

Arabic. He says: "It is a sacred language because God has chosen it as His instrument of communication, and He always chooses to 'speak' in a language which is primordial and which expresses the profoundest truths in the most concrete terms. It is only later that the sacred language develops an abstract and philosophical dimension. A sacred language is profound in depth and usually little developed on the surface as can be seen in Qur'anic Arabic. Every word carries a world of meaning within itself and there is never a complete 'horizontal' and didactic explanation of its content."⁽⁹⁾

According to a linguistic point of view a language is usually subject to change during a long period of time. Arabic is a Semitic tongue which has been used by a great number of people for thousands of years and, unlike any other language, no change has occurred in it during the last fourteen centuries. A linguistic characteristic of Arabic and, therefore, of the Qur'anic language is ellipticism. It is this inimitable ellipticism or 'ijaz, of the Qur'an "which often deliberately omits intermediate thought-clauses in order to express the final stage of an idea as pithily and as concisely as it is possible within the limitations of a human language."⁽¹⁰⁾ It is not only the ellipticism of the Qur'an which is inimitable, there are also many other characteristics which make the Qur'an unique and unchallengeable. "Unlike any other book, its meaning and its linguistic presentation form one unbreakable whole. The position of individual words in a sentence, the rhythm and sound of its phrases and their syntactic construction, the manner in which a metaphor flows almost imperceptibly into a pragmatic statement, the use of acoustic stress not merely in the service of rhetoric but as a means of alluding to unspoken but clearly implied ideas: all this makes the Qur'an, in the last resort, unique and untranslatable."⁽¹¹⁾

Although it is true that no translation can take the place of the Qur'an and no one can reproduce it in another language and also its sacred language cannot be separated from the content, it is possible to convey its message in another language in order to help those who do not know Arabic and need to understand the message of the Qur'an in their own mother tongue.

However, it is highly recommended that a Muslim should try to read and understand the Qur'an in its original Arabic which is its sacred language, because it is in this case that the reader can participate in its Divine grace and understand the Divine Message directly from the Divine Book.

It does not contain anything of the Prophet's sayings. There are, of course, many misunderstandings, especially by Westerners, concerning the religion of Islam. The renowned Muslim scholar, Sayyid Muhammad Qutb, was completely aware of this fact when he named one of his famous books 'Shobahatun Houlal Islam' which has been translated into English under the title of 'Islam the Misunderstood Religion'. It is also difficult for many Westerners to understand the meaning of the sacred language in Islam because there is no such a language in Christianity.

To participate in the Divine grace of the Qur'an a Muslim has to recite it in its sacred language. "But neither a Persian nor a Turk nor an Indian Muslim could participate in the 'barakah' of the Holy Book and perform his rites as a Muslim if he were to use, let us say, Turkish or Persian in the daily prayers. The efficacy of canonical prayers, litanies, invocations, etc. is contained not only in the content but also in the very sounds and reverberations of the sacred language. Religion is not philosophy or theology meant only for the mental plane. It is a method of integrating our whole being including the psychical and the corporeal. The sacred language serves precisely as a providential means whereby man can come not only to think about the truths of religion, which is only for people of a certain type of mentality, but to participate with his whole being in a Divine norm. This truth is universally applicable, and especially it is clearly demonstrated in the case of the Qur'an whose formulae and verses are guide posts for the life of the Muslim and whose continuous repetition provides a heavenly shelter for man in the turmoil of his earthly existence."⁽⁵⁾

According to Pickthall, who was the first English Muslim to translate the Qur'an into English, no translation can take the place of the Qur'an, "that inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy."⁽⁶⁾

The Holy Qur'an says: "Truly it is the revelation of the Lord of all Being, brought down by the Faithful Spirit upon thy heart, that thou mayest be one of the warners, in a clear, Arabic tongue."⁽⁷⁾ As the Qur'an itself asserts, the revelation of Allah is in a clear Arabic tongue. According to Richard Bell, from this assertion of the Qur'an later Muslim scholars developed the view that the language of the Qur'an was the purest variety of Arabic. Bell believes that such a view is a theological dogma rather than a linguistic theory, but he accepts that modern scholarship tends to study at a purely linguistic level the relation of the language of the Qur'an to contemporary varieties of Arabic.⁽⁸⁾

The language of the Qur'an is sacred because Allah has revealed His message in it. This kind of reasoning concerning the sacredness of the Qur'anic Arabic is considered by some as a theological dogma. But a contemporary Muslim scholar demonstrates another reasoning for the sacredness of the Qur'anic language which can be considered as a linguistic one to indicate the purity, primordality and profundity of the Qur'anic

human language. Since it is the very World of Allah it has the 'Divine Presence', and therefore its language is sacred.

The role of Arabic as a sacred language should not be mistaken with its role in linguistics or ethnic nationalism. To be a good Muslim one does not need to know Arabic language well. But to attain the grace of the Divine Book it is necessary to say those Qur'anic verses read in prayers and other acts of worship in the original Arabic. The sacredness of Arabic in Islam is not due to its linguistic features or ethnic nationalism, but to the fact that the Word of Allah has been revealed in it. It is, in fact, the Word of Allah which is sacred, not the Arabic language in itself. No translation of the Qur'an has the sacredness of the 'Divine Presence' because it is not the Word of Allah; nor is the Arabic language sacred when it is used to convey a human message.

To say more about the meaning of a sacred language we can make another comparison between two types of traditions. There are some traditions that take their name from that of the founder because they are based on him. For example, Christianity takes its name from Christ and it is based on him. Buddhism is based on Buddha and it takes its name from him who is its founder. In these traditions the founder is considered as a 'Divine descent', incarnation or in Hindu terms 'avatara', who is himself (as they believe) the 'Word of God' and the message of Heaven. In such traditions there is no sacred language because the body or external form of the founder itself is the external form of the Word.⁽³⁾

In Christianity, one can celebrate mass in any language in order to participate in the 'blood and body' of Christ. In Catholic Church they use Latin, but it is not a sacred language; rather, it is a liturgical one. In Buddhism, although the early Buddhist texts are in Sanskrit, it is not necessary to know it to be a good Buddhist. One can read the religious texts in any other language. In none of these two traditions the message of Heaven is in the form of a book; rather, it is a person who is the founder of the tradition. And that is why there is not a sacred language in such traditions.

But in Islam the case is quite different. Islam is a religion which is not based on a person. Rather, it is based on the Qur'an which is the very Word of Allah. The Prophet is the Divine Messenger and not the Divine Message. The message is in the form of a Book revealed in a 'sacred language' which is inextricably connected to the content of the message and providentially chosen as its vehicle of expression. The very sounds and words of such a sacred language are parts of the revelation and play the same role in Islam as the body of Christ does in Christianity.⁽⁴⁾ Therefore, to call Islam 'Muhammadanism', as it has been called by some Western authors, in the same sense that the religion of Christ is called Christianity, is not right, because it is not based on the personality of the Prophet. The content of the Qur'an is what Allah has said.

Qur'an and He Himself is its Guardian. Therefore, the Book of Allah is everlasting and no one will be able to harm it at all.

From linguistic point of view, the original Arabic text of the Qur'an is 'splendidly decorated'. Arthur J. Arberry, whose English interpretation of the Qur'an is one of the most esteemed ones, in the introduction to his translation, says: "In making the present attempt to improve on the performance of my predecessors, and to produce something which might be accepted as echoing however faintly the sublime rhetoric of the Arabic Koran, I have been at pains to study the intricate and richly varied rhythms which--apart from the message itself--constitute the Koran's undeniable claim to rank amongst the greatest literary masterpieces of mankind. This very characteristic feature has been almost totally ignored by previous translators; it is therefore not surprising that what they have wrought sounds dull and flat indeed in comparison with the splendidly decorated original. For the Koran is neither prose nor poetry, but a unique fusion of both."⁽¹⁾

As the Qur'an itself says, the Prophet was unlettered. He did not know how to read and write because he had not gone to a school to learn such skills. One may ask how could the Prophet be unlettered and at the same time recite and announce the Glorious Qur'an which, as the Prophet himself has said, has a beautiful exterior and a profound interior.

To answer this question, Dr. S.H. Nasr, who is a renowned Iranian Muslim scholar, has made a comparison between Islam and Christianity from a certain point of view. He says:

"The Word of God in Islam is the Qur'an; in Christianity it is Christ. The vehicle of the Divine Message in Christianity is the Virgin Mary; in Islam it is the soul of the Prophet. The Prophet must be unlettered for the same reason that the Virgin Mary must be virgin. The human vehicle of a Divine Message must be pure and untainted. The Divine Word can only be written on the pure and 'untouched' tablet of human receptivity. If this word is in the form of flesh the purity is symbolized by the virginity of the mother who gives birth to the Word, and if it is in the form of a book this purity is symbolized by the unlettered nature of the person who is chosen to announce this Word among men."⁽²⁾

According to what professor Nasr says if the soul of the Prophet were not pure and virgin, the Word of Allah would become in a sense tainted with purely human knowledge, and therefore it would not be announced to mankind in its pristine purity. The Prophet added nothing to the revelation he received from God; nor did he delete anything from it. What the Prophet conveyed to mankind is not a book written by him. It is the Word of Allah revealed to him in the form of a Sacred Book in a clear

Linguistics and the Sacred Language of the Qur'an

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The Arabic language of the Qur'an is an integral aspect of this revealed Book. It is not only the content of the Qur'an which has come from Allah, the container is also Divine and cannot be separated from the message. Since the message has been sent to mankind, it has a clear human language as its vehicle of expression. But the very words and verses of the Qur'an have not been originally spoken by a human being. They have been spoken by Allah and therefore they have Divine Presence. It is this Divine Presence that makes the Arabic of the Qur'an a sacred language.

When the Qur'an is translated into another language, the translation does not have that sacredness of the original text, because its words and sentences belong to a human being and thus they have not the Divine Presence to be sacred. Therefore, the sacredness of the Qur'anic language originates not from its being Arabic, but from the fact that it is the very Word of Allah.

When we say the sacredness of the Qur'anic Arabic is due to its being chosen by Allah as His instrument of communication, we, in fact, speak theologically. But one may also speak linguistically and say that Allah has chosen to communicate in such a language because it is pure, primordial and profound.

It is an undeniable fact that the rhetoric of the Qur'an is really sublime. The eloquence of this Divine Book is a great miracle in Islam. It is a miracle of speech which has remained unchallengeable since it was revealed fourteen centuries ago. There is no doubt that during this long period of time there have been many unbelieving adversaries who tried to fight against the Book of Allah, but none could really succeed in his diabolical struggles, nor could any of them harm the Qur'an whatever. According to the saying of a Qur'anic verse (15:9) Allah Himself has sent down the