising if Islam spreads among them and makes them the more capable of serving the Quran.

So the other task is to spread the Holy Quran. In this, everyone of you can participate, whether you are great or small. ... Try to acquire knowledge of the Quran and pass it on. Allah never wastes anyone's effort and struggle. The brains of all human beings have more or less the same capability. The difference is in man's effort. The person of average intelligence can achieve through effort what a highly intelligent man cannot achieve without effort."

Preface to the revised edition

Two years later, writing in his Preface to the revised edition, which he dated as January 1951, he has outlined the background to the revision as follows:

"There has been a demand for a revised edition of my English Translation and Commentary of the Holy Quran 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; my 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 Quran, the Hadith and other religious literature of Islam. During this interval of about 33 years — the first edition was published in 1917 — I made substantial contribution to the religious literature of Islam both in English and in Urdu.

After the English Translation I wrote a voluminous

Urdu Commentary, the *Bayan al- Quran*, 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 *Muhammad 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 *Sahih Bukhari*, the well-known Hadith collection. In 1936 was published another voluminous work in English, *The Religion of Islam*, which contains full information on almost all Islamic questions of modern days. *The New World Order*, *A Manual of Hadith* and *The Living Thoughts of the Prophet Muhammad* 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 Quran than I had given in my younger days. I began the work of revising the translation and commentary of the Holy Quran 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."

Maulana Muhammad Ali completed the final proof reading on 8 October 1951 and died five days later on 13 October 1951. The revised, fourth edition appeared in print in December 1951, in a quantity of 20,000, and was printed in England at the Verstage Press, Basingstoke.

Later reprints and editions

All subsequent reprints and editions are re-publications of the 1951 edition, incorporating corrections of typographical and other errors found over the years, and improving its design. Many such errors in the fourth edition were identified in Lahore by Dr Asghar Hameed.² Incorporating these corrections, the fifth edition was printed in 1963 in a quantity of 10,000, at Unwin Brothers of Woking (where the pre-1951 editions had been printed). In 1973 the sixth edition was printed and published from the USA by arrangement with Speciality Promotions Co. Inc. of Chicago.

In 1978, the writer of these lines, Dr Zahid Aziz, carried out a detailed proof reading of the latest available reprint and submitted a list of corrections and other suggestions to the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Lahore. These were considered in detail by Mr N.A. Faruqi,³ a leading light of the Anjuman who was much involved in the study of the Quran and the propagation of Maulana Muhammad Ali's writings, and Mr Muhammad Ahmad,⁴ son of Maulana Muhammad Ali. They produced an approved list of corrections, the most important of which were incorporated in subsequent editions published in the 1980s and 1990s in the USA by the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Ishaat Islam Lahore, USA.

Since the late 1980s, various reprints and editions have been published by the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Ishaat Islam Lahore, Ohio, USA, including a pocket version consisting only of the translation, without the Arabic text or footnotes. Dr Noman I. Malik and Mrs Samina Malik of Dublin, Ohio, have led and expanded this work with considerable energy and dedication over many years.

During the late 1990s the entire book was re-typeset in a new design and layout, with re-checking of all references and cross-references, and providing a greatly expanded index of subjects. Some

minor linguistic inconsistencies were also removed. Most of these seemed to have arisen because the revisions made for the 1951 edition had, in some cases, not been reflected in all the places to which they related. Details are provided in a Publisher's Note to the resulting work. This edition was published in 2002, and is known as the Year 2002 Edition. It had been first planned and proposed by Dr Zahid Aziz in 1989-90, and includes a Foreword written in 1990 by the President of the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Lahore, Dr Saeed Ahmad Khan,⁵ and the Vice-President Mr N.A. Faruqui, as endorsement and approval.

Even before the start of the 21st century it was being felt that, due to changes in recent years in currently-written English language, some of the expressions used in the translation were becoming increasingly unfamiliar to modern English readers; in particular, the use of the forms *thee*, *thou*, *hast*, *wouldst* etc. The traditional versions of the Bible are no longer so generally studied and read in the English-speaking world, and people are less and less acquainted with certain previous forms of expression. Therefore, to make the language of the translation of the Quran more widely accessible, the writer of these lines, Zahid Aziz, edited Maulana Muhammad Ali's translation with the specific aim limited to replacing antiquated terms by those in current usage. An edition updated along these lines was printed from the UK in 2010. Details of the kind of changes made are explained in the Preface to that work. As stated in that Preface, the revisions have been made "while showing reverence to the original work and remaining as close as possible to the language used by Maulana Muhammad Ali". In that edition, the Arabic text has not been included, and the footnotes have been considerably abridged.

Over the last hundred years and more, since before 1917 in fact, many people have been involved in assisting, as volunteers, with various aspects of the publication of the editions, mentioned in this book, of Maulana Muhammad Ali's English translation of the Quran. Only some of their names have been noted here, but acknowledgements are due to all of them.

Notes

- ¹ The sermon (*khutba*) was delivered in Karachi on 19th August 1949 in Urdu. It was published a few days later in the Lahore Ahmadiyya Urdu periodical *Paigham Sulh*, 7 September 1949, 5–6. The translation here is by Zahid Aziz.
- ² Dr Asghar Hameed was a distinguished academic in the field of mathematics at the University of Engineering and Technology, Lahore, as well as being a scholar of the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Lahore. He was head of the Anjuman from 1996 to 2002.
- ³ Naseer Ahmad Faruqi (1906–1991) retired in the mid-1960s after a long public service career, first in the Indian Civil Service till 1947, and then in the Civil Service of Pakistan, in which he rose to the high position of Cabinet Secretary. He had a life-long, deep interest in studying and teaching the Quran. He was also brother-in-law of Maulana Muhammad Ali and was devoted to carrying forward and propagating the Maulana's literary work. It was at his residence in Karachi that the Maulana stayed during the last five months of his life, passing away in October 1951.
- ⁴ Muhammad Ahmad (1920–1981), elder son of Maulana Muhammad Ali, who served in the Railway service of Pakistan at high executive levels, was also devoted to carrying forward the religious work of his father. He was the main author of Maulana Muhammad Ali's Urdu biography, *Mujahid-i Kabir*, published in 1962.
- ⁵ Dr Saeed Ahmad Khan (d. 1996) was head of the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Lahore from 1981 to 1996. He had had an illustrious medical career as a specialist and surgeon in chest diseases and was superintendent of a famous tuberculosis sanatorium at Dadar (in the North-west Frontier Province of British India, later Pakistan) from 1939 to 1964. He also had vast knowledge of Islam, and in particular the Quran, whose meanings he taught regularly. As with the three other Lahore Ahmadiyya stalwarts mentioned in the notes above, his inspiration for the service of Islam, the Quran and the Lahore Ahmadiyya cause came from long association with Maulana Muhammad Ali.

5. Status and Role of the Quran

The Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, reiterated certain long-forgotten principles regarding the status of the Quran and its interpretation which are necessary for a true appreciation of its teachings. His forceful exhortations in this connection created faith and zeal in the hearts of his followers to present the Quran to the world. We summarise some of these here.

He taught that the Quran contains within itself endless treasures of knowledge which are disclosed in each age in accordance with the needs of the time. In one of his earliest books he wrote:

“Know that the clear miracle of the Holy Quran ... is that the knowledge and the truths contained in the Quran are unlimited, and are disclosed in every age according to the needs of that age. They stand like armed soldiers to combat the [wrong] philosophies of every age. If the Holy Quran had been a limited thing in terms of the truths contained in it, it could not possibly be a perfect miracle. Eloquence of language by itself is not a quality whose miraculous nature can be appreciated by everyone, whether learned or uneducated...

The wonders of the Holy Quran can never come to an end, just as the wonders of nature did not come to an end in some previous age, but ever newer ones are constantly appearing. The same is true of this holy scripture, so that there is conformity between the word of God and the work of God.”¹

“God says: ‘The treasures of everything are with Us, but We send them down in a known measure’ (the Quran, 15:21), and according to need. ... This age is, in fact, a time which

by its nature requires that the Holy Quran disclose its inner secrets. ... In this age, these needs arose to the full. Humans made great advances in such knowledge as makes them oppose Islam. There is no doubt that, if at this critical time, the knowledge concealed in the Quran does not become manifest, the present-day *Ulama* by their adherence to simplistic and superficial religious teachings, can never face the opponents. ... Everything created by God possesses unlimited wonders within it. The pretext that if we accept such subtle points and knowledge from the Quran which the people of the past did not know, then this is being disrespectful to the consensus they agreed upon, ... is a wrong conception of the *Mullas*. Since it is possible that in the present day a property may be discovered in some plant, or such like, which was not known to people of the past, why is it not possible that some wonderful truths may now be found from the Quran which were not known in the past because at that time there was no need of them? Of course, the essentials of faith relating to religious law, which are obligatory in order to be a Muslim, are set down openly in the Holy Quran for the information of everyone. But those points and truths which increase understanding are always being disclosed according to need, and at the time of ever newer evils, new meanings full of wisdom make their appearance. ...

The present age, with its research in the sciences and philosophy, is bringing about unusual changes. Is it not necessary that at such a critical time the door of spiritual progress also be opened?"²

In another book Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad wrote:

“Given that every created thing has properties that are limitless and unbounded, and has within it wonders beyond measure, how can the Holy Quran which is the Word of God be limited in its meanings to a commentary which is, say, even a thousand sections in size, or be limited to the explanations given by our Prophet, may peace and the blessings of Allah be upon him, in a limited period of time? ... It is true that all the meanings of the Holy Quran explained by the Holy Prophet are the right and correct ones, but it is certainly not true that there is no more in the Holy Quran

beyond the knowledge taught by him. ... Our Prophet was not sent merely for the *Ummis* (Arabs of his time); rather, human beings of all classes and categories are among his followers. Allah says: 'Say: O people I am the Messenger of Allah to you all' (7:158). This verse shows that the Holy Quran has been revealed for the development of every kind of human capability. ... Thus the notion that whatever the Holy Prophet has taught from the Holy Quran, it is not possible to get more than it, is clearly wrong."³

New problems requiring solution arise in every age:

"The *Ummah* faces new problems in every age. The Quran is certainly a reservoir of all knowledge, but that does not imply that all the knowledge in it should be disclosed in just one age. On the contrary, corresponding to the kinds of problems that are faced, the appropriate Quranic knowledge is disclosed, and corresponding to the issues of every age, for the resolving of those issues spiritual teachers are sent who are the heirs of the messengers of Allah and who attain the qualities of the messengers by way of image."⁴

Another unique characteristic of the Quran much stressed by him is that it puts forward all its own claims and supports them by arguments provided by itself. It does not leave it up to its followers to make claims on its behalf nor does it just make claims and rely on its followers to provide arguments and proofs for them.⁵ In interpreting the Quran, the first criterion is the Quran itself. He writes:

"The first criterion for its right interpretation is the evidence provided by the Holy Quran itself. ... The Holy Quran, unlike ordinary books, is not dependent on other sources for substantiating and exposing the truths it contains. It is like the perfectly proportioned edifice, moving a single brick from which would change the shape of the whole structure. It contains no truth within it that is not supported by at least ten or twenty pieces of evidence from within itself. If we interpret a verse of the Holy Quran in a certain way, we should see to it that affirmative evidence for it is provided by other verses of the Holy Quran. ... The distinguishing feature of a true interpretation is exactly this that the Holy Quran contains abundance of evidence in support of it."⁶

As to the relative positions of the Quran and Hadith, he wrote:

“I have written this article to show the right path, which is that Muslims have three things to enable them to adhere to Islamic guidance. (1) The Holy Quran which is the Book of Allah. We possess no other word more certain and definite than this. It is the word of God, untainted by doubt and conjecture. (2) The *Sunnah* ... meaning only the practical, repetitive example of the Holy Prophet which accompanied the Quran from the beginning and will do so forever ... (3) Hadith, meaning the remembrances collected through narrators some 150 years after the Holy Prophet. ... The Quran and the *Sunnah* must be considered as ruling over Hadith reports, and a hadith which is not contrary to the Quran and the *Sunnah* should be readily accepted.”⁷

In a later book, published 1902, he described the importance for Muslims of honouring the Quran and holding it above everything else. He told his own followers:

“An essential teaching for you is that you must not leave the Quran neglected because your very life lies in it. Those who honour the Quran shall receive honour in heaven. Those who give precedence to the Quran over every hadith report and every other saying, they shall be given precedence in heaven. There is now no book for the guidance of mankind on earth except the Quran.”⁸

You must read the Quran with understanding, and love it very greatly. Love it as you have not loved anything else because, as God has informed me, all types of good is in the Quran. This is true. Pity be on those people who give precedence to something else over it. The source of all your success and salvation lies in the Quran. There is no spiritual need of yours which is not provided in the Quran. ... God has done you an immense favour by giving you a book like the Quran, ... So value the blessing given to you.”⁹

In one of his last books, he emphasized that the Quran should be taken to the whole world as it was revealed for all nations. He writes of the time when the means of transport and communications

were to allow people living in different parts of the world to be acquainted with and meet each other:

“At that time God sent for all the countries one book, and commanded therein that as this book reaches various countries in different ages it shall be obligatory on those people to accept it and believe in it. It is the Holy Quran which is the book that has come to join together all the countries. Each of the books before the Quran was limited to one nation, ... and had nothing to do with any other nation. But the Holy Quran which came after them all is an international book, and is not for a particular people but for all the nations. The Quran came for a group of beings who were going to become a single nation gradually. So in the present age those resources have come into existence which are making the various nations into one. Meeting one another, which is the real basis of becoming one nation, has become so easy that journeys which were many years in length now take only days. Such means of communication have come into existence that news from a distant country, which could not take less than a year to arrive, now reaches in an instant. ... This clearly shows that God Almighty now intends to make into one nation all the nations spread over the earth, and join together those who had been separated for thousands of years. This news is given in the Holy Quran, and it is the Quran which has openly made the claim that it has come for all the nations of the world.”¹⁰

It was such powerful teachings of Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad which inspired Maulana Muhammad Ali to lead the task of taking the Quran to the world, both non-Muslim and Muslim, by translating and explaining its meanings in the light of the principles mentioned above. In his speech at the annual Lahore Ahmadiyya gathering in December 1949, Maulana Muhammad Ali said:

“In this age, no one among the Muslims arose to hold high the name of God in the world until Hazrat Mirza [Ghulam Ahmad] *sahib* raised this loud proclamation. His attention remained always directed towards the Holy Quran, as a result of which you can see a change taking place in the world,

if you look carefully. This work could not have been accomplished by a state or government, nor by means of finance and wealth. It is only as a result of the prayers of the *Mu-jaddid* and his drawing attention to this work....

The Holy Quran was undoubtedly kept by Muslims in their homes with the greatest respect, but they had no thought of taking it to the world. In this age, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad is the only one who made it an aim of his life to take the Quran to the whole world and to make Muslims give the highest precedence to the Quran [as the source of guidance]. ... In the present time, when Muslims were unaware of this priceless treasure and they treated it as something unrelated to real life, considering that to place it in a cupboard or on a high shelf would earn them Divine reward, who was the man who announced that the Quran was the fountain of life, and in whose heart the desire arose to take it to every corner of the world? Ponder deeply, and you will find it was only Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. ...

God also created the means for the fulfilment of this desire. On the one hand, there was the most intense opposition to his Movement, and on the other its internal condition reached the low point that it split into two. Then from these two groups, it was the smaller and weaker one through which his desire was fulfilled.... This is an important event in the history of Islam, and the inspiration behind it is the deep urge that arose in the heart of the Imam [Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad]. ...

Our small [Lahore Ahmadiyya] community has so far published 40,000 copies of the English translation of the Quran. This is no small number. And by means of this translation, not only was the message of truth made to reach non-Muslims but the popularity of the Quran spread among all Muslim countries as well....

It was the desire of the Hazrat which God Himself is bringing to fulfilment. If it was not myself, then God would have chosen someone else for this task. It is the grace of God upon us that He made our community a means for accomplishing His works.”¹¹

Notes

- ¹ *Izala Auham*, p. 305–311.
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 675–679.
- ³ *Karamat-us-Sadiqeen*, p. 19.
- ⁴ *Shahadat-ul-Quran*, p. 52.
- ⁵ See his famous book *The Teachings of Islam*, Preliminary Remarks.
- ⁶ *Barakat-ud-Dua*, p. 15.
- ⁷ *Review Mubahasa Batalvi wa Chakralvi*, p. 3–4, 5.
- ⁸ *Kishti-i Nuh*, p. 13.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- ¹⁰ *Chashma-i Ma'rifat*, p. 67–68.
- ¹¹ *Paigham Sulh*, Lahore Ahmadiyya organ, 18 January 1950, p. 3–4.

Appendix: Illustrations

THE HOLY QUR-ÁN

CONTAINING THE ARABIC TEXT
WITH ENGLISH TRANSLATION
AND COMMENTARY

BY

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PRESIDENT AHMADIAH ANJAMAN-I-ISHAET-I-ISLAM
LAHORE, INDIA

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Title page of the first edition

SECTION 11

Truth of Divine Revelation

92. Deniers of the Prophet's revelation. 93. Revelation of the Qur-ān is for all ages. 94, 95. Fate of its opponents.

92 And they do not assign to Allah the attributes due to Him⁷⁹⁷ when they say: Allah has not revealed any thing to a mortal. Say: Who revealed the Book which Moses brought, a light and a guidance to men, which you make into *scattered writings*⁷⁹⁸ which you show while you conceal much? And you were taught what you did not know, (neither) you nor your fathers. Say: Allah; then leave them sporting in their vain discourses.

93 And this is a Book We have revealed, blessed, verifying that which is before it,^a and that *you may* warn the metropolis⁷⁹⁹ and those around her; and those who believe in the hereafter believe in it, and they attend to their prayers constantly.

94 And who is more unjust than he who forges a lie against Allah, or says: It has been revealed to me; while

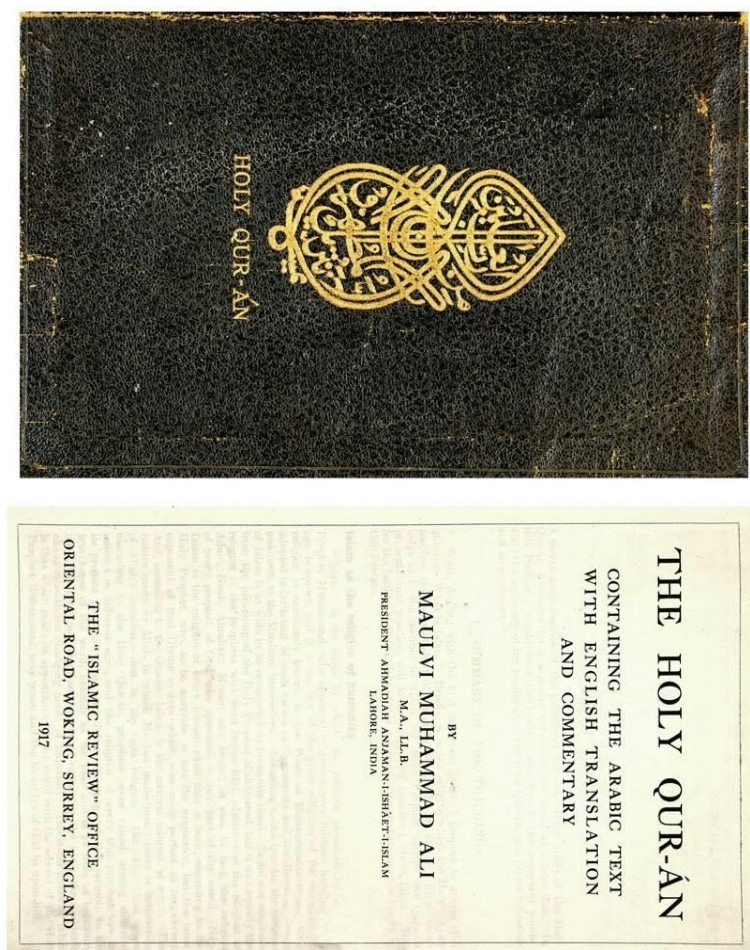
وَمَا قَدَرُوا اللَّهَ حَقَّ قَدْرِهِ إِذْ قَالُوا مَا
أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ عَلَى سَيِّدِنَا مِنْ شَيْءٍ قُلْ مَنْ
أَكْثَبُ الَّذِي جَاءَ بِهِ مُوسَى نُورًا
وَهَدًى لِلنَّاسِ يَجْعَلُونَ مِنْهُ الْقُرْآنَ
بُتْلُومًا وَيَخْفَوْنَ عَلَيْهِمْ وَإِلَيْهِمْ
مَأْتُهُمْ تَبْلُغُوا أَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ الْبَاقِرُ
قُلْ اللَّهُ تَعَالَى فِي خَوَائِهِمْ
يُلْعَبُونَ ○

وَهَذَا كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ مُبَارَكٌ مُصَدِّقُ
الَّذِي بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ وَلِتُنْذِرَ أُمَّ الْقُرَى
وَمَنْ حَوْلَهَا وَالَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْآخِرَةِ
يُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ وَهُمْ عَلَى صَلَاتِهِمْ
يَحْفَظُونَ ○
وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنِ افْتَرَى عَلَى اللَّهِ
كُنْ بَا أَوْ قَالَ أَوْحَى إِلَيْنِ

797 The word *qadr* has a variety of meanings. T'Ab interprets the words *وما قدروا الله* as meaning *they do not honour Allah with the honour due to Him*; Abul 'Alīya as *they do not assign to Allah the attributes due to Him*; and Akhfash as *they do not know Him as they ought to have known Him* (Rz). A denial of God's power to send revelation is a denial of the most important of His attributes. The reference here seems to be to the Jews, who, while believing a revelation to Moses, denied that to the Holy Prophet.

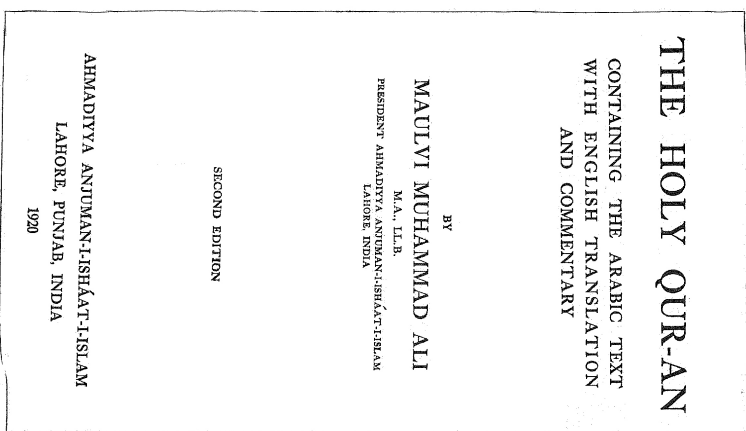
798 *Qurāṭis* is plural of *qirāṭ*, which means a *paper*. What is implied is that it is written down on scattered papers, some parts being shown, while others are concealed. The book was not kept intact, hence its description as *scattered writings*.

799 By the *metropolis* is meant *the people of the metropolis*. *Umm-ul-Qurā* is the title by which Mecca is known. Rz says there is a consensus of opinion that the *Umm-ul-qurā* is Mecca. Those, therefore, who suppose that this and the previous verse were revealed at Medina are mistaken. With such a clear reference to Mecca in this verse, the mere fact that the Jews and Moses are spoken of in the previous connecting verse cannot give rise to the conclusion that these verses were revealed at Medina. And to explain *Umm-ul-qurā* as meaning Medina is a blunder. The reason why Mecca is called *Umm-ul-qurā*, or the metropolis (lit. *the mother of the towns*), is not only that it was both the political and the spiritual centre of Arabia, but also because it was destined to be the universal spiritual centre—the real mother of the whole world.

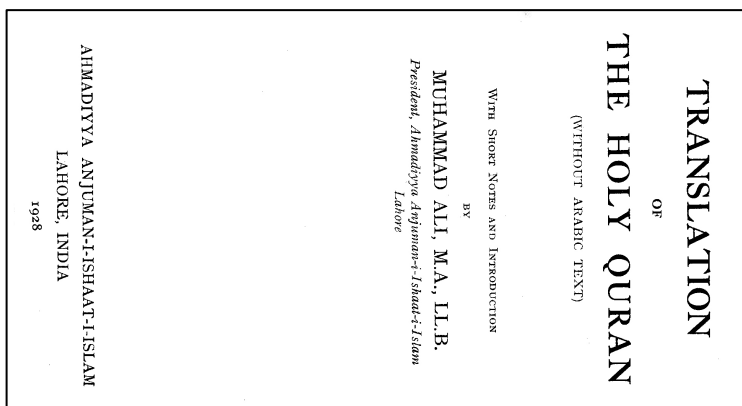


Photograph of the cover and title page of a copy of the first edition which belonged to a British soldier of the First World War. It is inscribed: 'B.W Addison' of Freckleton, Lancashire.

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Title page of the 1920 edition



Title page of the 1928 edition without Arabic text and short notes

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ARABIC TEXT, TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY

(Revised Edition)

By

MAULĀNĀ MUḤAMMAD 'ALĪ

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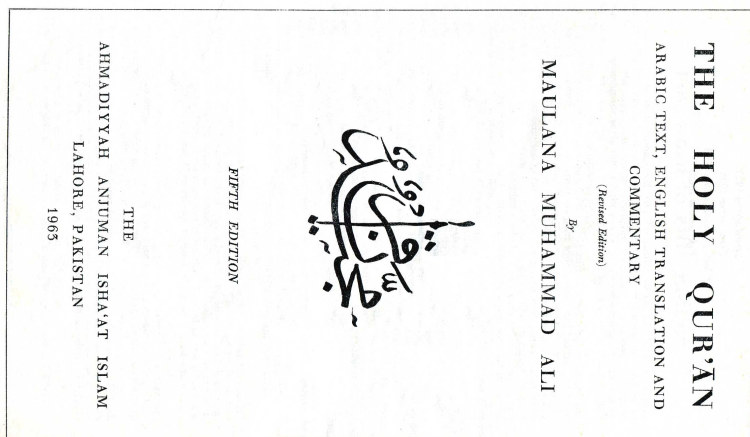
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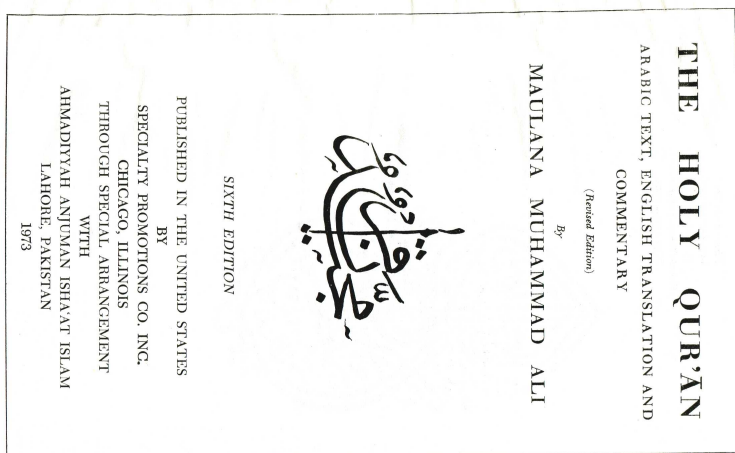
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25 Those who disbelieve and hinder (men) from Allāh's way and from the Sacred Mosque, which We have made equally for all men, (for) the dweller therein and the visitor.^a And whoever inclines therein to wrong, unjustly, We shall make him taste of painful chastisement.

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَيَصُدُّونَ عَنْ سَبِيلِ
اللَّهِ وَالْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ الَّذِي جَعَلْنَاهُ
لِلنَّاسِ سَوَاءً سَوَاءً الْعَاكِفُ فِيهِ وَالْبَادِ
وَمَنْ يُضِدِّ فِيهِ بِإِلْحَادٍ بِظُلْمٍ نُزِقْهُ
مِنْ عَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ۝

SECTION 4: Pilgrimage

26 And when We pointed to Abraham the place of the House, saying: Associate naught with Me, and purify My House for those who make circuits and stand to pray and bow and prostrate themselves.

وَإِذْ بَوَّأْنَا لِإِبْرَاهِيمَ مَكَانَ الْبَيْتِ
أَنْ لَا تُشْرِكَ بِي شَيْئًا وَطَهِّرْ بَيْتِيَ
لِلطَّائِفِينَ وَالْقَائِمِينَ وَالرُّكَّعِ السُّجُودِ ۝

27 And proclaim to men the Pilgrimage:^a they will come to thee on foot and on every lean camel, coming from every remote path:^b

وَادْعُ فِي التَّائِبِينَ بِالْحَجِّ يَأْتُوكَ رِجَالًا
وَعَلَى كُلِّ ضَامِرٍ يَأْتِينَ مِنْ كُلِّ
فَجٍّ عَسِيبٍ ۝

28 That they may witness benefits (provided) for them, and mention the

بَيِّنَاتٍ لِّمَن شَاءَ وَمِنْ أَفْئِدَةٍ رَّكْعًا
وَيَذْكُرُوا اسْمَ اللَّهِ فِي آيَاتِهِ مَقْلُوبَةً عَلَى مَآ

wear them, on which he praised the Almighty". The reason for 'Umar causing the bracelets to be worn by Surāqah is also given by the same authority in another report, according to which the Holy Prophet had said to Surāqah: "How wilt thou feel when thou wearest the bracelets of Kisrā?" (*Khaṣā' is al-Kubrā*, vol. ii, p. 113).

25a. Or, 'ākif may signify the dweller in Makkah, and bād, the dweller in the desert, or the two may respectively signify one who dwells in it constantly and one who comes to it occasionally. The disbelievers, being then in possession of the Sacred Mosque, prevented the Muslims from using it. They are told that this state of things will be brought to an end, for it must be open to all visitors, and that could only be brought about by the Muslims being made masters of it.

27a. The words are addressed to the Holy Prophet, and contain a mighty prophecy that Makkah will become the centre to which men will come for pilgrimage. It was announced just at the time when the Holy Prophet was being driven away from Makkah by his enemies, who were the sole masters of the place. Just when Makkah seemed to have lost every chance of becoming a Muslim centre, and when the Muslims themselves were in danger of being entirely destroyed, a mighty prophecy is announced in the most forcible words that Islām will spread to all countries of the world, and Makkah will become the universal centre to which pilgrims from all nations will resort.

27b. The lean camel is particularly mentioned here to indicate the great distances from which the pilgrims would come. The addition of the words from every remote path shows that people will come from the remotest parts of the earth.

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About this book



Maulana Muhammad Ali
(d. 1951)

This booklet is compiled at the centenary of the publication, in 1917 in England, of the English translation and commentary of the Quran by Maulana Muhammad Ali — **the first such work by a Muslim** to be printed and published in the West, the first such work by a Muslim to be widely available in the world.

It recounts the history of how the Maulana carried out this unprecedented project, its publication and the reviews it received. Its influence on later translations is discussed in detail. Maulana Muhammad Ali's thorough revision of it to produce the 1951 edition, is then covered. Information is also provided about editions produced after his death.

At the end, quotations are given from the writings of the Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, on the status of the Quran as God's final revealed book. These inspired Maulana Muhammad Ali and his Lahore Ahmadiyya community to concentrate on the work of making the Quran accessible to the world in various languages.