

**Abdur Raheem Kidwai. *God's Word, Man's Interpretations: A Critical Study of the 21st Century English Translations of the Quran*. New Delhi, etc.: Viva Books, 2018. Paperback. xvii + 178pp. ISBN: 978-93-87486-29-4.**

Rather than “a critical study”, this third installment in a series of books (p. xii) on English translations of the Qur’ān by Aligarh Muslim University Professor Abdur Raheem Kidwai, grandly entitled *God's Word, Man's Interpretations: A Critical Study of the 21st Century English Translations of the Quran* (we are still in its second decade) is a compilation of reviews he and others have authored over the past 18 years, reproduced verbatim. The author says he covers “most of the translations published between 2000 and 2017” (p. xii), but he left out the most remarkable, *The Holy Quran: Translation with Commentary* (2006) by Taheereh Saffarzadeh (1936-2008), the most *fiqh*-reliable, *Meanings of the Noble Qur'an* (2006) by Muhammad Taqi Uthmani, and the most egregious, *The Study Quran* (2015), among others. He expresses his contempt of all translations of the Qur’ān to date in the first few lines of his first review: “there is not a single translation which may be recommended with confidence that it would enhance the readers’ understanding of the meaning and message of the Quran” (p. 1) but then gushes over the translations by Ahmad Zaki Hammad, Tarif Khalidi, and Mustafa Khattab as his personal recommendations (p. 128). He enlarges his book with an appendix entitled “*Tafsir* Studies: An Assessment of the Orientalist Enterprise”, a review of three more works mostly unrelated to Qur’an translation (pp. 142-154).

The compilation covers 32 works that are chronologically arranged as follows:

1. *The Majestic Quran* (2000) by “[Turkish] Translation Committee”: filched from Pickthall and Yusuf Ali “without any scruples” (p. 2, 4)
2. *The Quran: A New Translation* (2004) by Thomas Cleary [in reality Kidwai’s earlier review of Cleary’s 1997 *The Essential Koran: An Introductory Selection of Readings*]: see below
3. *The Quran: A New Translation* (2004) by M.A.S. Haleem: see below
4. *The Quran with a Phrase-by-Phrase English Translation* (2004) by Ali Quli Qarai: “includes typical Shiah notions in his index... faithful and lucid translation”
5. *The Holy Quran: Arabic Text and English Translation* (2005) by Amatul Rahman and Abdul Mannan Omar: see below
6. *English Translation of the Meaning of the Quran* (2005) by Syed Vickar Ahamed: “another blatant instance of plagiarism... bears the ‘Translation Approval’ from al-Azhar” (p. 19)
7. *The Quran with Annotated interpretation in Modern English* (2006) by Ali Unal: “driven by pious enthusiasm... copious... too many parenthetical statements... low standard of language... not very remarkabl[e]” (pp. 23-25)
8. *The Quran Translated into English* (2007) by Alan Jones: cobwebbed rehash of the construct of the Qur’ān as a syncretistic, collective, unstable text marred by obscure syntax and erroneous grammar (pp. 26-30)
9. *The Sublime Quran* (2007) by Laleh Bakhtiar: “at times almost the same as Arberry’s” (p. 33) but with noted differences (see below)
10. *The Gracious Quran: A Modern-Phrased Interpretation in English* (2007) by Ahmad Zaki Hammad (see below)
11. *The Quran: A Reformist Translation* (2007) by Edip Yuksel et al.: “another addition to a strange, rather grossly atrocious breed of English translations” (p. 42)
12. *Towards Understanding the Ever-Glorious Quran* (2008) by Muhammad Mahmud Ghali: “pitiable English... ‘Family of the Book’ for *Ahl al-Kitab*, ‘Seeds of Israel’ for Bani Israil” (pp. 48-49)
13. *The Quran: A New Translation* (2008) by Tarif Khalidi: see below
14. *Meaning of the Magnificent Quran* (2008) by Muhammad Sharif Chaudhary: a didactic tool for a year-long study of the Qur’ān rather than a translation, filched from Pickthall with additions in garbled English and a thoroughly detailed index (pp. 52-54)
15. *The Noble Quran: A New Rendering of its Meaning in English* by Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley: see below

16. *The Quran: Translation and Commentary* (2011) by Wahiduddin Khan: see below
17. *The Wise Quran: A new Translation* (2011) by Assad Nimer Busool: “fiddling with the Word of God... teems with blatant whimsical rendering... countless mistakes of English” (pp. 64-65, 71)
18. *The Glorious Quran* [sic] (2011) by Tahirul Mohammad [sic] Qadri: see below
19. *The Quran: Translated to English* (2012) by Talal Itani: “mostly close to the original... marred by instances of mistranslation” (p. 84)
20. *The Quran: The Final Book of God: A Clear English Translation of the Glorious Quran* (2012) by Daoud William Peachy and Maneh Hammad al-Johani: “unethical... deplorable... morally and legally untenable rewrit[ing of] Pickthall... rehashing... disappointing” (pp. 85, 87, 90)
21. *The Quran: English Meanings and Notes* (2012) by International Saheeh: “fairly good” (p. 92)
22. *What is in the Quran? Message of the Quran in Simple English* (2013) by Abdur Raheem Kidwai, three reviews by others: “neither the literal meaning nor an English translation of the Quran” (p. 94), “seems to bank largely on Yusuf Ali, Mawdudi, Daryabadi, Muhsin Khan and Hilali” (p. 96)
23. *Quran Translation: The Latest and Most Modern Translation of the Quran* (2013) by Ijaz Chaudry: “blasphem[ous]... obnoxious... scandalous... pathetic, vile work” (pp. 103-105)
24. *The Quran: A New Annotated Translation* (2014) by A. J. Droge: see no. 8 above
25. *The Quran* [sic] (2014) by M.H. Shakir and Yasin T. al-Jibouri: “*ad verbatim* [sic] plagiarized, bodily lifted [sic] word by word from Yusuf Ali” (p. 111)
26. *Quran Made Easy* (2015) by Afzal Hoosen Elias: see below
27. *The Noble Quran: Translation of the Meaning in English Language* (2015) by Read Foundation: “a queer example of unauthorized, surreptitious publication of someone else’s [Abdel Haleem’s] work *in toto*” (p. 120)
28. *Islamic Scripture: Translation/Interpretations of the Arabic Quran* (2015) by Bilal Muhammad: “*ad verbatim* [sic] replica of Yusuf Ali’s version” with a few highly idiosyncratic modifications (pp. 123-124)
29. *The Quran: A Journey* (2016) by Kader Abdolah: an apostate’s purported rewriting of the Qur’an which he terms “Muhammad’s prose” (pp. 125-127)
30. *The Clear Quran: A Thematic English Translation of the Message of the Final Revelation* (2016) by Mustafa Khattab: “admirably delivers... both lucid and idiomatic” (pp. 128, 130)
31. *The Quran With References to the Bible* (2016) by Safi Kaskas and David Hungerford: not a translation but an interfaith project citing “as many as 3000 Biblical quotations... cross-referencing the Quran... underscores, laudably, the unity of religions [sic]” (pp. 135-138)
32. *The Message: A Translation of the Glorious Quran* (2017) by The Monotheist Group: see below

Besides praiseworthy categories, these works range from what Kidwai considers outright theft (1, 27) or plagiarism (6, 9, 14, 20, 25, 28); Orientalist disinformation (8, 24); unreadable pidgin (12, 14, 17); sectarian, tendentious or heretical agendas by which he means (see p. xv) not only Qadyanis (5), Hadith deniers (11, 23, 32), and an apparently demented Iranian-Dutch “liberal” (29), but also Shiis (4, 25), a Sufi (18), and a feminist (9).

The latter three categories deserve closer scrutiny. Kidwai—who despises the Ulema, whom he compares to the Christian clergy and accuses of “conformity to convention” (p. 64)—dismisses Tahirul Qadri (18) as “wedded unflinchingly to the Bareilvi school” (p. 75) among other inept comments. He also misjudges the non-doctrinal aspects of Qarai’s (4) contribution (more on these two further down). He denounces Bakhtiar’s translation *then go away from them* for *wa-dribūhunna* (Q 4:34) as a mistake (p. 32), a choice Bakhtiar defended as based on one of the meanings of the verb *ḍaraba* (to strike) in Zabīdī’s *Taj al-‘arūs* and the fact that the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, never struck any woman but rather stayed away from his wives for a month at one point. In my view she did not sufficiently consider that (i) the Prophet himself authentically glossed that verse at the Farewell Pilgrimage as “beat them lightly” (Muslim and others); (ii) Zabīdī said “*ḍarb* is well-known”; (iii) he cited the meaning “go away” only in the intransitive sense, not in that of going away *from* something / someone / somewhere, which would leave the direct object suffix *-hunna* unaccounted for; and (iv) the example he gave was “birds going off” (*ḍarabat al-ṭayr: dhahabat*). She could have simply adduced the equally sound hadith “Do not strike women” (Abū Dāwūd, Dārimī and others) as

a vocal Prophetic reaffirmation of the Prophetic practice, the best way, the way of the Sunna. Kidwai is wrong in his claim on the same page, however, that among Bakhtiar's "numerous mistakes... *rahim* (womb) is mistranslated in its extended sense as blood relations" for Q 4:1 (not 4:2 as he misstates). In fact "blood relations" is the exact precise meaning of *arḥām* in the above verse: "*al-rahim* is a name for all near relatives/kin without distinction between the unmarried and the marriageable" (Qurtubi), i.e. everyone except in-laws.

There is a strong methodological bias in Kidwai's approach. In discussing the definition and requisites of any translation of the Qur'ān, Shah Waliyyullah famously advocated, at the end of his book on Quranic exegesis, *al-Fawz al-kabīr fī uṣūl al-tafsīr*, that the text of the Qur'an must be, on the one hand, rendered as word-for-word and literally as possible—*verbatim et literatim*—yet, at the same time, intelligibly and clearly, *ad sensum*, even if the word count rises in the target language. Kidwai, however, confuses translation with commentary throughout his reviews (see especially pp. 35-38). His understanding of Qur'an translation, his approach to his purported task, his critique of translators are all irremediably skewed as a result, and he applies a double standard time and again. Not only does he dismiss two of his compilation's less-than-few true translations (in the sense advocated by Waliyyullah) as lacking (3, 15), but he fails to give apt reasons for recommending those he endorses, such as Khalidi's (13), whose main merit appears to be that it will now counterbalance the loathed, 70-reprint N.J. Dawood as the more Islam-friendly Penguin translation (pp. 50-51), and Zaki Hammad's interpretive, translator-intrusive *The Gracious Quran* (10). Kidwai admits the latter work is all "paraphrasis rather than literal translation... contain[ing] abundant material... not supported by the wording of the text" (pp. 37, 41) yet he extols it for reasons once again related to interpretation, not translation (pp. 35-41). Of Haleem's translation (3) he states "the work is, at best, a bare translation of the Quranic text, with very brief and occasional notes, and even these are drawn from... Razi's *Mafatih al-ghayb*" (p. 11). In reality this is as stellar a compliment as any translation should hope to get in this age of "deep and sincere concern, overflowing sincerity" (p. 35), "pious intention" (p. 49) all passing for affirmations of quality. Khalidi's translation (13) lacks all the footnotes, Chronology of the Qur'ān section, Select Bibliography section, Map, and Index Haleem provides yet, lo and behold, is hailed as "a major event" (p. 50). Kidwai endorses Wahiduddin's (16) misrepresentation of jihad as "a peaceful ideological struggle and his emphatic refutation of any link between Islam and violence" (p. 59) together with Kaskas and Hungerford (31) "underscoring laudably the unity of religions" (p. 138), but he waxes indignant at Bakhtiar (9), Ahmed Ali (*The Quran: A Contemporary Translation*, 1993) and others for attempting any interpretation of Q 4:34 other than wife-beating (pp. 32, 72). He grossly misjudges, in his usual *linguo*, the Bewleys' (15) contribution as "strictly literal and even unidiomatic... inexplicable... vitiated by a befogging or even loss of meaning" (p. 56), followed by ten examples from their text that, far from damning, are well-inspired contributions to the art of translation, most of them true insights. His objections to terms used by Ali Qarai (4) is equally telling: "Here are some examples of his unhappy and inelegant usage: 'God-wariness, abstemiousness, arraigned, baseborn, benefaction, besiegement, blameful, commending to Allah's protection...'" etc. All such objections show disconnection with the registers of the language and the medium of the art.

Kidwai also confuses translations of translations with original translations. He repeatedly cites Alexander Ross's 1648 "first English translation" (pp. xii, xxx, 30) which, in reality, was never from the Qur'ān but from an earlier French translation (Ross was thoroughly ignorant of Arabic). He refers to the works of the Omars (5), Wahiduddin Khan (16), Tahir-ul Qadri (18) and Afzal Hoosen Elias (26) in the same manner whereas all four are English translations of Urdu translations of the Qur'ān—and therefore not English translations of the Qur'ān contrary to what their titles (and Kidwai, by including them) lead readers to suppose. The first (5) is by the Qadyani Hakim Nooruddin (1841-1914) and is not a 2005 publication as claimed but the seventh reprint of the 1990 edition as stated in the publisher's imprint

itself. The second (16) is another plodding (1,770 pages) interpretive paraphrasis which Kidwai bombastically (pp. 58-63) dubs “a *tafsīr*” that “invests [readers] with a sense of purposiveness and direction” (p. 60)—despite views bordering on heterodoxy—with exactly one perfunctory line and a half on translation proper (p. 62). The third (18) is discussed in the next to previous paragraph and again in the next paragraph. The fourth (26) is introduced as “a representative Deobandi interpretation”: an interpretive, parenthesis-heavy rendering with many Arabic terms left untranslated and with an Index betraying anti-semitic and sexist sentiments, with a “level of translation and transliteration not up to the mark” (p. 116-119).

Other substantial blunders are Kidwai’s definition of *tafsīr bil-ma’thur* as “explanation of the Quran in the light of the import of other related Quranic verses and Ahadith” (p. 23) when the correct definition is “what is transmitted from the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, the Companions, the Successors, and the generation after that among the experts of exegesis” as stated in the introduction of the Jeddah 40-author, 24-volume *Mawsū‘at al-tafsīr al-ma’thūr* (2017) and as exemplified in practice by the large commentaries of Ṭabarī and Suyūfī. Twice he defines Israelite reports (*isrā’īliyyāt*) as “unsubstantiated/inauthentic reports rooted in the Judæo-Christian tradition” (pp. 67, 132) whereas *isrā’īliyyāt* are three types: the first, reports that are confirmed by the Qur’ān and/or Sunna; the second, reports neither confirmed nor denied; both these types are acceptable in the Sacred Law; the third, reports that contradict the Qur’ān and/or the Sunna and are therefore rejected (Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, Preamble). He scoffs at Tahirul Qadri’s translation of Q 27:80, Q 30:52 and Q 35:32 with dismissive bad faith towards Sufis on top of ignorance of *tafsīr*: “Since the Bareilivs [sic] believe in invoking the dead saints, the Quranic observation that the Prophet (pbuh) cannot make the dead hear the call of the Quran is given this twist: ‘(O Beloved!) Surely, you make neither the dead (i.e. the disbelievers deprived of the vitality of faith) hear your call...’” (p. 77). In reality, as Abū Ḥayyān al-Andalusī said in *Tafsīr al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, there is consensus of the exegetes that “the dead” in all these verses refers to the unbelievers. Kidwai also fails to challenge doctrinal biases and leanings that are, to a careful reader, evident in certain works and authors, such as the Perennialism-friendly (though insightful) Cleary translation (2), the Rashad Khalifa-offshoot “Monotheist Group” (32), and the blasphemy scribbled by a certain Assad Nimer Busool (17) about the words of the Prophet ‘Īsā, upon him peace, at birth: “This is Jesus claim [sic], and not God’s. Here God narrates what Jesus, the baby, claimed at his infancy [sic] without knowing what God decreed for him in the future,” to which Kidwai timidly objects as a “dubious comment... hazy ideas... bound to perplex readers” (p. 68).

Finally, although he flags others for “their ignorance of English language [sic] and idiom” (p. xiii) and bad copy-editing (pp. 13, 16, 25, 90, 119, 138), Kidwai’s borderline English, bad grammar and typos burst at the seams of his text with an irony all their own for “English peaking [sic] readers” (p. 51). “Worse, Ghali’s lack of familiarity [sic] with English language [sic] and idiom has further undermined the worth of his translation” (p. 48); “riding high on the wave of frenetic [sic] support” (p. 102); “*Israiliyat* (inauthentic *tafsīr* reports of the Judæo-Christian [sic] origin)” (p. 132); “Had he elaborated this point as some length, it will have enhanced the value of the work” (p. 16); “the Quran is the Word of God for Muslims” (p. xi): if the intent is that it is meant only for Muslims then no, it is “the Word of [Allah] addressed to the entire humanity” as Kidwai himself writes elsewhere (p. 64); if what is meant is that Muslims consider it to be divinely revealed then he should say so clearly. Quli’s use of the word “Apostle” for the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, is deemed “unacceptable in view of its biblical overtones” (pp. 15-16); but even more so is the title *God’s Word*; Muslims by and large prefer to use the actual Name of Allah, Most High and Exalted.

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