

A Reflection on Sura Ikhlas

The Islamic article of faith, the Kalma: '*There is no God, but God*', begins with the negative; the denial of what is false, i.e. the absolute denial that there is anything, other than God, that is entitled to be called God.

We will take this as a model in first refuting some myths about the reliance on a deep knowledge of Arabic to understand the implications of the verses in the Holy Qur'an, before moving on to the positive.

From infancy words become attached to objects and actions in the developing mind. The extent of this is such that in the presence of a familiar object or event the word associated with it usually rises immediately to the conscious level of the mind. Invariably it draws with it additional associations that may be or may not be rejected by the conscious mind but nevertheless linger in the background with associated feelings. Thus with the Arabic word 'Allah' the reverence associated with it would undoubtedly attach itself readily to one brought up with Arabic as their mother tongue.

Still it would also be true to say that any none Arabic speaking person brought up in the Islamic faith would have comparable feelings of reverence associated with the word, and a non-believing Arabic speaker may equally bring different associations. I don't doubt that many deniers of the holy Qur'an at the time of the Prophet (saw) were deeply versed in the Arabic of the time; but it did not bring them faith.

Let us go to a deeper level in which a language itself could be said to exist so to speak independently of the individuals using that language. This would be denied of course by much modern psychology based as it is on a materialistic world view. Still psychologists are perplexed by the ability of some severely mentally retarded people who, without any way of learning it, and without language in general, nevertheless, use words (usually abusive or swear words) where no means for them to 'learn' such words can possibly be identified.

Be that as it may, the pre-existence of language itself and languages specifically can readily be understood by more open minded spiritually aware persons as created, albeit changing, phenomena. It goes to show what a blessing Allah gave to the Arabic language and thus to the Arabs that he chose Arabic to bless with these revelations. Similarly, however, He chose the Israeli gene pool to be favoured with many blessings of intelligence and talent and so on; though the favours were forfeited and thus the benefits lost that could have flowed from this gift. Perhaps in this is a lesson and a warning for those Arabs who tend to assume a superiority complex on account of this blessing of Allah.

Nonetheless the actual implications of the verses in the Qur'an belong to an even deeper level of reality. Mevlana Rumi in his wonderful Persian verses called the Masnevi describes an argument between workers who have been offered a specific reward of grapes but each speaking a different language does not understand what they have been offered. The point being made is that the thing described has an existence quite independent of the words in different languages used to describe it.

By extension the verses of Allah have deep reality of their own derived from the Ummul Kitab - the Mother of the book. This is not written in any specific language but in events and objects established in the 'intermediary' world.

The actual implicit sense of the words of Allah is in fact the deepest of realities, clothed, so to speak, in language itself and then finally decked out in the words of an individual language.

This then gives us our justification for a meditation on Sura Ikhlas. That is to say we need to penetrate deeper than a given language to find so to speak the soul of the verse and then to dress it not in Arabic clothes but in the clothing of the modern English language.

Advantageous in some respects as it would be to be deeply fluent in both Arabic and the target language (in our case English), this process actually requires rather a knowledge of the mystical realities. It is even possible the knowledge of the languages would have its drawbacks as well as advantages as language itself has a seductive effect on the scholarly mind and what we are really concerned with is the Reality to which the language refers.

It is interesting in this respect that the holy Prophet (saw) himself was described in the Qur'an as *Ummiy* (usually translated as unlettered). We take the fact of the Prophet not being a scholar and still being chosen as the vehicle to convey Allah's words, as significant support for our contention that it is a legitimate practice to seek to convey the implications of a given verse in another language than Arabic, whilst simultaneously recognising the power inherent in the original words delivered as they were by Gabriel, in that form, to the Holy Prophet.

Thus having dealt with the negative, now let us move on, to the positive.

Here is the verse in question:

Qul-Hu-Wallaa hu 'Ahad;
Allahus-Samad; Lam yalid,
wa lam yuulad;
Walam yakul-la-Huu kufuwan 'ahad.

We may first note the lines carry a rhyme making far easier to memorise. This device is used fairly frequently in the Qur'an but I do not think this makes it poetry except in the deepest sense of that word where it is taken to mean something very beautiful, as when we say 'it was sheer poetry' about something that was particularly beautiful. In that sense alone the whole Qur'an is sheer poetry (and so much more). All things being equal it would be advantageous to try to convey this verse with some form of rhyming.

The following translations do not use this device but are from great and respected experts in the field of translation and along with others are our means of access to the level of meaning of the verses if not necessarily the level of their implication.

Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1930)

Purity of Faith

Say; He is Allah, The One;
Allah, the Eternal, Absolute;
He begetteth not,
Nor is He begotten;
And there is none
Like unto Him.

Marmaduke Picthall

The Unity

Say: He is Allah, the One!
Allah, the eternally besought of all!
He begetteth not nor was begotten.
And there is none comparable unto Him.

Richard Bell 1937

The chapter of Making Exclusive

Say: He is Allah, One,
Allah, the Eternal;

He brought not forth,
nor hath He been brought forth;
Co-equal with Him there hath never been any one.

Arthur J. Arberry (1955)

Sincere Religion

Say: He is God, One, God,
the Everlasting Refuge,
who has not begotten,
and has not been begotten,
and equal to Him is not anyone

Maulana Shah Ahmed Raza Khan (urdu) translated
into English by Professor Shah Faridul Haque (1981).

The Unity

Say: He, Allah, is One.
Allah is He on Whom all depend
He begets not, nor is He begotten.
And none is like unto Him.

M.A. Salahi, A.A. Shamis (from Sayyid Qutub) (1979)

Purity of Faith

Say, He is Allah, the one and only God,
The Eternal, the Absolute.
He begot not, nor was He begotten,
and there is none comparable to Him.

Thomas Cleary (1993)

Pure Truth

Say, It is God, Unique,
God the Ultimate,
God does not reproduce
and is not reproduced.
And there is nothing at all equivalent to God.

The most straightforward way of understanding the verse is that It simply stresses that there is only one (Eternal) God who was not born of anyone (a refutation of the Christian doctrine which declares that Mary was the mother of God by means of His incarnation in Jesus). Further, God cannot be considered to be the parent of any one (again a refutation of the use of the word father to describe God and by implication a refutation of the use of this word in the concept of trinity). It is also stated that the One God cannot be likened to anything (e.g. to a father or to an idol). Thus it purifies the false doctrines which had crept into Christianity by stripping out its errors, whilst confirming its basic premise that there is only one God.

This level of meaning needs to be retained, but as always in the Qur'an there are certainly deeper levels which, however, do not contradict the most obvious meaning.

During the course of this meditation, or reflection, keeping in view the purpose of finding a satisfactory expression of the sense of verse in English without actually translating or rather re-forming the translations available became unsurprisingly difficult. I have included a sample of the thought processes more as an illustration of this than with the idea they have any merit. Anyhow these are some of the thought processes though you would be more than forgiven for jumping to the last few paragraphs.....

To begin with I am going to use the English word 'God' rather than the Arabic word 'Allah' since to change language mid sentence would appear to be unnecessary and in a sense goes against the very basis of the underlying sense of the verse that there is only one God i.e. that 'God' and 'Allah' do not represent two realities.

The First draft

*Declare: O God! Oh the Only One
God, eternally encompassing all,
Who does not conceive anyone
Who is not conceived at all
And Who is not conceivable
By any means or comparison.*

This is how I arrived at the first draft

'Cul' is frequently used in the holy book and is generally translated as 'say' which is probably most suitable in many contexts. The word 'declare' however has the meaning of to make clear, and this is such an emphatic and important verse it seems to justify the use of the stronger word here.

There appears to be no satisfactory translation of 'Hu' or 'Ho' but the English word *Ipseity* or Individual selfhood probably comes close; though Personality is probably better.

Neither of these options however have the verbal punch of Ho - which is softer than Hu which reflects God's Majesty as opposed to His Love or Mercy which is implied in Ho.

I instead tried the English declamatory 'O' which has the advantage of also indicating zero, nothingness, or none (which is related etymologically to the English word One). *[It is also probably not strictly translatable but is generally represented by 'Ya'.]*

It can vary in its implication depending on how pronounced. The Arabic has a repetition of of the 'h' sound throughout the line. Here we have a similar repetition of the 'O' sound used with 'declare' gives great emphasis. However the English interjection 'Oh', also untranslatable, has the advantage of an 'h' sound which seems important in mystical expression and for example in Zikr when 'Hu' or 'Ho' is repeated many times. I have therefore used both in the initial attempt. It coincidentally of course uses the same letters in reverse order as the original. The word 'who' in the next line carries the same sound as the Arabic 'Hu' which is again fortunate from a poetic viewpoint.

We could try to be literal and say:

Declare: the essential self of God, God's essential self is One

Or:

Declare the Ipseity of God, the Ipseity is One,

but these seem self-evidently heavy handed.

I have avoided the term 'He' or 'His' because the word 'Hu' does not appear to be gender specific despite its usual translation this way. The introduction of a gender specific term in such a short verse should be unnecessary, though as a convention the use of 'He' in a non gender sense seems fairly inevitable throughout the holy Qur'an. God is self evidently beyond gender.

We could refine this down and say:

Declare: the essence of God, the essence is Oneness,

Or refine this further to:

Declare: the Essence of God is essentially One

The problem with this is that 'Allah' itself is often translated as 'The Essence' which seems a tautology.

Though:

Declare: the essence of The Essence is essentially One

The Eternal Essence

has a certain 'sound flow' even if it is far from conveying the intensity conveyed in the Arabic.

We must also bear in mind we do not want to be seduced into translation as such. The problem with this word is that 'Essence' implies its corollary of 'accident', and thus implies a duality, which seems to run contrary to the overall meaning. The word God with a capital 'G' does not suffer from this.

As indicated above I have preferred therefore the declamatory 'O' for 'Ho' and the interjection 'Oh' for the repetition of sound.

Declare: O God, Oh the Only One

God, eternally encompassing all,

With regard to the second line it seems to me the word 'all', implying the unimaginable numerical antithesis of One is required. So here we have God followed by a reference to time and space (eternally = specifically transcending both) and 'all' i.e. everything within those parameters.

It is necessary to indicate that His Oneness incorporates within itself both time and space and everything and every thing within those.

The next two lines are clearly interwoven and present a counterpoint to each other and it would seem desirable to reflect this.

As to '*not conceiving*' most translations use the '*unbegetting*' which is of course archaic though understood from its use in the King James Bible. It seems to me 'conceive' carries both a more modern sense in relation to bringing to birth but it also carries the sense of 'taking into the mind'. This also means we can benefit from both senses of the word in the next phrase.

That is how I arrived at the first draft - this is what followed.

However as satisfactory as all this seems to me in certain respects, we are still left by it at the level of language, i.e. it is still essentially a translation of the Arabic, or more accurately a re-wording of translations, and this was not our initial intention.

Let us take an important further step and lay down any cleverness or knowledge we may think we have as useless before God. Let us ask in prayer, the unchanging Changer, the uncreated Creator, the unmanifest Manifest, the unoriginated Originator - how to express the purity of true belief in original English (i.e. without reference to the Arabic at all).

The following came immediately to mind and blew away all prior speculative meandering:

Say: God is God, the One.

God is the eternal One.

None gave birth to God,

God gave birth to no one,

And no one is God, but God.

This is not a translation of the Arabic, but seems to say all that needs to be said in the simplest way. Let us leave it, with gratitude, at that - as our final version and the completion of this meditation. God knows best.

Amin!

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