

Interview with Seyyed Hossein Nasr¹

Enes Karić*

Bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīm

This article contains Mr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr's answers to a series of questions posed by Dr. Enes Karić from the University of Sarajevo about the *Study Qur'ān*², a book that we are currently preparing.

1. *Dear Professor Nasr: I was delighted when I discovered that you have been translating the Qur'ān for some time now. Let us start with the very important topic of the translatability of the Qur'ān. Some people hold the view that the Qur'ān cannot be (permanently) translated, but that it must instead be translated on an ongoing basis: as God's speech in its eternity reaches us in our human temporariness. The reception of the Qur'ān is never final and finished. Please tell us about your experience translating the Qur'ān.*

Of course, the *Study Qur'ān* is not only a translation of the Qur'ān, but is also a commentary which contains explanatory essays which will accompany the text. As far as translation is concerned, from one point of view, the Qur'ān is not "translatable". This is because it was revealed in the Arabic language and brought with it an element of finality as far as the form in which God wanted to have His last revelation revealed to humanity is concerned. This "form" cannot be completely translated into any other language, or even into, let us say, contemporary Arabic. In addition to its many levels of meaning, the form in which the Qur'ān was revealed is part and parcel of the revelation of the Qur'ān. Therefore, every translation of the Qur'ān implies by definition a certain amount of interpretation. This is true even of ordinary works such as masterpieces of literature. If a play of Shakespeare is translated into Bosnian, it is not going to be "identical" with the original Shakespearean language. However, the difference between the original and the translated document is even greater in the case of sacred texts, especially as regards the text of the Qur'ān, in which the language employed conveys structure layers of vertical meaning which are not completely translatable – in fact, are hardly translatable at all – into other languages that human beings speak.

One cannot say that the Qur'ān can only be understood if it is translated on an ongoing basis. It is not an ongoing revelation that is not yet complete. The Qur'ān itself remains a permanent, immutable text. However, it must be constantly interpreted. You must be able to interpret it today, even if you are an Arabic speaker, in light of our contemporary under-

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² This work is now being prepared by myself as chief editor together with Joseph Lumbard, Maria Dakake and Caner Dagli as editors. The work is to be published by Harper in 2012.

standing of the world around us, of reality, of religion, and of our usage of language. One cannot say that the reception of the Qur'ān is never final or finished. The reception of the Qur'ān from one point of view is final and was finished when the last verse was revealed to the Prophet. And so one cannot take away from the text of the Qur'ān its finality. However, the meaning it gives to those who read it and who hear it is inexhaustible. It comes from the Divine Reality, which is infinite. The Word of God, therefore, is such that its understanding is not finite and limited. It is meant to be understood by human beings of all generations, and of all places.

In translating the text of the Qur'ān, we were fully aware of all of these realities, and we of course do not claim that our or any other translation has the finality of the original Arabic. This would be actually impudent and sacrilegious, to put it mildly. It would be a theological sin to make such a claim. What we hope is that ours will be a translation that captures as much as possible both the meaning and literary characteristics of the text of the Qur'ān in a contemporary English idiom which can also be understood by our contemporaries. At the same time, we also hope to capture as much as possible the elegance of Qur'ānic language, whilst not betraying the literal meaning of the text of the Qur'ān. This is a very difficult task, precisely because of the nature of the language of Qur'ānic Arabic itself, which is a Semitic language different in structure from, let us say, the English language, which is an Indo-European language. Also, many terms in the Qur'ān have levels of meaning for which there is not a single equivalent in English. So of course the translation of the Qur'ān is an extremely humbling experience and one in which one can never be perfect.

2. *The English language is nowadays increasingly used in Islamic and Muslim books, movies, etc. However, the role of the English language as an Islamic language is a very short one, especially when compared to languages such as Persian or Turkish. Please tell us how you cope with the possibilities of translating lisān 'arabiyy mubīn into English.*

You are right, the history of the usage of the English language as an Islamic language is a short one. A process took place through which, let us say, the Persian language, the second most important language of Islamic civilization, or Turkish, or Urdu, or Swahili, or Bengali, or all the other Islamic languages became Islamic languages; that is, they began to become impregnated by the values of Islam, and often by vocabulary drawn from the Arabic of the Qur'ān. These terms became part and parcel of those languages. To translate the Qur'ān and other Islamic texts into English is, in a sense, another step in making the English language also an Islamic language. Some people have said that the majority of those who speak English are not Muslims and have therefore questioned how English can become a Muslim language. This is true as far as Muslims being a minority among English speakers is concerned but that in itself does not prevent English from also becoming an Islamic language. Look at the Bengali language: the majority of people who spoke Bengali even after the 14th century, when part of Bengal became Islamic, were not Muslim; they were Hindus. Nevertheless, within the context of the Bengali world a Bengali usage of Islamic themes, its literature, its worldview, its religious views, and other aspects of the revelation developed which gradually transformed the Bengali language into an Islamic language. At the same time, the vast number of Hindus, who were previously a majority

and are perhaps even today, if not a majority, at least as numerous as the Muslims in the Bengali speaking world continued to use Bengali as a vehicle for the culture of Hinduism.

Therefore, this type of criticism is not acceptable. We are in the middle of a process whereby the English language is also developing into a major Islamic language. Whether this process is accelerated by the accelerated pace of history itself, or whether it will take a long time for this task to be accomplished is another question that I cannot deal with here. But there is no doubt that the process is underway, and every translation that is made of the Qur'ān into the English language is an important step in making this language, that is, the English language, also an Islamic language in the same way that those other languages of the Islamic world like Persian and Turkish became Islamic languages.

3. *Now we come to the question regarding the rich tradition of the interpretation of the Qur'ān, and its relation to the translation of the Qur'ān. As a translator of the Qur'ān into Bosnian, I have become aware that any translation of the Qur'ān is actually an interpretation of the holy book. Sometimes it is impossible to translate some parts of the Qur'ān without al-Zamaḥṣari's commentary, that is to say, without tafsīr. Do you agree that when translating the Qur'ān, the holy book must also be interpreted?*

As I already said, yes, the translation of the Qur'ān always implies an interpretation of what the Qur'ānic Arabic is saying. In our case, we have also made full use of the whole spectrum of Islamic commentaries, from linguistic and historical ones, to theological and legal ones, to mystical, theosophical and Sufi ones, and everything else. Yes, it is extremely important to pay attention to the long tradition of traditional commentary – I do not mean many of these modern commentaries that have appeared during the last century and a half in the Islamic world, but traditional commentaries – in order to situate and understand, and therefore to translate particular passages of the Qur'ān.

4. *The translation of the Qur'ān can be diachronical (taking examples for the interpretation of the book from history) and it can be synchronical (for example, the period of time we are living in may be used to help us to understand and to translate the Qur'ān). Of course, a combination of these two approaches is also possible. Please tell us which approach you have taken to translating and interpreting the Qur'ān.*

To start with, not just the Qur'ān, but also other revealed texts have two aspects to them: One is a particular concrete situation. When a particular verse or chapter of the scripture is revealed, it is often in relation to a particular event or situation; this is called *sha'n al-nuzūl* in traditional Qur'ānic studies. These conditions must be always brought out. However, by virtue of the touching of Heaven and earth in revelation, something which at first appears to be a temporal event, which was the occasion for the revelation of a particular verse, also has a significance beyond the particular moment in time and space in which the verse was revealed. Further to this, the significance of the verse itself transcends the occasion of its revelation. In all of our commentaries, we first attempt to clarify the conditions under which particular verses of the Qur'ān were revealed. We then make an effort to bring out the significance beyond the confines of the particular situation that occasioned the verse to be revealed to the Prophet.

5. *Now we come to Sufi themes contained in the translation of the Qur'ān. You are known as a great authority and a master in Sufism. Shall we have a hue of Sufi readings and interpretation of the Qur'ān in your translation?*

The answer is of course yes. However, please let me elucidate this answer. First of all, what became crystallized as Sufism in Islamic history is an inner reality which was contained in the Qur'ān from the very beginning. It involves the inner meaning of the Qur'ān, the study of which many people interpret as being *ta'wīl al-Qur'ān* rather than *tafsīr al-Qur'ān* when it came to commenting upon the Sacred Text. Therefore, Sufi readings, as you call them, or interpretations, run throughout the Qur'ān. Moreover, there are verses that are more specifically esoteric and metaphysical and which cannot be understood without reference to the teachings of what came to be known as Sufism in Islamic civilization and tradition. We have tried, of course, to be aware of these verses and to bring out their inner meaning. We have also attempted to bring out the metaphysical and spiritual meaning or dimension of verses which have been interpreted in a variety of different ways, i.e. as regards their legal, moral and ethical, social, or political meanings.

6. *Referring back to the previous questions, to what extent is it possible to bring the message of the famous theosophical commentators of the Qur'ān to the front of the English translation of the Qur'ān in the knowledge that the English language has been subject to various secular influences throughout its existence? By these theosophical commentaries, I mean the ones by Mullā Sadrā, Šīrāzī and similar ones.*

This is not very far removed from question five. It is true that the English language has become secularized through the very process of development of modern civilization, where one of the major languages spoken and written was obviously English, and the difficulty you mention also holds true for other interpretations of the Qur'ān. However, I and those people who work with me on this project – all of who are either current or former students of mine and share a single 'worldview' which embraces what you call 'theosophical commentaries' – attempt to bring out when possible the meanings of these 'theosophical commentaries' as well as other spiritual, legal, or historical meanings contained in the text.

7. *I have advised people for many years now on how the Qur'ān might best be translated into the Slovenian language. In the Republic of Slovenia there is a Bosniak minority whose children speak Slovenian. We have encountered a problem: how to write names of some Biblical prophets: Yusuf or Joseph; Musa or Moses; Maryam or Mary. Therefore, I would like to ask your opinion on solving a socio-linguistic problem, since the Muslims of the Balkans shy from reading the Qur'ān if the names of these personages are not written as they are pronounced by Muslims.*

My advice in this case is to write the Arabic form of the name with the Slovenian form in parentheses, because the readers of your translation into Slovenian are not only going to be Bosniaks living in Slovenia, but also non-Muslim Slovenians. It is also important to identify these names in the form that people know them, some of which are strange to general readers in their Arabic form. For a Western audience, it is extremely important to be able to identify them as names which are in most cases household names and are very familiar to those acquainted with Christianity and of course the Bible.

8. *All of us dealing with the translation and interpretation of the Qur'ān are aware of the danger of scientifying and modernizing its message. We are of course aware that your translation does not adopt this approach. However, what can you tell us about the large number of 20th century translations of the Qur'ān that adopted a scientifying approach to translating the Qur'ān?*

First of all, let me make it clear again that our *Study Qur'ān* is not only a translation but also a commentary, and we have excluded in principle all but traditional understandings and commentaries of the Qur'ān. We have excluded completely the modernistic ones, whether they are scientific or not. As for the so-called *al-tafsīr al-'ilmī* or scientific interpretations of the Qur'ān, I consider them to be really very dangerous exercises which have already done a great deal of harm to Islamic intellectual life. The majority of these works have been composed by men who neither had a deep understanding of the philosophy of modern science nor of the Qur'ān. These men “dated” the message of the Qur'ān by identifying it with certain scientific theories or data that, while being acceptable at the time in which they were composing their scientific interpretations, are now dismissed by modern scientists. Just look at Iskandarānī's work today, over a century and a half after it was composed. I believe that this kind of scientism is something that should be avoided completely, and I have written extensively about this matter in other places. For Muslims, the Qur'ān contains the roots of all authentic knowledge, but that does not mean that it is a “scientific text”, or that we can prove the validity of the Qur'ān by showing that this verse refers to this scientific discovery, that verse to some other scientific discovery. This is something absurd, because the Qur'ān is the immutable Word of God, and scientific theories and ideas come and go. This kind of exercise comes from a kind of intellectual inferiority complex, which many Muslims have unfortunately had since the advent of the dominion of colonial powers over the Islamic world in the 19th century.

9. *You yourself spoke in your earlier works about the reception of the Qur'ān by eye (calligraphy), by ear (reciting of the Qur'ān), and by mind (interpretation of the Qur'ān). In relation to numerous translations of the Qur'ān, can we speak about a special reception of the Qur'ān through translations into various languages?*

The two parts of your question do not really connect together very clearly with each other. Let us initially turn to the first part: yes, I believe that the Qur'ān is and has been received through the eye, through the ear and through the mind, as you put it. In sura 32, *as-sağda* v. 9, the Qur'ān itself says, in reference to man's creation by God, “Then He fashioned them, and breathed into them His Spirit, and endowed you with hearing, sight, and hearts” (the heart being the organ associated with knowledge). The Qur'ān addresses all of these faculties with which God endowed man. However, the various translations of the Qur'ān in different languages cannot add anything to the first two faculties, and can thus in reality only address the third faculty, i.e. that which is understood by the mind, which grasps words, phrases, and sentences and tries to gain meaning from them. You can neither use Qur'ānic calligraphy for a translation into a language that uses the Latin alphabet, let us say English or French, nor can you recite the Qur'ān in a liturgical and sacred sense except as it was revealed in the Arabic language. Therefore, reception through the eye and the ear is confined almost in its entirety to the Qur'ān in its original Arabic form. However, the

third part, that is, the interpretation of the Qur'ān by the mind, is where the work of the translator and commentator comes in. The translator should try to introduce the mind of the reader to the meaning that the Qur'ān is seeking to convey. In addition, the reason, or at least one of the reasons why the Qur'ān can never be fully translated, is because the reception of the Qur'ān by the eye, through beautiful recitation or through the ear can only be reproduced in a translation where, in a calligraphic sense, the language into which the Qur'ān is being translated uses the Arabic alphabet. The reception of the Qur'ān through not only the mind but also the eye and the ear is possible only in the original revealed form of the revelation.

10. *What can the Qur'ān tell us in today's world, in an age in which on the one hand the machine is increasingly suppressing the prayer, but on the other hand many are predicting that the machine will win only a Pyrrhic victory? Who is the true listener of the message of the Qur'ān today?*

The first point to make here is that the Qur'ān can say to us today what it has said to every generation. This is because questions as to the meaning of life and death, of good and evil, of the nature of the world, of the structure of reality and especially those pertaining to the nature of the Divine Reality, together with many other issues are in fact perennial and exist for each generation. These things are of as much significance to us today as they were in days of old. The usage of the machine – to type or to produce the Qur'ān or to enable people to listen to it through various kinds of recordings, etc. – do not change that truth at all. There are, however, issues that concern us specifically today, let us say global warming or the pollution of the natural world. There are verses of the Qur'ān that refer to man causing corruption on the earth, *fasād*. These contain messages that are very pertinent to such problems that are specific to us. In previous generations, the destruction of nature was not a significant problem, because man did not have the power to really “corrupt” the natural world in the way that we can do so today. Therefore, yes, there are places where specific problems of our times have to be searched for in applications, or new applications of meanings of certain Qur'ānic verses to our specific condition. Nevertheless, the more profound condition of being human has not really changed that much. The Qur'ān addresses a permanent element in the condition of human nature, an element that is in a sense specific to every generation while being at the same time universal and pertinent to all generations of human beings.

11. *How do you endeavor to overcome the differing understandings and interpretations of the holy book held by differing sections of the Muslim public when translating the Qur'ān? How do you seek to present a singular interpretation of the Qur'ānic message in the context of these differences?*

This, of course, is a major problem that cannot be solved in such a way that all critics will be silenced. That is not going to happen. Throughout Islamic history there have been different schools of thought, various limited understandings or what you call sectarian interpretations of the Qur'ān, different schools of theology, of *kalām*, of course of Islamic Law, wherein certain legal verses have been interpreted in different ways by different *madāhib*, etc. That is an unavoidable historical as well as present day reality. Therefore, what we have tried to do is to be completely non-sectarian, and have sought to use the full spectrum

of Islamic thought in bringing out the meaning of various verses. Where there are differences among various traditional schools concerning particular verses, we try to allude to that fact, and state that different interpretations are made by various traditional schools.

12. *There is a resurgent tendency for a stylistic translation and interpretation of the Qur'ān. Its proponents rely on the issue of i'ğāz. How far could a stylistic translation of the Qur'ān go in relation to the meaning and the message contained in the holy book?*

I do not quite understand what you mean by “stylistic translation”. Every translation uses a particular style, a particular literary style. What we have tried to do is to remain as close to the meaning, the literal meaning, of the text as possible, while opening in the commentary, again to the extent to which this is possible, the inner or symbolic meaning of those very verses that are translated literally. We have also tried to remain as close to the style of the original within the possibilities of the English language, all of whose resources we have attempted to use. This is something which is very difficult to achieve in all the cases with which one is involved, but it can be done to a large extent.

13. *It is well known that while the Qur'ān is often quoted and cited in the Western media, it is rarely truly read. How can your translation enhance the dialogue between diverse and diverging groups and religions?*

To start with, it is important to state that books, even ‘ordinary’ ones, do not make an impact unless they are read. We are hoping that this new *Study Qur'ān* will bring out many of the meanings of the Sacred Text for people who would not be able to reach these inner meanings by simply reading one of the translations currently available in the English language. In addition, we believe that ours is the first to make full use of the whole spectrum of traditional Qur'ānic commentaries to bring out the inner meaning of the verses, and in fact even the outer meaning of many verses which may appear to be enigmatic (the *mutašābihāt*). Moreover, throughout our work we have emphasized in those verses of the Qur'ān which refer to other religions, the universality of revelation and prophethood and so forth; we have sought to bring out fully the universal message of the Qur'ān. We have sought to bring out how the Qur'ān itself, if read correctly, is a most important source for coming to understand other religions. We believe that in doing so, we shall attract many more people who are not Muslims who read in English to the study of the Sacred Text.

14. *You have been the leading Islamic intellectual for almost three decades now. Your works are read and translated, and you are the man who has returned dignity to Islamic studies. Is your translation one of the peaks of your work?*

Let me start by saying ‘*astagfir Allāh*’ in the traditional sense of “I ask pardon unto God”. My work is too humble to be considered the peak of anything. However, as far as my own writings are concerned, for fifty years I have written about various aspects of Islamic thought, religion, Sufism, Islamic philosophy, art and science, as well as comparative religion, universal metaphysics, the environmental crisis, etc. I did not and still do not consider myself to be a specialist in Qur'ānic studies. However, the hands of destiny put me in a place where I had to accept the chance of becoming the chief editor of this major work. I hope that if, God willing, I am given the strength by Him to finish this task with the help of

my co-editors, it will be certainly one of the most important achievements of my life. And let us hope that God will accept this service, and that the work can be of help to people not only in the West, but also to many modern educated Muslims who are cut off from the message of the traditional Qur'ānic commentaries. These commentaries have helped Muslims to understand the meaning of the Qur'ān, which was their supreme guide over the centuries and continues to be so today.