

Towards Islamic English

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1. What is Islamic English?

Islamic English is the English Language modified to enable it to carry Islamic proper nouns and meanings without distortion, and thus to serve the linguistic needs of Muslim users of the English Language. As new notion, Islamic English " raises three questions: who are the Muslim users of the English Language? What is the nature of the distortion claimed to exist? What is the needed rectification?

A. Who are the Muslim Users of the English Language?

Muslim users of the English Language are, first, the Muslim citizens and permanent residents of the English-speaking countries, namely ,the United Kingdom , the United states of America , Canada , Australia ,and New Zealand . To these, the non- citizen Muslim students should be added. The term also includes the Muslim citizens and permanent or transient residents of those countries around the world where English is official Language, such as Pakistan, India, Ceylon, Malaysia, the Philippine in Asia, and Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania and others in Africa and around the globe. Besides the foregoing, the category equally includes all those Muslims, regardless of their country of residence, who have mastered or acquainted themselves with English language, and who use it as a language of

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reading and research, for writing and or communication. All together, the number of Muslim users of the English language to whom this essay is addressed amounts to several hundred million people. Finally, to this large number must be added the millions of Muslims who use the non-Islamic Languages --e .g., the Languages of Europe, Asia and Africa, because the rules regarding translation apply to all, and the rules applying to transliteration apply to those Languages which are written in the Latin alphabet . Indeed, some of the considerations of this essay involve the Muslim users of all other Languages that are not based on the Arabic alphabet , thus making the numbers of persons involved far greater than those non-Muslims for whom English is mother tongue.

B. The Nature of the Distortion

1. Distortion Through Transliteration

The present situation of the English Language-- when it expresses matters pertaining to Islam, its culture, history and civilization, to the Muslim world or the Muslims , whether used by Muslims or non-Muslims- is chaotic . It constitutes an intellectual and spiritual disaster of the highest magnitude. And it carries a universal injustice against the human spirit.

Every Muslim who needs to have his name transliterated into the Latin alphabet must have seen his name spelled in a large variety of ways. Most of these ways mutilate the Muslims' name beyond recognition. In an English telephone book, for example , or any listing of Muslim names in Latin script, the person wanted may never be found because of the diverse ways of spelling , or because of the abbreviation of the Muslims' numerous personal names . Such bungling of Muslim names may sometimes be tolerated as insignificant ; or it may even constitute a joke which people take light heartedly. However, in other instances where the name

includes a divine attribute, or one of the name of the Prophet “Salla Allah alayhi wa sallam”, the incorrect spelling is not only irritating ; it can be downright blasphemous.

A Muslim name is in all likelihood an Arabic name, composed either of one of the names of Allah “Subhanaahu wa ta’ala” or of one of His divine attributes “Sifat ” , or one of the names of the Prophet “SAAS”, or of one of his epithets , or of the name of another prophet , or of a quality or attribute of that prophet , or of a Qur 'anic term connoting an Islamic value . It is also possible that the name be that of a sahabi “a companion of the Prophet”, or of a great Muslim of the past who has distinguished himself in the service of Islam , whether by his pen or sword , virtue or piety, statesmanship or justice , or any other Islamic value .Or finally , it may be the very name of that value whether as a noun or adjective. In the first week of his life, the Muslim newborn is given his/ her name , in the hope that the child would grow to fulfill the Islamic value which the name indicates; or to emulate the great Muslim predecessor to whom the name refers. Names are dear to their owners, to the parents who chose them and to the peers who have come to recognize each person by that person’s name. Names are surely worthy of respect . Every person is entitled to be called by his /her name; and every name should be honored by correct spelling and pronunciation . This is one of the basic human rights of the Muslim.The Muslim’s name is the index of the person’s Legal personality under the shari'ah.

To the outside world, the name is not only a convention ; I .e.,, a denoting symbol . It is also a partial definiens of the person . For instance, it certainly tells the outside world that the person is Muslim .To that person as well as to other Muslim , this fact may well be the most significant aspect of the person’s being . To the attentive outsider, or to a fellow Muslim ; the name also recalls an aspect of Islamic history , of Islamic culture, of Islam itself. Indeed, the name is sometimes informative about Allah “SWT” Himself . when it is connotative of a

relationship to Him as in Abd Allah , Abd al Rahman , etc. And it may be informative of the Prophet whose very name one may be carrying. Respect to one's name is not only respect to one's own person; it is also respect to the person after whom one is named , or to the Islamic quality connoted by the name. Names are often expressive of a whole history, a whole culture, a whole religion, a whole spiritual realm; and it is these which suffer through misrepresentation or misnaming . Should the name be mutilated, disrespectfully bungled or violated, all that it represents is equally violated .

As examples of the above, consider the most obvious and gravest cases .The names Hafiz “ successful memorizer of the Qur'an” or Hamid “ praiser of Allah” or khaliq “creator” can easily be misaccented as Hafiz, Hamid or Khaliq. Immediately, they are transformed from meaning an Islamic virtue to blasphemy .For no man may be called by a divine name . If the name were conjunction of Abd “servant” and one of the divine names , it would be equally blasphemous to misspell or mispronounce it ; e.g. Abd al Haqq “servant of Allah, the Truth – SWT” as Abd al Hakk “Servant of scratching ”. It would be an equally grave misdeed to drop ,Abd from the name “a popular abbreviation technique” , leaving the divine name standing by itself. If on the other hand , and for the same reason of abbreviation , the divine name is dropped , one is left with the abject Arabic name of, Abd ; i.e., servant or slave without specification of owner or master. In other mutilations, the divine name is dropped, but not its demonstrative al , thus creating the absurd appellation, Abdul or "servant of the ."

Next to blasphemy stand those misspelling of the names of God combined with other words to make personal names, such as Mumtaz al Rehman instead of al Rahman; Abd al Gafur “servant of the widean empty” instead of Abd al Ghafur “servant of the Forgiving”; al Aliyy or Ali “the mechanical” instead of al ' Aliyy “the High”. These are followed by misspellings of

the names of the Prophet “SAAS”; as Munzir or Monzir “hurrier, belittler, despiser” instead of Mundhir “warner”; or Muddassir “he in whom something has been plunged by force, as in assassination with a dagger” instead of Muddaththir “wrapped in his mantle, of Surah 74:1”. Muslims object strongly to the changing of the name of the Prophet Muhammad to Maumet, which Webster-International defines as “a false god or idol arising from a belief that Mohammedan worshipped images of Mohammed, a puppet; a doll, an image, also an odd figure; aguy -- often a term of abuse” and the derivative “maumetry” which the same dictionary defines as “1. idolatry, idols, and idol; 2. the appurtenances of idolatry; 3. Mohammedanism.” Surely, it follows that Muslims ought to insist that the prophet’s name is Muhammad “SAAS”, and not Mahomet, Mohamed, Mohamed, Mohammed, or Maumet.

There are of course other names which are removed from Allah “SWT” and His Prophet “SAAS”, though they may be names of the Prophet’s companions or of the great men and women of Islam “RAA”. Such names are held in high honor and esteem by all Muslims. No Muslim may give himself or others the Liberty to tamper with their spelling or pronunciation. And there are still other names which connote an Islamic meaning or value. It is offensive to the Muslim ear which comprehends those meanings and values to receive them bungled and mutilated from the hands of those who are ignorant of those meanings, whether they are the carriers of these names or others.

Muslims are particularly prone to having their beautiful Islamic names mutilated, because of the general ignorance of Arabic or the difficulties of transliteration. Names which have a western equivalent “Yusuf, Yaqub Ishaq, Yunus, Musa, Ibrahim etc.” are hastily changed into their biblical equivalents “Joseph, Jacob, Isaac, Jonah, Moses, Abraham, etc”, without

awareness that these biblical personalities represent entirely different meanings to the Christian and /or Jew than the Qur'anic names do to the Muslim .

There are as many ways transliterating Arabic words into the Latin alphabet as there are authors and writers and publishers. Indeed those of one country have followed different ways from those of another country . Within the English speaking world , there has been little success in coordinating and unifying the various ways. Some universities, Libraries, educational institutions and publishing firms have each devised its own way. Some have had more influence than others: the Library of Congress, the American Oriental Society, the Middle East Studies Association, and some major universities, each tried to establish its own way as universal norm for transliteration . None succeeded , and none proved its viability without question, since each had set its own rules , some of which were quite arbitrary . All were incomplete and inadequate for the English speaking Muslim.

The vast majority of transliterated words carry no diacritical marks and thus give occasion for mispronunciation and misaccentuation. Nearly all of them are rendered phonetically according to the colloquial pronunciation . This creates an impossible situation for those who must separate the words in order to understand them . To the Muslim who knows Arabic only through the Qur'an, understanding what is being read or recited becomes a hopeless task . The French orientalist mispronounce the soft as dj, all an endings as the diphthong an, and give a Frenchified ending “de” to all adjectives derived from proper nouns “Abbaside , Fatimide , etc”.

2. Distortion Through Translation

Many Arabic words are simply not translatable into English. Many others are rendered into English with difficulty. The desire of Muslims to present their meaning in English is often so strong as to make them less cautious, and to use words which do not at all do justice to the

intended meanings . The orientalists may have used such translations with impunity because for them it is a foregone conclusion that all Islamic meanings must fit themselves under Western categories . But for the Muslims to imitate the orientalists in their errors and misinterpretations, or to add to these their own, is unacceptable . The meanings imbedded in the Arabic Language of the Qur'an are a precious Legacy which no man is at liberty to tamper with or change. Besides the Ludicrous effect the noblest of meanings can sometimes produce when mistranslated, many meanings suffer change, loss or obliteration from consciousness through the translation process . It must be remembered that many of the meanings suffer change, Loss or obliteration from consciousness through the translation process. It must be remembered that many of the meanings of Arabic words and phrases are of divine provenance and may not be separated from their Arabic forms . And when Islamic meanings are altered, transformed and transvalued through translation, it is an irreparable loss to Islam, to the Muslim and to the human spirit.

Consider for instance the word salah, which is often translated as “prayer” “Prayer” is any communication with whatever is taken to be one's god, even if that is an idol . To say that one prays to God, to Jesus that one prays for a juicy apple in the morning or for one's beloved to recover from sickness, to pray at any place or time, in any position or under any condition, all these constitute sound English usage . What distortion of salah to translate it as prayer. Being the supreme act of worship in Islam, salah must be held at its five times, for the purposes defined by the shari'ah. It should consist of precise recitations, genuflection's, prostration's, standings and sittings with orientation towards the Ka ' bah and should be entered into only after ablutions and a solemn declaration of intention or niyyah. How can all this ever be compressed in a word like "prayer"? Doesn't reason dictate that salah should always be called “salah” " Prayer" corresponds to the meaning of du'a, and may well stand as translation of it . But certainly not for salah.

Or consider the term zakah which is often translated as charity, alms, poor-due or alms-giving .All these English terms apply to any act of voluntary, altruistic giving of anything useful in any amount, made with the intention of helping those in need. Such would correspond to the Arabic term sadagah. On the other hand, Zakah is something quite different . It is more of the nature of a public welfare tax, with the specific amount of 2 1/2 per cent of appropriated wealth beyond a certain minimum amount “excluding capital goods, lands , residence , personal house furnishings and consumer’s goods for domestic use”. Its payment is religiously and publicly obligatory for all Muslims without exception, and it is levied on all inheritances before distribution . As the etymology of the word indicates, zakah is a "sweetening" of the total income of the year and of the owner’s continued holding of accumulated wealth. Obviously , zakah is not the equivalent of any one of the English terms mentioned. It must therefore never be translated . Rather , it must be understood as it stands in its Arabic form.

The same considerations are applicable to most of the vocabulary of Islam, both the religion and the culture. Words like tqwa, huda, dalal, qist, wahy, siyam, haji, fiqh, usul fiqh, hadith,etc. have much more meaning in their Arabic form than their English approximation are ever capable of carrying. To give an English translation to them is to reduce, and often to ruin, those meanings. To the scholar in general, intellectual loyalty to English form has to no right to assume priority over loyalty to meaning. The later is the realm of truth; and truth must take precedence over all other values—let alone the value of a convention of the English speaking people. A fortiori, for the Muslim, loyalty to “ the King’s English” must never assume priority over loyalty to Islam, to its meanings and concepts.

What is being proposed here is not really a violation of English. Rather, it is an enrichment. In modern times, the English Language has profited immensely by additional

vocabulary from French and German, Spanish and Italian, as it did from Latin and Greek in pre-modern times. Nor is this the first time that English, like all other languages of Europe, stands to benefit from Arabic vocabulary. They all did so in their “Middle Ages” when Arabic was the world Language of science and technology, of administration, of international relations and trade. Then the English language needed to appropriate the Muslims’ discoveries in philosophy, medicine and pharmacology, in astronomy and navigation, agriculture and industry, public administration and trade, diplomacy and international relations. This, it could do by simple act of borrowing; for it was possible for the English and Latin speaking peoples to learn and develop the materials, textbooks or establishments to which the newly learned vocabulary referred. But it was not then possible for the English or Latin Languages to benefit from the religious and cultural vocabulary of Islam. The spiritual and intellectual tyranny of the Church would not permit it. Today that tyranny has passed; many of those whose mother tongue is English have become Muslims; and many of the Muslims have become English speaking. Equally, today the conditions of the English speaking world need the religious and spiritual values of Islam than they did at any other period of their history. Infusion of the language with a new religious, spiritual and ethical vocabulary, and the permanent presence of English speaking Muslims within the English speaking world to embody and exemplify Islamic values and meanings in their daily lives, may have salvific value not only for the English speaking peoples themselves, but for the world of which they are the economic, political and military leaders.

As we have already suggested, transliteration and translation are capable of great distortions of the form and content of Islamic concepts. On the long run, such distortions cannot be without effect upon the spiritual life of the speaker of the language in which they occur—because of the built-in human tendency to practice what one thinks, and to think what the

majority often one's peers usually understand by the words in common use. Percontra, the alert Muslim who resists the conventions surrounding him and injects into the new vision and new spiritual sensitivities is not only a blessing to his own English speaking community, but a living example of Islamic loyalty to the language of al Qur'an al karim. Insistence upon using and preservation of that Language are acts Islamic purism necessary for preservation of the Quranic revelation, Allah "S W T" has said many times that the Quran is an Arabic Quran "12: 2, 20: 113, 39:28, 41:3 43:3 46:12, 16: 102". Its concepts and categories are Arabic. Were it not for this, the revelation would have suffered change because with the change of Language the Linkage with the present is gradually lost. The old meanings and categories of thought and life embedded in the Language fade away and disappear from consciousness without use. The tampering with the revelations of the earlier prophets from Adam, Noah and Abraham to Jesus, would surely befall the Quranic revelation.

Just as loyalty to Islam cannot be separated from Loyalty to al Qu'ran al Karim, the latter cannot be separated from Loyalty to Arabic, its language and from. This inseparable connection is at the root of *ijaz* -- the absolute inimitability of al Qu'ran and its transcendent and miraculous nature. For its sake and because of its requirement that the Language remain in constant use the Arabic Language neither changed nor developed over the past fifteen centuries. The immutability and permanence of Arabic has saved al Quran al Karim from the hermeneutical problems besetting the old and New Testaments as well as the Hindu and Buddhist scriptures and they have made it possible for us in this century to understand al Quran al Karim just as well as the contemporaries of the Prophet "SAAS" did when they heard for the first time. Faulty transliteration and improper translation constitute a serious threat to this continuity of Islamic understanding.

If in spite of these considerations, the English speaking Muslim mutilates his own name and the Arabic vocabulary of Islam whether through transliteration, pronunciation or translation

or if he suffers without objection the Arabic language of al Quran al Karim to be so mutilated by others or which is even worse tolerates or encourages such mutilation --- what does this tell about his personality ? Surely a warping of its Islamicness is in evidence on three levels:

- 1) It betrays a lax or disrespectful attitude to the names of Allah “SWT” These being Quranic his Laxity is a toleration of tampering with the Quranic text which is holy! it is a defiance of Allah “SWT” since it is He Who said: “It is we Who revealed the Quran and it is we who shall safeguard it ” “15:9”
- 2)less grave but equally significant is the attitude of laxity or disrespect betrayed by tampering with the names the Prophet “SAAS” of his companions of the great men Qu’ran and women of Islam and of Islamic meanings and values .
- 3)Indirectly, there is another kind of attitude betrayed in the process. It is that of tolerating the corruption of the language of the Qu’ran through the use of colloquialisms, Whether those of the Arabic or other vernaculars . colloquialisms are the most dangerous and persistent threat to the language and hence to the text of al quran Karim. They are the road to the division of the Arabic Language into numerous dialects which soon develop into Languages of their own first alienating the people form, and finally dividing them against ,one another Loyalty to the colloquial Language and /or the vernacular is the mirror of shuubiyah , the promoter of ethnocentrism . It is the beginning of resistance to al Quran alkarim itself . . it is not by accident that every enemy of Islam has blessed, promoted and encouraged the colloquial dialects of the Muslim peoples Linguists do Know the colloquialisms are the end of unity and beginning of division and those of then that Know continuing role al Quran alKarim has played in uniting the Muslims of the world across the continents as well as the centuries and in determining their lives, new Know that colloquialisms cut the umbilical cord which binds the Muslim to their scripture.

For the English speaking Muslim to create a new Language--- Islamic English -- by adding to modern English the terms of the religion , spirituality and culture of Islam , together

with a few pertinent rules of Arabic grammar , is a worthy creative and beneficial effort . It is not the first time in history that it happened . The pahlaw speaking Muslim were the first to create Persian by exactly the same method, and they were followed by the speakers of Sanskrit and other languages of the Indian subcontinent who created Undue and other modern vernaculars such as pushtu Punjabi, Sindi, Balahand, Bengali , by speakers of the Bantu Languages group , who created swahili and Hausa, by speakers of the Turkic group of languages who created Turkish Uzbek and Tajik and of the Malay group who created malay. These Languages, and the Islamic literatures which were produced in them under the inspiration of Islam are all contributions to the human spirit an enrichment of the human legacy In many instances the Islamic linguistic contribution had lifted the language from an archaic age to modernity enriching its vocabulary, with that of Islam, giving the new language its alphabet, and granting it the inheritance of Arabic literature with much of its poetical and themes, and providing it with abridge communication with the then - known world .

In modern times , the English language stands in need of the percepts and values of Islam which only the Quranic language can provide Constant use of their Arabic form will help to shield the English- speaking Muslims from the onslaught of materialism, utilitarianism, skepticism, relativism, secularism and hedonism that the last two hundred years have established firmly in English consciousness And it will --in sha a Allah --- inject a reforming and salutary influence into the consciousness of all English speaking Muslims, pulling them out of their tragic predicament in modern times