Translating the Baha'i Writings

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Translating the Bahá’í Writings
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Abstract
Although the difficulties of translating the holy Word are recognized,
Bahá’í institutions have always stressed the
importance of translation. No approach to biblical or quranic translation
corresponds completely to the Bahá’í ideal,
just as no former religious leader combined Shoghi Effendi’s unique dual role
as Guardian and translator. Bahá’í
institutions have defined the most salient theoretical issues relating to
Bahá’í translation. In translating the Bahá’í
writings, faithfulness to the original text is paramount. This is defined as
reflecting the beauty of the original and
accurately conveying the concepts of the original. Consultation is an integral
part of the translation process, and
translations of scripture are seen as a tool for education. Bahá’í
translators today face a number of practical problems
caused by a lack of resources, cultural differences, and linguistic
underdevelopment.

Résumé
Tout en étant conscientes des difficultés inhérentes à la traduction des
écrits saints, les institutions bahá’íes ont
toujours mis l’accent sur l’importance de la traduction. Aucune approche de
la traduction biblique ou coranique ne
correspond exactement a l’idéal bahá’í, de même qu’aucun dirigeant
religieux du passé n’a cumulé, comme Shoghi
Effendi, les roles de Gardien et de traducteur. Les institutions bahá’ís
ont défini les questions théoriques essentielles
relatives à la traduction des écrits bahá’ís. Lorsqu’on traduit les
ecrits bahá’ís, la fidélité par rapport au texte original
est primordiale. Fidélité signifie ici refléter la beauté de l’original
tout en communiquant avec précision les concepts
qu’il contient. La consultation fait partie intégrante du processus

traductionnel et la traduction des écrits saints est considérée comme un outil pédagogique. Les traducteurs bahá'ís de nos jours doivent affronter une serie de problèmes pratiques découlant d'un manque de ressources, de différences culturelles et d'un sous-développement linguistique.

Resumen
Aunque la traducción de la Palabra Sagrada es de reconocida dificultad, las instituciones bahá'ís han siempre subrayado la importancia de la traducción. Ningún patrón de traducción bíblica o coránica alcanza allegar al concepto bahá'í, al igual que ningún dirigente religioso de tiempos pasados combina la doble y única función de Guardián y traductor como lo hizo Shoghi Effendi. Las instituciones bahá'ís han definido los asuntos teoréticos más resaltantes relativo a la traducción bahá'í. Al traducir los escritos bahá'ís es principalísimo mantener fidelidad al texto original. Gana definición al compararse fielmente a la belleza del original y cuando da a entender precisamente los conceptos que aquel imparte. La consulta es parte íntegra del proceso de traducción, y a las traducciones de los escritos se les ve como instrumentos de la educación. Los traductores bahá'ís tienen que enfrentarse a numerosos problemas de índole práctico causados por falta de recursos, diferencias culturales, y subdesarrollo linguístico.

Introduction

S ince its inception, the Bahá'í Faith has spread to all but six countries in the world (Smith, The Babi and Baha'i Religions 160). Indeed, the Encyclopedia Britannica claims that while only 0.1% of the world's population is Bahá'í, the Bahá'í Faith is second only to Christianity as the most widely distributed religion in the world (Barrett, "World Religious Statistics" 303). Such a diverse community has a strong need for translation, not only for interethnic communication within the Bahá'í community but also for individual believer's access to Bahá'í scripture, without which the ideals of independent investigation of truth cannot be realized. That translation is important among Bahá'ís is illustrated by the increased availability of Bahá'í literature—from eight languages in 1928 to 739 languages in 1985 (Smith, The Babi and Baha'i Religions 160). Although there is no more a Bahá'í theory of translation than there is a Bahá'í theory of music or architecture, it is possible to identify certain principles that Bahá'í translators are expected to follow.

The Translatability of the Bahá'í Writings

The power of language and the creative Word is extremely important in the imagery of the Bahá'í writings. As Bahiyyih Nakhjavani has explained, the Manifestation is the "spiritual reality of words, metaphors and of language" ("Some Themes and Images in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh" 673). The Báb, for example, adopted the title "The Primal Point," proclaiming his role as the Initiator of language, and spoke of God's creation of the universe through seven words (de Gobineau, 259). Bahá'u'lláh says, "Should the Word be allowed to release suddenly all the energies latent within it, no man could sustain the weight of so mighty a Revelation. Nay, all that is heaven and on earth would flee in consternation before it" (Gleanings 76–77).

Given the power of the Word of God, a question arises about the extent to which this power is veiled by translation and even whether translation should be attempted at all. This has been a matter of controversy in earlier religions. In Christianity, for example, translations have been the cause of numerous controversies, and Thomas More was not alone in expressing the idea that "it is dangerous to translate the text of Scripture from one tongue into another...for as much as in translation it is hard to keep the same sentence [i.e., sense] whole" (quoted in Kelly, The True Interpreter 74). In Islam the first translations of the Qur'án into Persian soon after the passing of Muhammad were a cause of much controversy, which was eventually settled by prohibiting official translations from the Arabic but permitting "explanations" in other languages for "private use" (cf. Tibawi). Even in modern times, the introduction of vernacular translations of the Qur'án has caused much dispute. To some extent there would seem to be an echo of this feeling among the Bahá'ís. For example, Rúhiyyih Rabbani (The Priceless Pearl 203) reports that Shoghi Effendi felt that it would prove impossible ever to translate some of Bahá'u'lláh's writings into English.

Similarly, Shoghi Effendi discouraged translations of the more important Arabic tablets of Bahá'u'lláh into Persian, describing the originals as "pearls" and translations as "shells" (letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi in Persian 27 March 1845—quoted in Research Department 1988, p. 4). Certainly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's requirements for a translator would discourage many:

> Truly translation is very difficult. One has to have the utmost proficiency in science and religion, in divine wisdom, in the current trends of thought in Europe, and in philosophical and

scientific terms. (Quoted in
Research Department 1988, p. 3; original reference not given)

This does not mean translation is ruled out completely. In 1940 Shoghi Effendi explained that his ban
applies only to translations into Persian and that in the "Tablets of the
Divine Plan" 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Tablets of
'Abdu'l-Bahá 52) had urged the translation of the Bahá'í writings into
all languages. The Universal House of Justice
seems to view the problem of translatability quite pragmatically: although
"translation of a passage can seldom be an
entirely faithful rendering of the original," and the quality of many
Bahá'í translations is poor, "for the time being
we must do what we can with what we have" (letter of 8 September 1985).

The Role of Shoghi Effendi

If pragmatism were the only reason to support translating the Bahá'í writings, the role of translation in the
Bahá'í Faith might be no more important than in Islam or Christianity, and, as in those religions, attitudes towards
whether or how to translate might vary from generation to generation. In the Bahá'í Faith, however, translation is
not merely tolerated for reasons of practicality; when certain principles are followed, translation can play a key role
in the development of the community. The most convincing argument for the acceptability and importance of
translating the Bahá'í writings is the amount of time Shoghi Effendi devoted to this task, even while often prefacing
his translations with comments about "the unattainable goal—a befitting rendering of Bahá'u'lláh's matchless
utterance" (Shoghi Effendi, letter of 14 August 1930). Indeed, it would be impossible to comprehend the important
role translation plays in the Bahá'í Faith without an understanding of the position of Shoghi Effendi.

As both a translator and Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi's position as a religious translator is
unique. While there have been many gifted religious translators, such as St. Jerome in Christianity or Hsuan Tsang
in Buddhism, none has been an acknowledged interpreter of the scriptures as well. Shoghi Effendi's approach can be
compared to Gadamer's ("Sprache als Medium der hermeneutischen Erfahrung") description of hermeneutic
translation: the result of having faith in the integrity of the original text and engaging in a dialogue with it. The
translation that results from this process is a reflection not only of the original work but also of the dialogue between
the translator and the original. In this way the translator comes to terms with both the ideas expressed by the text and

those elements in the text that are at odds with the “true essence” of the receptor language. Such a process is not unlike Ruhiyyih Rabbani’s description of Shoghi Effendi’s approach to translation (Rabbani, The Priceless Pearl 202ff).

In hermeneutic translation, this dialogue produces a synthesis between the ideas of the original and the reaction of the translator, which reflects a deeper understanding of the text as it is recreated for a new audience. Benjamin (“Die Aufgabe des Uebersetzers” 189) describes this as the process of finding the “intention” of the text in the receptor language in which the original grows through translation. Where hermeneutic translations of scripture, such as Buber and Rosenzweig’s translation of the Torah into German, have not been accepted in the past, it has often been because the translator’s vision of the intention of the text is questioned by the audience. This cannot be the case with Shoghi Effendi’s translations into English for a Bahá’í audience. While Shoghi Effendi himself wrote that his translations were not final and would be subject to review in future (Shoghi Effendi, letter of 14 August 1930), his position as Guardian allowed him to make decisions about the authorized interpretation of a potentially ambiguous text at the same time that he was translating it into English. Because of this and because of the inherent ambiguity of Persian and Arabic rhetoric, which Shoghi Effendi felt had to be made more explicit in English translation, Ruhíyyíh Rabbani (The Priceless Pearl 202) explains that this interpretive dimension made his translations an even clearer representation of the spirit of Bahá’u’lláh than the originals. For this reason, most translations into other languages are now done from Shoghi Effendi’s English translations, rather than from the Arabic and Persian originals.

The most noticeable characteristic of Shoghi Effendi’s translations is their literary style in sharp contrast to the earlier translations of Bahá’í writings into English, described by David Hofman as ranging from “bizarre to banal” (George Townshend 61). Shoghi Effendi’s style reflects his love of the language of the King James Bible and his conscious attempt to set a high cultural standard for the Bahá’í community. His literary style was the result of an attempt to create a style that could act as a bridge between the conventions of modem English and the rich and very figurative style of the originals. The Universal House of Justice (Research Dept., Memorandum 1985) has contrasted this style to that of modem translations of the Bible, noting that while a

colloquial or straightforward translation might be an adequate reflection of the koine Greek or ancient Hebrew style of the Bible, to have made a similar colloquial translation from the highly literary styles of the Persian and Arabic Bahá'í writings would have been unfaithful to the original.

Faithfulness

Translators of scripture are all too aware that they are translating the Word of God, so rendering that Word in the receptor language faithfully is of the utmost importance (cf. Cary, "The Word of God into the Languages of Men"). It is therefore not surprising that much of the dialogue in the Bahá'í community regarding translation has dealt with trying to define "faithfulness."

Beauty

In discussing translations of the Writings 'Abdu'l-Bahá instructed that not only should they be made "into every tongue," but that this should be done "conformably to the originals" and "with power and grace of style" (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá 66). Between these two ideals of beauty and conformity there would seem to be a dynamic tension.

Shoghi Effendi often deplored "offhand and ungrammatical translations," stating that "proper and adequate translations" should "not only convey the true spirit of the original but also possess some literary merit" (letter to George Townshend, 1926). Similarly, the Universal House of Justice (letter of 7 October 1973) and its Research Department (Memorandum 1985) have discussed the "exalted and poetic" style of the original that should be conveyed using a translation style "in which there is an abundance of spiritual and poetic terminology" (Research Department Memorandum 1985). In most societies this is not an everyday register of language, and the Universal House of Justice has specifically stated, "We have noticed a tendency in a number of countries to attempt to translate Bahá'í literature into the current, easy, everyday language of the country. This, however, should not be an overriding consideration" (letter of 7 October 1973). In another letter (letter of 3 February 1988) the House of Justice explains that this directive was given not only because of the elevated style of the original texts but also because if translators try to follow the literary styles of the day, these styles change every few decades, and new translations would be needed. In the same letter the House of Justice notes that "one merely has to consider the large

number of new translations of the Bible that have appeared, and are still appearing, and yet many English-speaking Christians prefer to continue using the Authorized Version in spite of its proven inaccuracies. Holy scriptures have a profound meaning for their readers and to change the familiar words too often can be gravely disturbing" (Universal House of Justice letter of 3 February 1988).

George Grace (personal comment) has pointed out that in many societies, keeping translations of scripture from being too accessible to the masses has been a tool for oppression. Given the Bahá'í principle of independent investigation of truth, this matter should be a great cause of concern among Bahá'ís. In Islam during the many centuries when translation was officially prohibited, "unofficial" vernacular summaries were written in the guise of commentaries. A similar practice exists among Bahá'ís. Thus, the Universal House of Justice has authorized simplified English translations for use in Papua New Guinea (Universal House of Justice, letter of 20 September 1973) and translations of parts of Arabic prayers into Persian (Universal House of Justice, letter of 7 August 1984).

In both cases care is made to ensure that these translations are not labelled as, or used instead of, the authorized translation. Indeed, it is required that the original appear on the same page so as to avoid any confusion about the role of the translation-commentary.

Accuracy

The Universal House of Justice also writes that a Bahá'í translator "must always bear in mind that he or she is dealing with the Word of God, and, when striving to convey the meaning of the original, he should exert his utmost to make his rendering both faithful and befitting." (Universal House of Justice letter of 29 October 1973).

One obvious aspect of faithfulness is to avoid adding to the revealed Word; Ruhíyyíh Rabbani (The Priceless Pearl 206) records Shoghi Effendi's uneasiness about even the addition of headings to classify sections in a proposed compilation of prayers by Bahá'u'lláh.

Common sense tells us that faithfulness also means conveying all the ideas in the original, which Shoghi Effendi considered even more important than the beauty of the translation: "...literary considerations are, no doubt, important, but are quite secondary when compared to the ideas and thoughts constituting the Message itself" (letter of 14 October 1936). Gruber says that often initial translations of the Writings are too general "with considerable

loss of the power of the original: for example, rendering ‘God grant that the light of unity may envelope the whole earth’ as ‘may God make the opinion of the people of the world one’” (Gruber, Translation Goals 2). At the same time the Universal House of Justice has recognized that an overly literal translation can also be problematic by producing “phraseology or imagery that would convey the wrong impression” (Letter of 7 October 1973).

While Shoghi Effendi is by far the foremost Bahá’í translator, there is an obvious limit to the extent to which other Bahá’í translators can follow his example, since none can claim to have the ability to make interpretations of the meaning of a text for others, or even necessarily to have a clear vision of the real intention of the original. To determine what the ideas of the original actually are, translators of the Bahá’í writings into languages other than English are strongly encouraged to use the English translations of Shoghi Effendi as their starting point. This method is advised not only because Shoghi Effendi could produce both translation and authorized exposition but also because, for European languages at least, the thought patterns of English are easier to understand than are those of Persian or Arabic and because as an international language English can act as a type of bridge between the Middle Eastern culture in which the Writings were revealed and the wider world (Universal House of Justice, letter of 14 March 1977).

Consultation

As in many Bahá’í endeavors, the concept of consultation is important in achieving faithfulness in translation. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá 151–52), for example, preferred translation by a committee of two translators who are native speakers of the source language and two writers who are native speakers of the receptor language. That such a group of Bahá’í scholars could not be formed was given as a reason by Shoghi Effendi (letter of 15 July 1947) for not translating the Qayyúmu’l-Asmá during his lifetime. Both Shoghi Effendi (letter of 14 December 1938) and the Universal House of Justice (letter of 31 May 1981) have stressed the importance of receiving expert outside advice when necessary, or for translators working from Shoghi Effendi’s English translations to collaborate with Persian or Arabic speakers to refer to the originals when the English versions ambiguous or when additional clarification is needed (Universal House of Justice, letter of 30 July 1987). Even

Shoghi Effendi was in the habit of sending the first drafts of his translations to George Townshend for comment and review or asking him for assistance in translating Arabic words that referred to biblical passages (Hofman, George Townshend 58).

In the above discussion of Shoghi Effendi's role as a Bahá'í translator, mention was made of his similarity to Western hermeneutic translators. There is an important difference between hermeneutic translation and Bahá'í translation, however. In hermeneutic translation, an attempt is made to be faithful to the word as the basic unit of translation, rather than sentences or paragraphs, as well as an attempt always to translate each word in the source language with the same word in the receptor language so as to give the flavor of the sentence patterns and rhythm of the original (cf. Buber). Among many Bible translators this approach has generally been rejected, and Bahá'í translators would concur; Arabic Bahá, for example, is generally translated as "Glory," as in Bahá'u'lláh "the Glory of God," but in the Bahá'í calendar, Jalál is translated as "Glory" and Bahá as "Splendor." The Universal House of Justice has explained the necessity of doing this as the result of the lack of a perfect correspondence between words in different languages. It strongly encourages translators to follow the example of Shoghi Effendi, who would alternate among different words in the receptor language when a Arabic or Persian word could be rendered by more than one English word (Rabbani, The Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith 86).

By conveying all the semantic possibilities of the original word in this way and by using units larger than the individual word as translation units, Bahá'í translation resembles the work of functional linguist Bible translators, such as Eugene Nida or members of the Wycliffe Bible Translators (Summer Institute of Linguistics).

But again there is a difference, in that the Bahá'í concept of "faithfulness" differs from that used by these Bible translators, for whom a translation is "faithful" if it can evoke the same response as was created in the audience of the original. A corollary of this is that different audiences within one language community will need different types of translations: a university professor is thought to need a different translation of the Bible than a poorly educated teenager, for example. This view is rejected by Bahá'í translators; although certain aids may be devised to assist poorly educated believers, generally the Bahá'í community is expected to rise to the level of translation that reflects the high literary niveau of the original Writings, rather than compromising the

style in which these were originally written.

Translations as Education

Translations as education implies that translations of the Writings should not only present the spiritual meaning of the original but that they should also be a means for improving the general educational level of their audience. Thus, Shoghi Effendi joked that if American Bahá'ís could not understand his translations, they should learn English (Rabbani, The Priceless Pearl 358), and he explained his ban on translations of the Writings from Arabic into Persian in part as a desire for Bahá'í children and youth to be well versed in Arabic (Research Department Memorandum 1988, 5, citing letters written on Shoghi Effendi's behalf to the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran—no dates given). Similarly, when the Universal House of Justice allowed "translations" in simple English for use in Papua New Guinea, it was only on the condition that the original English translation appear on the same page, not only to preserve the integrity of the authorized translation but also to "provide a means whereby the people of Papua and New Guinea could improve their knowledge and understanding of the English language" (letter of 20 September 1973). Elsewhere, in noting that "Books of Scripture themselves mould the language in which they are written," the Universal House of Justice has stated that translators into English should emulate the elevated style of Shoghi Effendi's translations to enable English-speaking children and youth to "use the English language effectively for thought and for expression" (letter of 14 December 1938). Although religious authorities have often used the study of scripture to help develop students' linguistic and reasoning skills, this seems to mark the first time in the translation of scripture that one of its conscious aims is to educate the audience in linguistic as well as in religious matters. This is an obvious link to the emphasis on scholarship and universal education in the Bahá'í Faith.

Current Problems in Bahá'í Translation

Although it cannot yet be said that there is a comprehensive theory of translation of Bahá'í scripture, the most crucial theoretical issues have been discussed by the central authorities of the Faith. The most immediate problems faced by Bahá'í translators today are therefore not theoretical but practical problems.

Some problems, for example, arise in using the English translations of Shoghi Effendi as the basis for

translation into other languages. Usually ambiguities in the English version can be resolved by referring to the original text, but for the translator who does not know Arabic or Persian, this must be done on an ad hoc basis by individual translators or their Persian or Arabic speaking associates. The only bilingual glossaries of words and phrases used by Shoghi Effendi and their original equivalents are incomplete and in such a state as to be potentially misleading to translators who do not know Arabic or Persian (Universal House of Justice, letter of 30 July 1987).

There is no equivalent of the detailed exegeses that translators of Christian scripture have at their disposal, although the Universal House of Justice has indicated that "the methods used by Shoghi Effendi in making his translations constitute a field of study that, it is hoped, will be increasingly explored by Bahá'í scholars in the years to come" (letter of 30 July 1987).

In some cases additions had to be made in English that could be misleading to translators in other languages. For example, Shoghi Effendi often used the phrase "There is none other God but Thee" (e.g., in the Short Obligatory Prayer) in his translations. Udo Schaefer (personal communication) argues that in this phrase "other," which is not a literal translation of any Arabic word and has only been added in English for stylistic reasons, is unnecessarily translated into other European languages, creating an unnatural "translationese" style (e.g., German "Es ist kein anderer Gott außer Dir.... On this point the German Publishing Trust states that "as a rule, it is not a poor grasp of English, but a poorly developed sense for correct German style that is the cause of questionable translations" [my translation, Entwurf 3]).

In many societies, especially in the Third World where the vast number of Bahá'ís live, illiteracy and poor education are problems, since the relatively few Bahá'ís with a sufficient level of education to be able to translate are often busy with other administrative tasks. In some societies there simply are no educated believers, and translations by persons with a poor grasp of the source language (English or a national language) cannot be expected to be completely accurate. To help overcome this problem, simplified English texts of the Writings have been developed by Dr. Gruber in Nigeria for use by translators whose command of literary English is somewhat weak (Universal House of Justice, 30 July 1987).

In some situations cultural expectations of translators can be a problem if they are normally expected to

embellish the original. One translation of the Short Obligatory Prayer into a vernacular language of Papua New Guinea, for example, had to be revised when it was found that the translator had inserted an extra paragraph, because the original prayer was “too short”!

Where Third World indigenous language communities have been subject to colonialism, emulating the elevated style required by Shoghi Effendi’s example can be difficult, since the use of such a style is often linked to traditional practices that do not survive the onslaught of Westernization. Similarly, in some regions, such as intensely multilingual Melanesia, it is more efficient at least initially to translate into pidgin languages used as lingua franca, which by their very nature do not make the distinction between elevated and colloquial registers and do not normally have a well-developed written or oral literary tradition. In all languages, the first translators of the Bahá’í writings must invent “Bahá’í terminology” to some extent. (Gruber [Translation Goals 2] discusses some practical aspects of this.) Translators in these pidgin languages are faced with the additional task of creating a literary style worthy of the Writings at the same time that they work to enlarge somewhat limited lexicons.

Conclusion

The study of the translation of scripture offers a good opportunity to demonstrate the Bahá’í ideal of the harmony of science and religion, and it is to be expected that in future the translation of the Bahá’í writings, and in particular the methods used by Shoghi Effendi, will attract the attention of an increasing number of scholars, At this stage it is already possible to identify certain characteristics that set the principles of Bahá’í scriptural translation apart from those used in Christianity and Islam. All three religions, of course, emphasize the importance of faithfulness to the original text. The Bahá’í approach differs from Christian translation of the Bible in that the principles followed cannot be labelled wholly hermeneutic or wholly functional. For example, like hermeneutic translation, the work of the foremost Bahá’í translator is the result of dynamic extraposition, but unlike hermeneutic translation, the goal of translating one word in the source language to one word in the receptor language is rejected.

The use of different near synonyms and the reliance on meaning over form are like the approach of functional linguist translators, but the refusal to tailor a translation to its specific audience is not. As in traditional Islam,

simplified vernacular translations written as commentaries are allowed where translation is not possible, but unlike in Islam, ordinary translations are normally allowed and are quite acceptable for public or private worship.

Two developments in Bahá'í translation set it apart from other translations of scripture. One is the view that translations should educate the readers linguistically as well as spiritually, and the other is the existence of translations of scripture made by a world leader recognized by all members of the faith as an authorized interpreter of its scripture.

Thus, even at this early stage in the history of the Bahá'í community one can discern certain attitudes towards the translation of scripture. The most important is that, in contrast to earlier religions, there is no doubt translation is acceptable. Ideally, a translation must be faithful to the original, by which is meant that the semantic meaning of the original must be expressed and the style be as uplifting, dignified, and literary as the original. In fulfilling this criterion of faithfulness, a translation of the Bahá'í writings can act as a tool for the intellectual as well as the spiritual education of the community. Fulfilling this ideal is, of course, not always possible, so that finding ways of doing so is certain to generate lively discourse among Bahá'í translators for some time to come.

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