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Victorian Review, Volume 37, Number 2, Fall 2011, pp. 31-35 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/vcr.2011.0035>



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Correcting English Versions of the Qur'an: The Throne ('arsh) and the Footstool (Kursi) Controversy in 1902

RON GEAVES



IN 1887, William Henry Quilliam, a well-known Liverpool solicitor, converted to Islam after visiting North Africa. Adopting the name "Abdullah," he announced his conversion in the press, creating some consternation among Liverpool's gentry. In October 1899, *The Sunday Telegraph* reported that he had successfully converted 182 English men and women to Islam and had established a mosque, a Muslim school, and an orphanage in the city (29 October 1899). Quilliam's activities on behalf of Islam became well-known throughout the Muslim world through his weekly newspaper, *The Crescent*, which was circulated to over eighty Muslim nations. By 1893, he had attracted the attention of the Sultan of the Ottomans, Ahmed Hamid II, the titular caliph of the Sunni Muslim world and the emir of Afghanistan. The former awarded Abdullah Quilliam the title of Sheikh al-Islam of the British Isles and the latter donated £2300 for the purchase of the mosque premises. It is estimated that by 1908, when he left Liverpool to reside in Istanbul, Quilliam had converted over 250 native-born English men and women to Islam. Perhaps more significantly, he had attracted to Islam a number of prominent personalities who were to play major roles in the establishment of the London Muslim community in the early decades of the twentieth century. The Muslim community in Liverpool was more than a group of English middle-class converts. The renown of the British lawyer and his mosque in Liverpool had gone out to the Muslim world. Wealthy upper-class Muslims had already developed their own version of a world tour and arrived in Liverpool on the steamships. Many of the deckhands who ensured the success of the British merchant fleet were Asian or Arab Muslims. The Lascars, as they were known, were often in dire straits, stranded in Britain's port as they waited to contract a journey home. Quilliam became their champion, accommodating them in the mosque when they were homeless, attending them in hospital when they were ill with fevers contracted at sea, or offering them full Muslim funerals with appropriate rites when their causes were hopeless. Quilliam was also known to Muslim students studying in Edinburgh, Oxford, and Cambridge. They visited him and he helped Cambridge Muslim students to establish the first Islamic Society in Britain. Through his activities, Quilliam was able to bring together the various constituents of the nineteenth-century Muslim presence in Britain and draw upon the resources of the mosque in Liverpool to create a hub around which these often itinerant Muslim presences could cohere (Geaves 290).

On 13 August 1902, Quilliam issued a public *du'a* (prayer of blessing) for the coronation of Edward VI. In its contents, he acknowledged the legitimacy of the rule of Britain over its Muslim dominions; however, the prayer's significance

lies in the translation of the Arabic into English used by Britain's Sheikh al-Islam. Quilliam introduced his prayer with a recitation of praise from the Qur'an:

O One Only and Eternal God! There is no God but Thee: Thou art the Living, the Self-Subsisting. Neither slumber nor sleep seizeth Thee, and to Thee belongeth whatsoever is in the heavens or upon the earth. None there is who can intercede with Thee but through Thy permission. Thou knowest all that which is past, and art acquainted with all that shall come. None can comprehend ought of Thy knowledge but so far as Thou permittest. Thy sway is extended over the whole firmament, and the earth is but as Thy Footstool. Thou art the High, the Mighty! Thou art the Creator and the Possessor of all things; and when Thou decreeth a thing Thou only saith unto it, Be, and it is. (2:255)

On the surface, there would appear to be nothing controversial in Quilliam's rendering of the Qur'an into English, and his translation draws upon the four existing renderings into the English language available at the time, most closely following the text of the George Sale edition published in 1734.¹ The first English version of the Qur'an was published by Alexander Ross in 1649 from the French version by the Sieur Du Ryer.² Sale's translation from the Arabic was the definitive version for English readers through to the second half of the nineteenth century until John Medows Rodwell's edition was published in 1861, followed by Edward Henry Palmer's version, published in 1880.

It is in the line "Thy sway is extended over the whole firmament, and the earth is but as Thy Footstool" that Quilliam introduces a major departure from the existing translations. Sale had rendered the text "His throne is extended over heaven and earth, and the preservation of both is no burden unto him" (*Koran . . . tr. into English*), closely followed by both Rodwell's "His Throne reacheth over the Heavens and the Earth, and the upholding of both burdeneth Him not" (*The Koran*) and Palmer's "His throne extends over the heavens and the earth, and it tires Him not to guard them both" (*The Qur'an*). Quilliam had corrected the translation into English of the word "throne" used by all three, significantly noting that the Arabic does not use *'arsh*, the usual term for the throne of God but *kursi*, more accurately translated as "footstool." Quilliam drew heavily on 2:255 (*al-Baqarah*) in official pronouncements and public prayer, but also provided theological exposition on his interpretation during his *khutba* (sermon) at *juma* prayer every Friday in the mosque in Liverpool.

In his choice of translation, Quilliam was asserting the right of Muslims to have ownership of translation of the Qur'an and challenging orientalist appropriation of the text as a mere linguistic exercise, or worse, as part of a Christian polemic against Islam. Three of the four existing English translations had been undertaken by Christians. Alexander Ross (c. 1590–1654) had been appointed one of Charles I's chaplains by 1622 and was vicar of St. Mary's Church, Carisbrooke in the Isle of Wight from 1634 to his death (Allan 72).

Ross's title to his translation tells its own story of prevailing attitudes and warns of the "dangers of reading the alcoran."³ George Sale had no living experience of Muslim life in spite of his claims to have lived twenty-five years in Arabia (Thomson 179). A devoted Protestant, he considers Islam to compare unfavourably with Christianity and Judaism, writing in the prologue to his translation,

I imagine it almost needless either to make an apology for publishing the following translation, or to go about to prove it a work of use as well as curiosity. They must have a mean opinion of the Christian religion, or be but ill grounded therein, who can apprehend any danger from so manifest a forgery. As Mohammed gave his Arabs the best religion he could, preferable, at least, to those of the ancient pagan lawgivers, I confess I cannot see why he deserves not equal respect, though not with Moses or Jesus Christ, whose laws came really from heaven. ("To the Reader" iii)

John Medows Rodwell (1808–1900) was also a clergyman of the Church of England, serving as Rector of St. Peter's, Saffron Hill, London from 1836–43 and Rector of St. Ethelburga's, Bishopsgate, London from 1843–1900.⁴ Edward Palmer (1840–82), who represented the new academic orientalism,⁵ was invited by Max Müller to contribute a new version of the Qur'an to his monumental series *Sacred Books of the East*. In 1871, Palmer became Lord Almoner's Professor of Arabic at Cambridge University, translating several works of Oriental mysticism and travelling extensively in the Middle East.

Quilliam's romantic disposition toward the Ottoman Empire would have led him to feel more empathy with Palmer's orientalism than the Christian negation of Islam exhibited in the earlier versions but, even though well-travelled and admired by the Bedouin, Palmer remained a linguist outside of Islam. Although Quilliam never translated the Qur'an into English, his *tafsir* (commentary) of the text can be gleaned from his weekly Qur'an classes provided to his English converts in Liverpool from 1900 and recorded in his weekly newspaper *The Crescent* in the early years of the twentieth century (Geaves 123). The Muslim convert community established by Quilliam in Liverpool between 1888 and 1908 provided both a prototype and an inspiration for the London and Woking communities in the early decades of the twentieth centuries. Indeed, Quilliam played a prominent role in both until his death in 1932. The translation of the Qur'an that he pre-empted was to be produced by his companion convert, Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, in 1930⁶ and to remain one of the classic English translations to this day. In asserting his right to interpret the Qur'an, Abdullah Quilliam was affirming his legitimacy as the leader of British Muslims. Quilliam's intervention at the beginning of the twentieth century not only challenged the appropriation of the translation of the Qur'an by Western Orientalists but also heralded the ongoing academic debate between the validity of accounts that come from a person within a culture (*emic*) or by observers who claim cultural neutrality (*etic*).⁷

Notes

- 1 Quilliam would have been familiar with George Sale's *Koran*, commonly called the *Alcoran of Mohammed*, tr. into English immediately from the original Arabic; with explanatory notes, taken from the most approved commentators. To which is prefixed a preliminary discourse 1734. J. Wilcox reprinted this as "The *Koran*: Commonly Called the *Alcoran of Mohammed*" (1856). Quilliam's personal edition of the Qur'an was Sale's 1856 translation.
- 2 *L'Alcoran de Mahomet* was the third western translation of the Qur'an, preceded by *Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete* and the translation by Mark of Toledo.
- 3 See title: *The Alcoran of Mahomet: Translated out of Arabique into French by the Sieur Du Ryer, Lord of Malezair, and Resident for the King of France at Alexandria, and Newly Englished for the Satisfaction of All That Desire to Look into Turkish Vanities, to Which is Prefixed the Life of Mahomet, ... with a Needful Caveat, or Admonition, for Those Who Desire to Know What Use May Be Made of, or If There Be Danger in Reading, the Alcoran* (1649).
- 4 Biographical information on Rodwell is scarce. There is a short and compact biographical note of J.M. Rodwell from the *Dictionary of National Biography*, London, 1909, 1176.
- 5 In 1869, Palmer surveyed the Sinai on behalf of the Palestine Exploration Fund and, in 1870, undertook a solo exploration of the desert of El-Tih, where he became acquainted with the Bedouin Abdallah Effendi. Palmer's writings include *The Desert of the Exodus* (1871), *The Poems of Beha-ed-Din* (1876–1877), *A Grammar of the Arabic* (1874), *Jerusalem, the City of Herod and Saladin* (co-written with Walter Besant, 1871), *Persian Dictionary* (1876), and *English and Persian Dictionary* (1883).
- 6 Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall (1875–1936) made a public declaration of his conversion to Islam after delivering a talk on "Islam and Progress" on 29 November 1917 to the Muslim Literary Society in Notting Hill, West London. He led the activities of the Woking Muslim Mission in the absence of Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din, its founder. His translation of the Qur'an into English was the first by a Muslim convert and was published in 1930 under the title *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an* (Marmaduke Pickthall n. pag.).
- 7 An anthropological distinction first theorized by Kenneth L. Pike in *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior* (3 parts). 1954–60.

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The Book of Acts and the Origin of the Races in Evangelical Thought

TIMOTHY LARSEN



And [God] hath made of one blood all nations of men.

— *KJV Acts 17:26*

WHILE IT is entertaining for scholars to quote those Victorians who defied established scientific knowledge on religious grounds, many evangelical ministers and theologians were actually quite willing to modify their Biblical interpretations in the light of advancing knowledge. They by and large adjusted quickly and painlessly to the old earth findings of nineteenth-century geology. They were likewise ready to reread the deluge as a local rather than universal event when scientific critiques made the latter possibility appear more and more untenable. For example, in 1839, the eminent evangelical theologian, John Pye Smith, published his influential book *On the Relation between the Holy Scriptures and Some Parts of Geological Science*.¹ In this well-received volume, Pye Smith accepted not only an old earth and a local flood but also an array of other changes to traditional readings of the Bible in order to accommodate new scientific evidence.²

This adaptive approach was a common one and well within the boundaries of permissible evangelical thought. Evangelicals never tired of saying that the Bible was not a science book and that the book of Genesis, in particular, should not be read in a wooden way. No doubt what it said was true, but in their view it was a communication of theological (not scientific) truth, written to be comprehensible to primitive peoples in an ancient and very different cultural and literary context and in a language that contained words and idioms whose meaning could no longer be interpreted with certainty.

Of Biblical statements concerning human origins that had scientific implications, evangelicals actually found the clearest statement not in Genesis but in the book of Acts. According to Acts, while speaking in Athens, the apostle