

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE QUR'AN ENGLISH VERSION OF TAFHIM AL-QUR'AN

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Mawlana Mawdudi's Tafhīm al-Qur'an (1942-1972) apart from being one of the most widely read works on tafsir in Urdu, is also the key to his life and mission. Since its earlier English translation *The meaning of the Qur'an* (Lahore, 1973-1988) left much to be desired, Zafar Ishaq Ansari and the Islamic Foundation, Leicester have done a commendable job in bringing out an excellent English version of this outstanding work. The Tafhīm al-Qur'an, based on fundamental beliefs of Islam, is a work of superb quality that sustains an intellectual and spiritual movement begun some two hundred years before by Shah Waliullah (1703-1762). Before him, study of the Qur'an had been the privilege and preserve of the 'Ulama. He turned against this tradition in order to revive Islam in the Indo-Pak subcontinent by launching the Qur'anic movement through his Rahimiyya Madrasa, founded by his father Shaikh 'Abd ar-Rahim (1644-1718). Shah Waliullah translated the Qur'an into Persian as early as 1737. His two sons, Rafi'ad-Din (1749-1817) and 'Abd al-Qadir (1753-1827) translations and commentaries appeared thereafter from Delhi, Lucknow and Hyderabad. The most popular was that of Shaikh al-Hind Mahmud Hasan (151-1920), published in 1933. His

commentary, as far as Surah Ni.sa' was completed by his disciple, Mawlana Shabbir Ahmad 'Uthmani (1887-1949).

Another popularly accepted tafsir (1908) was that of Mawlana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi (1863-1943) entitled Bayan al-Qur'an. Written in easy and simple Urdu, it corrected the mistranslations of Deputy Nazir Ahmad and of Mirza Hayat, and was praised by Mawlana Daryabadi (1892-1977) as the crown (taj) of all translations. Daryabadi used it as well as the translation of Shah Rafi'ad-Din for his own Tafsir Majidi which appeared in 1962.

A new era of translation and commentary was begun by Abut Kalam Azad (1889-1959). His Tarjuman al-Qur'an in 18 parts as far as Surah Mu'minun (1931) revolutionized Muslim thought and fired the enthusiasm of believers that only the Qur'an could remove the barriers of tribalism, racialism, communalism and unify mankind. The work was completed by Ghulam Rasul Mehr under the title of Baqiyat-e-Tarjuman al-Qur'an (3rd volume, Lahore, 1961, new editions in 1964-66). Syed Abdul Latif of Hyderabad translated this tafsir into English. Asad's translation is idiomatic and figurative with explanatory notes in brackets.

Mawdudi's Tafhim brought the translation and tafsir literature to its peak. The work spanned a lifetime's active commitment: Mawdudi believed in and projected Islam as a practicable way of life for all mankind. He rejected the division between religion and politics and like Shah Waliullah lived and died for the political revival of Islam. He founded Jama'at-i-Islami in 1941 and led it actively until 1972, when he retired on health grounds. His Jihad fil-Islam (1930) demolished the foundations of the Qadiyanis who, in league with the British, sought to abolish Jihad. His Urdu journal, Tarjuman al-Qur'an, launched in 1932, revolutionized the religio-cultural taste of the Muslims. Islam to him was no mere academic pursuit, nor a set of antiquated rituals; it was a dynamic way of life, fit for the whole of mankind. His penetrating criticism of Western culture opened the eyes of Muslim thinkers in India and abroad. The blueprint for an Islamic state which ranged from

transformation of the Muslims' general ideas to practical realities, developed from his insight into the Qur'an.

A reader of Tafhim will not fail to recognize that Mawdudi's Tafsir is a seminal work on Tafsir literature. Mawdudi has been remarkably successful in making the Qur'an relevant to the present-day human life, its concern and anxieties, its issues and problems, its fears and hopes. And yet in so doing he loses nothing of the timelessness of the Qur'an. What is all the more striking in this context is that Mawdudi accomplishes this task without abandoning the invaluable traditional understanding of the Qur'an as handed down by the Companions and succeeding generations of Muslim scholars. Far from bringing the traditional and the contemporary into any conflict, Tafhim represents an amalgam of the classical and the modern.

In Tafhim Mawdudi approaches the Qur'an mainly as a book of guidance (hidayah); he therefore presents the Qur'an as a living message. Not confined merely to an exposition of the legal injunctions and literary niceties of the Qur'an, Tafhim constantly invites the reader to the Qur'anic exhortation - 'run unto God and live in total submission to Him. This highly laudable effort to bring out and develop an understanding of the Qur'an as the only source of guidance in all spheres of human activity would certainly help the reader respond enthusiastically to the message of the Qur'an. For the Tafhim presents the-Qur'an as a book to be lived by, a mission to be lived for and a duty that the reader can no longer evade, or postpone.

In pursuance of the above aim, Mawdudi rightly emphasizes that the Qur'an is a book of an ideological movement. Apart from furnishing guidance to mankind through prescribing norms and commandments, the Qur'an invites the whole human race to embrace its world view,, organizes those who respond to this call into an ideological community and entrusts to this community the task of the socio-moral reconstruction of humanity, both individually and collectively. Through his copious notes Mawdudi brings home the point that the Qur'an constitutes a guide-book. This point is

corroborated rightly with reference to the career and mission of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). In sum, throughout Tafhīm Mawdūdī looks upon the Qurʾān as the guide-book for this movement of Islamic reconstruction.

For Mawdūdī the style and methodology of the Qurʾān are quite unique and distinct in that these reinforce its purpose and mission. Discussing extensively the subject matter, historical background and circumstantial setting of each Surah and the relationship between verses within each Surah, Mawdūdī points out how they are directed to the main objective of the Qurʾān - to develop a new consciousness of reality and to generate a new ideological movement. A sense of historical unity is achieved by linking all the Surahs to the progress of the Prophet's mission. The Tafhīm thus offers a new, convincing vision about the style and methodology of the Qurʾān.

Explanatory notes in Tafhīm, as explained by Khurshid Ahmad in the foreword, are functional and not merely ornamental in that apart from elucidating the import of the Qurʾān, supplemented with historical and other useful information, they highlight the relevance of a verse to injunctions. In these extensive notes Mawdūdī draws on the developments of modern knowledge, principles of historical criticism, comparative religion and contemporary ideologies. It is therefore no wonder that these notes go a long way in dispelling the doubts that agitate a modern-educated Muslim. Moreover, these notes bring out in full the Qurʾānic world view, along with the suggestion how it can be translated into the reality of the present time.

No doubt, Tafhīm represents a revivalist and revolutionary trend in Tafsīr literature. Far from taking liberties with the Word of God or equating the Qurʾānic concepts to modern ideologies, it is characterized by respect for tradition. It stands out pre-eminently as a call for a purposive change in the heart and life of its readers, directing them to the Way of God in total surrender.

The Tafhīm was written in fluent, modern Urdu, accessible to all. Zafar Ishaq Ansari has remarkably succeeded in rendering Mawdudi's Urdu version with a fluency and accessibility in English which matches that of the original. The first, immediate benefit will be to expel the misconceptions, distortions, deviations and erratic judgements, committed by the contemporary English translators of the Qur'an, such as Muhammad Asad, Muhammad Ali Lahori, and others, whether conformist or non-conformist.

The two volumes that have so far appeared are excellent in style and format. The first volume covers Surahs al-Fatihah, al-Baqarah and Al'Imrah. The second volume contains Surahs al-Nisa', al-Ma'idah and al-An'am. Both volumes have maps, and, uniquely, a glossary of terms, biographical notes: and bibliography not included in the Urdu original. The subject and general index serve as virtually a concordance for these surahs of the Qur'an.

Adequate documentation both from other scriptural literature and from the Hadith are also provided. Ansari has followed the system of A.J. Wensinck in his Hadith concordance. Biblical citations are from the Revised Standard Edition. Thus the translation can rightly claim to be regarded as the most standard and authentic English version now available. It has, along with the translation, the Arabic text, signally missing in several English translations, including that of T.B. Irving (1985). The Arabic text and not the translation is the 'Revealed' Book. Unlike the Bible, which comprises only translation in any language of the world, the Qur'an proper is in Arabic alone. Ansari has avoided the misleading innovations into which other modern English versions have lapsed, and adhered, with sound good taste, to classical traditions. Muhammad Asad, in the introduction to his translation, suggested three directives to translators of the Qur'an, to avoid erratic judgements in choice of interpretation. He advises the translator to follow the meaning of each Arabic word as it was used and understood in the time of the Prophet, for many words have since undergone semantic change. The translator should follow the balaghah and i'jaz of the Qur'anic style and not translate literally, else he would lose the force of the original and destroy its

organic unity and thematic development. Finally, the translator should understand the terms of the Qur'an as they were understood at the time of the Revelation. Unfortunately, Asad himself has not followed these criteria in that he has departed from common translations of many words. His translations of words such as al-Aya as message (ar-Risala), of Taghu(as forces of evil, of jinn merely as 'invisible', of Tabut as Qalb (heart), etc, are innovations. The denial of the miracles of the Qur'an by Asad has led him to deviate from orthodox beliefs of the ahl-as-sunna wa al-jama'a. Consequently he has translated many Arabic words against the accepted linguistic usage of the Arabs. The descent of the angels on the Day of Badr, according to Asad, is metaphorical or allegorical and not actual. It was spiritual expression in order to strengthen the hearts of the Muslims. The miracles of Jesus, according to Asad, were also metaphorical (tamthil Maazji). According to him, he cured people who were sick spiritually and not physically diseased. In other words he revived the spiritually dead. Above all Asad believes in the death of Jesus and not in his physical Ascension. Such misconceptions spread by the contemporary translators among the English reading public, are refuted in this English translation of Mawdudi's Tafhim al-Qur'an.

Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, a leading English translator of the Qur'an, did not deny either the miracles of the Qur'an or the existence of jinns or the angels as creation of God. His translation has inspired many orthodox Muslim translators including Yusuf Ali and 'Abd al-Majid Darybadi as they themselves have acknowledged. Uniquely Pickthall does not use 'God' because it does not correspond to the Arabic 'Allah'. Ansari, however, has translated 'Allah' as 'God'. Pickthall's choice remains more sound. There are many differences between Ansari's and Yusuf Ali's approach. The latter preferred blank verse with many archaisms and difficult turns of syntax; Ansari's has stuck to clear, modern English prose. Yusuf Ali does not translate the Arabic word 'Rabb' as 'Lord' because of its association in all Western languages with 'Lord Jesus', and has opted for 'Sustainer and Cherisher' which more clearly denotes the attributes meant by the Arabic

‘Rabb’. Ansari has translated Rabb al-Alamin as ‘Lord of the entire Universe’. The approach of Yusuf Ali seems to us more reliable.

The impact of this English translation will weigh most against the heretics and non-conformists. The Qadiyani translation have, in league with the colonial powers, misguided the Muslim Ummah, Ghulam Ahmad Pervez, Mirza Bashir Ahmad (the son of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad) and Muhammad Ali Lahori are among these misguiders. Khawaja Kamal ad-Din wrote his tafsir to prove the industrial and technological revolution in Europe; he interpreted dukhan (smoke) and hadid (iron) as symbolizing Western industrial culture. he interpreted the haraka (movement) as air service, etc. Such absurdities baffled both the Orientalists as well as Muslim scholars.

Muhammad Ali Lahori’s deviations also merit mention. He is a Qadiyani-style reformist. He first projected and amplified the death of Jesus in order to justify the claim of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad to the Prophethood. The existence of angels and jinns was denied by him. They, according to him, symbolize the forces of good (khair), (or the will of God) and the forces of evil (sharr) respectively. Paradise is not real; it signifies the pleasure of God and Hell His wrath, Muhammad Ali, like Asad, rejected the mu’jizat (miracles) and strained Arabic grammar to justify his point. It is against such unorthodoxies that the Tafsir al-Qur’an, now accessible in good, clear English, must be welcomed for its restoration of the paramountcy of the Holy Book. Ansari has translated the ashab al-Janna as ‘people of the garden’ and ashab al-jahim as ‘people of the blazing flame’: nothing could be more unequivocal.

The possible variations in translating even a single ayah of the Qur’an, the danger of thereby misleading the readers, even unintentionally, let alone intentionally, are very great. It is urgent that the learned men and women of the Ummah devise a set of guidelines by which translators could keep their work on the right path. In the meantime, we have the first two volumes of

this excellent and most reliable translation into English of Mawlana Mawdudi's great work.

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