

Critical Study of Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah's French Qur'ānic Translation

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah (1908--2002) was a great Islāmic scholar who published his works in the field of Qur'ānic sciences, ḥadith, sīrah and Islāmic jurisprudence. He was a polyglot who wrote in several Eastern as well as Western languages. He spent long time in Paris and thus developed command over French language. He rendered the Holy Qur'ān into French for French speaking world and published it under title "Le Saint Coran". This article discusses some merits of this translation under sub-headings like an idiomatic translation, avoiding use of brackets in translation, lucidity of language, strict adherence to actual meaning of Arabic words, a translation in pure French, great concern for translating the words related to Allah and His messengers, scientific translation of the verses pertaining to science. Dr. Hamidullah has also added concise footnotes wherein he has referred to Hadith literature, biography of the Prophet (upon whom be peace and greeting) and earlier scriptures etc. On the whole, it is considered as the best rendition of the Holy Qur'ān in French language and Muslim scholars have highly appreciated it.

Keywords: *Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah, Qur'ānic Sciences, "Le Saint Coran", Western Languages, Polyglot.*

Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah (1908-2002) was a great Islāmic scholar and intellectual who was born at Ḥyderabad Deḡan. He passed his B.A., LL.B. and M.A. examinations in first division from Osmānia University Ḥyderabad. He obtained his Ph.D. from Bonn University (Germany) in 1933 and D.Litt. from Sorbonne University Paris (France) the next year. He was also awarded doctoral degree by Osmānia University. He taught at his alma mater for some time and then served as ambassador of Ḥyderabad state at Paris. After occupation of Hyderabad by India, he lived and worked at Paris. He

remained a visiting Professor in the University of Istanbul and also worked for long time as a researcher in Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris.¹ Apart from his mother tongue, Urdū, he had mastered oriental languages including 'Arābic, Persian and Turkish. He was skilled in a number of western languages such as English, French, German and Italian.² In these languages, he wrote many scholarly books and edited manuscripts on various aspects of Islāmics. He was particularly adept in French language and one of the lasting monuments of his scholarship is his translation of the Holy Qur'ān into French entitled "*Le Saint Coran*".³ This article seeks to study this translation in some detail.

Some writers like 'Abdul Qādir Hasan⁴, Dr. Muhammad 'Abdullah⁵ and Dr. Zahoor Ahmad Azhar⁶ have erroneously told of Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah as the first French translator of the Holy Qur'an. Sayyid Rizwan 'Ali Nadwi⁷ thinks "*Le Saint Coran*" is the foremost French translation by a Muslim scholar. Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah has himself told about 25 Quranic translations before him in his Urdū article on "French Translations of the Holy Qur'ān".⁸ No doubt, most of them are incomplete, unpublished and even not available today. However, eight of these are complete and have been published before Dr. Hamidullah's translation. Professor 'Abdul Qayyum has mentioned 22 French translations in his article in Urdū Encyclopaedia of Islām.⁹ Jamil Naqvi has enumerated six translations published prior to Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah's *Le Saint Coran*.¹⁰ Muhammad 'Abdullah Minhas has enumerated chronologically nine French translations of the Holy Qur'ān published between 1647 to 1926.¹¹ The foremost complete translation of the Holy Qur'an was published by Andrae du Ryer in 1647 under the title "*L'Alcoran de Mahomet*".¹² This translation was printed 312 years before Dr. Hamidullah's translation. The first English translation by Alexander Ross was actually the translation of the first French translation of du Ryer that was published in 1649.¹³ Besides this, Claude Etienne Savary published "*Le Coran*" in 1783, Albert de Bibestein Kasimirski "*Le Koran*" in 1832, Edouerd Louis Montet's "*Le Coran*" in 1929 and Regis Blachere's "*Le Coran*" (3 volumes) in 1946-51.¹⁴ Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah has mentioned two French translations by Muslim scholars as well. Two Algerian Muslims, Ahmed Laimeche and B. Ben-Daoud, published "*Le Coran lecture par excellence*" from Algeria and Octave Pesle and Ahmed Tidgani published a French rendition of the Qur'an from Paris in 1928.¹⁵ So, it can be

said with certainty that Hamidullah was neither the first to render the Holy Qur'an into French nor the first Muslim French translator. Later on, Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah has given a list of 70 French translations in the preface of "Le Saint Coran" under the title "*Liste des Transductions du Coran en Langues Europeenes.*"

There is another misconception about Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah that he translated the Holy Qur'an in many languages. He himself called it ridiculous in a letter addressed to a Pakistani friend that he was rendering the Qur'an in many languages.¹⁶ Besides French, he has not published complete Quranic translation in any other language. He wrote in the preface of his brother Muhammad Habibullah's "*Tafsir Habibi*" that his English exegesis appeared in a journal "*al-Hadi al-Amin*" published from Durban(South Africa) from 1960 to 1965 wherein he has completed first two chapters----- *al-Fatiha* and approximately to the end of *al-Baqarah*.¹⁷ He has translated the Holy Qur'an into German languages up to *Surah al-An'am* (six parts) as he told Mazhar Mumtaz Quraishi.¹⁸ He has also told the reason of giving up the German translation of the Holy Qur'an. At this stage, he engaged himself in the French rendition of Shah Wali Allah's "*Hujjat Allah al-Balighah*"¹⁹ that was given priority. The misunderstanding of his translations in many Western languages was created by some writers as he has compiled a bibliography of Quranic translations published in different languages. Later on, he included such information in the preface of "Le Saint Coran" as told earlier.

The French translation of the Qur'an was carried out by Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah in collaboration with a French scholar M. Leturmy who took care of the literary aspect of the translation. However, Dr. Hamidullah took enormous pains to ensure that in the process of improving the literary presentation, the quality of the translation was not compromised and it was not affected in any way. The work was begun in August 1957 and published on November 1, 1959. The actual work of translation was accomplished in one year.²⁰ It also contains some exegetical notes that would be discussed later. The translation and notes cover 618 pages besides a detailed and useful introduction consisting of about one hundred pages (89 pages in 1985 edition and 102 in 1989 edition). The introduction consists of the following important headings:

- *Auteur Du Coran* (Author of the Qur'an)
- *Révélation* (Revelation)

- *Le Coran et Le Hadith, ou Sunna* (The Qur'an and the Hadith or Sunnah)
- *Les Styles du Coran et la Bible* (Styles of the Qur'an and the Bible)
- *Le Contenu du Coran* (Contents of the Qur'an)
- *Références Aux Israelities* (References to Israelities)
- *Conception Coranique de la Vie* (The Qur'anic concept of life)
- *La Femme Dans le Coran* (Woman in the Qur'an)
- *L'esclavage* (Slavery)
- *Esquisse de la vie de Muhammad dans le Cadre des Données Coraniques* (Sketch of the Life of Muhammad in the light of the Qur'anic data)
- *Histoire de la Rédaction du Coran* (History of the Compilation of the Qur'an)
- *L'ordre des Versets des Chapitres* (The arrangement of the verses and the chapters)
- *L'écriture* (Script)
- *Traduction du Certificat obtenu par l'auteur* (Translation of the Certificate obtained by the author)
- *L'orthographe* (Spellings)
- *La grammaire* (Grammar)
- *La Transmission et la Conservation du texte* (The transmission and preservation of the text)
- *Question de L'abrogation* (Question of abrogation)
- *La Récitation du Coran* (Recitation of the Qur'an)
- *Histoire de la Traduction du Coran* (History of the Qur'anic translations)
- *Liste des Traductions du Coran en Langues Européennes* (Translations of the Qur'an in European Languages)
- *Index des Traducteurs* (Translators' Index)

Reason for Publishing a New Translation:

Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah has mentioned the reason of translating the Holy Qur'an. By quoting the translation of verse LXIII: 4 by Savary, Kasimirski and Blachere, he has proved that these translators misunderstood and mistranslated the verse.

Dr. Hamidullah has mentioned the following merits of his translation:

1. Each verb has been rendered into French by same word.
2. Appropriate equivalents have been used for metaphors which have been explained in footnotes.

3. Biblical references have been quoted about the personalities mentioned in the Qur'an as well.
4. Effort has been made to remain close to Arabic syntax and the Qur'anic style.²¹

Salient Features of the Translation:

Some of the characteristics of Dr. Hamidullah's translation of the Holy Qur'an are discussed below:

1. An Idiomatic Translation:

The translations of the Holy Qur'an hitherto published in different languages can be classified in the following categories:

- i. Literal translations
- ii. Idiomatic translations

Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah's rendition is idiomatic because such translation can easily be comprehended by the readers and it is more beneficial than a highly literal translation.

2. Use of Brackets in Translation:

Each language has different sentence structure and vocabulary. Arabic is an ancient and rich language and Western languages lag behind it in vocabulary and eloquence. Sometimes, the translators have to add some words to complete a sentence. In Urdu and English translations some additional words are used so that the reader may make sense of the translation. To differentiate the original translation from such additional words, the latter are put in brackets. In English translations, 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali²², Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall²³, Muhammad Asad²⁴, Muhammad 'Ali²⁵ and Prof. Shah Farid ul Haque²⁶ have used brackets because the words bracketed have no equivalents in the text. Dr. Hamidullah's French translation of the Holy Qur'an does not contain brackets. If he wants to add some words to complete a sentence or to elucidate the meaning, he writes explanatory notes. For instance, the first word of *Surah al-Ikhlās* "Qul" has been rendered into "Dis" but in footnote, Dr. Hamidullah has added "Dis O Muhammad"²⁷ to elaborate the addressee in this verse.

3. Lucidity of the Language:

Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah's Language in the "*Le Saint Coran*" is very lucid. He has used contemporary idiom so that his readers can completely comprehend the meanings of the Holy Qur'an. He has avoided the usage of ancient language and obsolete words.

4. Strict Adherence to the Actual Meaning of Arabic Words:

The translator of the "*Le Saint Coran*" had full command over Arabic language. He was also skilled in French. While rendering the Holy Qur'an into French, he always kept in mind the literal meanings of Arabic words. For example, he has translated the verse 1:1 as follows:

*"Louange à Dieu, Seigneur des mondes"*²⁸

(Praise be to God, the Lord of all the worlds)

Some Urdu translators have translated the Arabic phrase "*Rabb al-'Alamin*" into "the Sustainer of the world". They ignored the plural noun "*al-'Alamin*" and considered it as a singular but Dr. Hamidullah used "*des mondes*" for it that is the correct equivalent of the Arabic word mentioned in the opening verse of *Surah al-Fateha*.

5. A Translation in Pure French:

Some translators of the Holy Qur'an have retained many Arabic words in their translations. They argued that non-Arabic languages do not have equivalents for many Arabic words. Dr. Hamidullah translated the Holy Qur'an in pure French. Instead of retaining word "Allah" he used word "*Dieu*" for God so that French speaking people can easily understand the meanings of the Holy Qur'an. Similarly, he has used "*Le Diable*" for the Satan. However, he has written Arabic words "*Iblis*" and "*Chaitan*" plural "*Chayatin*" in footnote.²⁹ He has translated *salat* (obligatory prayer) into "*l'Office*" and Zakat into "*l'impôt*". Consider the translation of verse 2:43

*"Établissez l'office, et acquittez l'impôt et inclinez-vous avec ceux qui s'inclinent"*³⁰

(And be steadfast in prayer, and pay in charity and bow down with those who bow down)

6. A Great Concern for Translating the Words Relating to Allah:

Dr. Hamidullah has shown great concern for rendering the words related to the attributes and position of Almighty Allah. Some Urdu and English translators have not shown much care. For instance, Muhammad 'Ali, a translator and commentator of Ahmadiyyah Jama'at, has translated the verse 3:142 as follows:

*"Do you think that you will enter the Garden while Allah not known those from among you who strive hard (nor) known the steadfast?"*³¹

In this translation, the expression "*Allah not Known*" seems inappropriate. But Dr. Hamidullah translated this verse carefully keeping in view the dignity of Almighty Allah. His translation of this verse is as under:

*"Comptez-vous entrer au Paradis sans qu'Allah ne distingue parmi vous ceux qui luttent et qui sont endurants ?"*³²

(Do you think you will enter Paradise without Allah distinguishing whom among you those who fight and are patients?)

Consider another example of the verse 8:30 that has been translated by 'Abdul Majid Daryabadi as follows:

*"They were plotting and Allah was plotting, and Allah is the Best of plotters."*³³

But Dr. Hamidullah rendered the verse into French as under:-

*"Et ils stratégient. Et Dieu stratégie ! Cependant, Dieu est le meilleur de tous ceux qui stratégient."*³⁴

(And they planned and God also planned, but God is the best of planners).

7. Veneration of the Prophet Muhammad (upon whom be peace and greeting):

The translator of the "Le Saint Coran" had immense love and respect for the Prophet of Islam (upon whom be peace and greeting). The French orientalists have wrongly spelled the name of Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace and greeting) as "Mahomet". The last "t" in it would be silent and thus the holy name of the Prophet of Islam would be distorted due to its French pronunciation. To avoid this, the learned scholar had written its spelling as "Muhammad."³⁵

8. A Great Concern for Translating the Words Related to Apostles:

Dr. Hamidullah's style reveals his great veneration for the belief on the infallibility of all the apostles. Belief in the Prophets and the scriptures revealed upon them is fundamental in Islam. Therefore, a translator of the Holy Qur'an should be careful in rendering the words related to the Prophets into any other language. Dr. Hamidullah had shown maximum care in this regard. For instance, he translated the verse 12:76 into French as follows:

*"C'est ainsi que Nous rusâmes en faveur de Joseph."*³⁶

(Thus We planned for Joseph)

The learned scholar translated the verse 66:12 into French as:

*"De même Marie; une fille d'Amran. Elle avait préservée son corps."*³⁷

(And Mary, the daughter of Imran who preserved her body)

9. Translation of the Qur'anic Verses pertaining to Science:

Some translators of the Holy Qur'an have translated the Qur'anic verses pertaining to science in such words which are not in accordance with

the proved facts of science. The French translation of such verses by Dr. Hamidullah is worth-reading. Consider the verse 21:33: "*Et c'est Lui qui a créé la nuit et le jour, et le soleil et la lune, chacunageant dans un orbite.*"³⁸

(It is He Who created the Night and the Day, and the sun and the moon, everyone moving in its orbit)

This verse tells about movement of the sun and the stars in their specific orbits. It repudiates the theory that the sun is stationary. Dr. Maurice Bucaille has appreciated Dr. Hamidullah's translation of word "*Falak*" by "*un orbite*". He observes:

"The Arabic word *Falak* has here been translated by the word 'Orbit'; many French translators of the Qur'an attach to it the meaning of a sphere. This is indeed its initial sense. Hamidullah translated it to the word 'orbit' The work caused concern to older translators of the Qur'an who were unable to imagine the circular course of the moon and the sun and therefore retained images of their course through space that were neither more or less correct, nor hopelessly wrong."³⁹

Exegetical Notes by Dr. Hamidullah:

Dr. Hamidullah's French translation of the Holy Qur'an also contains explanatory notes. He managed to publish these notes in red ink and original translation in black ink so that the reader can differentiate between them. Some of the characteristics of these notes are discussed here:

1. Concise Notes:

The great scholar has written brief exegetical notes on his Qur'an translation in French language. He has elucidated the meanings where the reader may have any difficulty in comprehension.

2. Reference to Hadith Literature:

Being an unparalleled scholar of Hadith literature, Dr. Hamidullah considered hadith as an important source of the Quranic exegesis. He has cited some *ahadith* in these explanatory notes. For instance, he has referred to Bukhari and Muslim in the commentary of the verse 10:26⁴⁰ He has given French translation of a hadith in the exegetical note on the verse 61:6.⁴¹ Similar examples can be quoted like hadith pertaining to the first revelation.⁴²

3. Biography of the Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace and greeting):

The author of the "*Le Saint Coran*" has cited some events from the Life of the Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace and greeting). For example, in the

beginning of *Surah al-Fath*, he writes that the Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace and greeting) concluded a treaty with Makkah infidels in the 6th year of Hijrah. One of its clauses reads that the Muslims can go Makkah to visit the Holy Ka'ba next year.⁴³ The Holy Qur'an has regarded it a clear victory (*victoire élatante*).⁴⁴

About Umme Jamil, the wife of Abu Lahb, Dr. Hamidullah wrote:

*"Elle jetait des branches d'épineux, la nuit, devant la maison du prophète qui rentrait tard après la prière devant la Ka'ba par des rues sans éclairage."*⁴⁵

(She used to throw the thorny branches in front of the Prophet's house who used to return his home late at night after prayer through lightless streets.

4. References to Earlier Scriptures:

The learned translator (and exegete) has referred to the scriptures of earlier religions in some explanatory notes. He has discussed the difference of two words *parakletos* and *periklytos*.⁴⁶ The latter means "the much praised" that is actually translation of "Ahmad" used in the Bible for the Prophet of Islam (upon whom be peace and greeting) that is mentioned in the Qur'an.⁴⁷ He has quoted references from four Gospels of the New Testament about the Prophet Muhammad (upon whom be peace and greeting).

5. Some Detailed Notes:

In the translation of the Holy Qur'an, Dr. Hamidullah has also added some detailed notes. For instance, while commenting on the verse 4:3, he discussed the issue of polygamy in the light of the teachings of other religions. According to him, no restriction has been imposed on polygamy in the New Testament or the Old Testament. Protestant leaders Luther, Butzer and Melanchton regarded it a legal practice. The clergymen were polygamous themselves in the days of Charlemagne. There is no restriction on it in Hinduism and Zoroastrianism.⁴⁸

6. Deviation from Exegetical Tradition:

Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah deviated from the exegetical tradition in the commentary of some verses. Generally, the verse 95:1 is applied to Ibrahim's country but according to him it is without convincing reasons because the wild fig may refer to Buddha and his tree Boudi.⁴⁹ He has written that Kifl is Arabicized form Kapilavastou, Buddha's country. Dhou'l Kifl mentioned in verse 21:85 is Buddha as there is close resemblance of meanings in both the names. He added that kifl also means nourishment. Accordingly, he thought

of Buddha's father ,Suddhu-dana ,meaning *nourisher* or pure nourishment⁵⁰
In this way, the learned scholar is inclined to accept Buddha as a prophet.

7. Criticism on Dr.Hamidullah's Translation:

Some contemporary writers have bitterly criticized Dr. Hamidullah's translation, putting him in the same group as other translators such as Hamza Boubakeur, Denise Masson and Grojean, believed to be influenced by the famous orientalist Louis Massignon. Hadroug Mimouni⁵¹, an Algerian Muslim scholar, who have full command over French made a critical study of Dr.Hamidullah French translation of the Holy Qur'an accusing him of having Judaic conception of God (referring to verse 2:210) and the role of the Messenger (verse 2:143).

1. He has objected on the rendering of verse 2:154 that reads:

*"Et ne dites pas morts ceux qui sont tués dans le sentier de Dieu. Ils sont vivants, au contraire, mais vous êtes inconscients."*⁵²

(And do not say dead those who are killed in the path of God. They are alive, on contrary, but you are unconscious.)

2. Another verse 2:167 is put in evidence by Mimouni since he considers its translation as too complicated for the reader. ⁵³

Muslim Scholar's Views about the "Le Saint Coran":

Muslim scholars have praised Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah for his French translation of the Holy Qur'an and regarded it a remarkable service to Islam. Famous journalist Muhammad Salahuddin remarked:

"His translation and exegesis of the Holy Qur'an in French language is a great achievement". ⁵⁴ Professor Khurshid Ahmad regarded it a remarkable task. ⁵⁵ In Urdu Encyclopaedia of Islam it has been underlined: *"In contemporary age, Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah's translation of the Qur'an in French language is praise-worthy and worth-reading in every respect."* ⁵⁶

Dr. Maurice Bucaille told Prof. Dr. Zahoor Ahmad Azhar in a seminar that he was attracted to the Qur'an through Dr. Hamidullah's French translation. ⁵⁷

Then he wrote a book *"La Bible le Coran et la Science"* ⁵⁸ (The Bible, The Qur'an and Science⁵⁹) and ultimately embraced Islam in 1980. ⁶⁰

Shah Baligh-ud-Din opines about this scholastic work as follows:

"There are other translations of the Holy Qur'an in French but Dr. Sahib's translation has great importance." ⁶¹

Prof. Dr. Mazhar Moeen⁶², Mujahid al-Hasaini⁶³, Dr. Rizwan Ali Nadwi⁶⁴ and Lutf-ur-Rehman Faruqi⁶⁵ have also praised Dr. Hamidullah's French Quranic translation.

In short, it can be said that the "Le Saint Coran" is extremely beneficial for Muslims in France and other French-speaking people. It is also an instrument for comprehension of the Holy Qur'an to French scholars interested in Islam as well.

References & Notes:

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⁶⁰ Muhammad Hamidullah, Dr., *Khutbat-e-Bahawalpur*, Islamic Research Institute, Islamabad, 2003, p. 277.

⁶¹ Shah Baligh-ud-Din, "Aik 'Alim aik Muhaqqiq", Quarterly *Osmania*, Karachi, Vol. 2, No. 4 April-June, 1997, p. 32.

⁶² Mazhar Moeen, Prof. Dr., Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah — His Life and Writings (Arabic), *Oriental College Magazine*, Punjab University Lahore, Vol. 78, No. 3-4, 2003, p. 39.

⁶³ Mujahid ul Husayni, "Dr. Muhammad — A French Translator of the Qur'an", Quarterly *Qafilah Adab-e-Islami*, op. cit. pp.211-216.

⁶⁴ Nadwi, Rizwan Ali, Dr. Syed, "Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah — Naqush-o-Ta'atharat, Mujallah "Osmania" Karachi, Vol. 2, No. 4, April-June, 1997, p. 38.

⁶⁵ Faruqi, Lutf-ur-Rahman, "Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah — Aik Be mithal Muhaqqiq", Monthly *Da'wah*, Vol. 9, No. 10, March, 2003, p. 47.