



This note examines how an iconic Arabic phrase such as the *basmala* has been translated into Persian and English. These translations reflect different aesthetic, political and cultural aspects of this phrase. Outside of its Qur'anic context, embedded within it, the *basmala* has extended cultural meanings. An equivalence-based approach to the translation of formulaic expressions would not suffice for the translation of the *basmala* in literary contexts.

**KEYWORDS:** *basmala*, Cultural translation, Literary translation.

# Basmala: Translating An Iconic Phrase

ARIA FANI & JOHN L. HAYES

*Esta nota examina distintas versiones al persa e inglés de una frase árabe icónica como es la basmala. Estas traducciones reflejan diferentes aspectos estéticos, políticos y culturales de esta frase. Fuera de su contexto coránico, la basmala abarca sentidos culturales extendidos. Un enfoque basado en la equivalencia de la traducción de expresiones formuladas no sería suficiente para la traducción del basmala en contextos literarios.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *basmala*, traducción cultural, traducción literaria.

Translating formulaic expressions presents linguistic, cultural and aesthetic challenges. The translator will need to search for an equivalent while approximating the literary texture and cultural references of the expression. Consider the *basmala*, the opening phrase of the Qur'ān, repeated 114 times throughout the book. In its full form, it is pronounced: *bismi Allāhi ar-rahmāni ar-rahīm*. When spoken, several vowels are regularly dropped and some of its consonants are assimilated. It is uttered as one breath-unit: *bismillāhirrahmānirrahīm*. The approximate equivalence of this phrase is “in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.” In everyday speech, the *basmala* is often abbreviated to *bismillāhi*.

This phrase is incorporated into the daily rhythms and traditions of Islamic societies in a myriad of ways.<sup>1</sup> The *basmala* is traditionally the first words whispered into a newborn's ears. It is in all five of the daily prayers. Speakers—educators, news anchors, politicians—will open their talk with the *basmala*. Pious Muslims may utter it on different occasions, including drinking water, starting a car, or slaughtering an animal. It is also uttered in rituals and situations of danger. Virtually all books on Islam will open with the *basmala*, but it can be found widely in books on any subject. The constitutions of states that define themselves as Muslim contain this phrase. The *basmala* is the most frequently used expression in Arabic calligraphy, a highly cultivated and revered art form. It adorns the walls of houses, schools, offices and mosques.



In this note, we will examine how this phrase has been translated into Persian and English,

<sup>1</sup> Islamicate refers to the cultural resonances of Islam that go beyond configurations of religiosity.

which present us with distinctly different case studies. English is commonly described as being infused with Christian literary lore. Given its major place in academia, English is a robust vehicle for the translation of the Qur'ān today. The English language is also home to scholarly and creative works on different aspects of Islamic art and thought. Persian, a transnational language of belles-lettres and political historiography, gradually adopted the Arabic script and appropriated its aesthetic norms and literary models in the ninth and tenth centuries. Persian has a large number of Arabic loanwords. Before the emergence of nation-states, Persian operated as one of the dominant languages of literary production and cultural importance from the Bosphorus to the Bay of Bengal. Persian literary culture is infused with Islamic lore. Our consideration of Persian translations will not only offer a comparative basis, but will also challenge the hyper-central role of English in translation studies today. Broadly put, we will discuss the theoretical implications of translating the *basmala* in the context of its extended, cultural senses. We argue that the equivalence-based approach to the translation of formulaic expressions may need to be revisited in the case of this iconic phrase.

#### BASMALA: ETYMOLOGY AND MEANING

Let us break down the *basmala*: the opening *bi* is a preposition. *Ism* is a common noun meaning both “name” and “noun.” Now, what does “in the name of” actually *mean*? Most Muslims who hear and pronounce the *basmala* uncountable times in their lives may not consciously think about this. The formulation, many scholars note, is a way of saying something along the lines of “with the help of God.” “Allāh” is the Arabic word for “God,” with a capital “G.” The

word for “god” with a lowercase “g” is *’ilāh*. Some authorities derive “Allāh” from “al-’ilāh,” “the god.” Presumably changes in pronunciation arose from the use of the name in liturgical settings. Others see the name as non-derived: “Allāh,” the veritable name of God. In any case, Allāh was not a new name to Muḥammad’s community. Muḥammad was born into a largely polytheistic and henotheistic society. Allāh was one god already worshipped by some, at times alongside other deities of more-or-less equal rank. Other times it was alongside other deities, but with Allāh occupying a more elevated position.



In the *basmala*, God is called first *ar-rahmān* and then *ar-rahīm*. Muslim scholars have spent much ink debating the meaning of these adjectives.

Both are common adjectival formulations derived from the word *rahīm* which means “womb.” They may originally have signified a maternal kind of affection. *Rahmān* is an attribute of God only. *Rahīm* however can be used in other contexts as well, and in the Qur’an it also describes people who are kind to one another.

## ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

The Qur’an was first translated into English in 1649 by Alexander Ross through the intermediary of a French translation by Sieur du Ryer. The version by Ross is still in print today. Numerous translations have appeared ever since, mostly based on the original. The first full translation from the Arabic was that of George Sale in 1734, still used by scholars. We will examine several popular translations used today; all are currently in print. The translators have rendered the *basmala* as follows:

Sale (1734)	IN THE NAME OF THE MOST MERCIFUL GOD
Pickthall (1984) <sup>2</sup>	In the name of Allāh, the Beneficent, the Merciful
Arberry (1955) <sup>3</sup>	In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate
Dawood (2006) <sup>4</sup>	In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful
Asad (1980) <sup>5</sup>	IN THE NAME OF GOD, THE MOST GRACIOUS, THE DISPENSER OF GRACE
Hilāl & Khān (1999) <sup>6</sup>	In the Name of Allāh, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful
Fakhry (2002) <sup>7</sup>	In the Name of Allāh, the Compassionate, the Merciful
Jones (2007) <sup>8</sup>	In the name of the Merciful and Compassionate God
Bakhtiar (2012) <sup>9</sup>	In the Name of God, The Merciful, The Compassionate

<sup>2</sup> Pickthall was a British convert to Islam. This bilingual translation is popular primarily among English-speaking Muslims.

<sup>3</sup> Arberry was a respected British Arabist. His translation consciously attempts to capture the cadences of the original; scholars regard it as one of the more literary translations of the Qur’an.

<sup>4</sup> Dawood was an Iraqi scholar. His translation has been reprinted and revised since it was first published in 1956. We use the 2006 version.

<sup>5</sup> Asad was a Jewish-born Austro-Hungarian journalist who converted to Islam and eventually became a Pakistani citizen. Many regard his translation as “modernist.”

<sup>6</sup> This bilingual edition is globally distributed by Saudi religious authorities.

<sup>7</sup> This bilingual edition bears the *imprimatur* of Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, a foremost center of Islamic learning.

<sup>8</sup> Printed in 2007, this is the most recent English translation to appear by a non-Muslim British-born Arabist.

<sup>9</sup> This is a fairly literal translation of the Qur’an, designed specifically for students of classical Arabic. It first appeared

All translations use “In the name of.” This translation may immediately call to mind the Christian trinitarian formula “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” This intrusion of Christian thought may seem invidious, but non-Muslim scholars have raised the issue whether the *basmala* itself is the result of Christian influence upon Muḥammad. The question of whether *Allāh* should be rendered “God” or left untranslated has proven polemical. No translator of the Qur’ān can avoid the politics of translation today, as with all translation enterprises. In general, Muslims conceptualize Allāh as the same god worshiped by Jews and Christians. Using the word “God” in English stresses the common foundation of the three Abrahamic faiths. Moreover, Arabic-speaking Christians refer to God as “Allāh” while Arabic translations of both the Old Testament and the New Testament use “Allāh.” Using the word “Allāh” in English raises the possibility that non-Muslims may understand their deity to be essentially different than the one worshiped by other monotheistic traditions.<sup>10</sup> In other words, some may read it as a heightened religious statement.

Many Muslims may specifically prefer “Allāh” in translation based on their spiritual connection to the term. Others may wish to articulate theological or cultural differences between religions. Similarly, non-Muslims may attempt to stress such “differences” in their writings by using the Arabic term in English. For instance, after 9/11, President Bush opined that Muslims and Christians “worship the same

God.” Many conservative Christians rejected the statement. Richard Land, a member of the Southern Baptist Convention, tauntingly reminded Mr. Bush that he was “the commander-in-chief” and not “the theologian-in-chief.” How have English-language translators dealt with this? Non-Muslim translators have all opted for “God.” Of the translations done by Muslims, Asad, Bakhtiar and Dawood use “God.” Hilal and Khan, Fakhry and Pickthall opt for “Allāh.” It is common for translators to elucidate the trajectory of their decisions, but only Pickthall explains his choice in a brief note while other translators offer no insights as to why they have retained “Allāh.”<sup>11</sup>

Translating *ar-rahmān ar-rahīm* raises different issues. First, many Muslims argue about the difference in meaning between the two words. How can this semantic distinction, however minute, be reflected in English? Second, the two words derive from one root in Arabic, producing alliteration through the three consonants: r-ḥ-m. How can this aesthetic quality be captured? Most translations use “merciful” and “compassionate” for one or the other term. Other prefer “gracious” or “beneficent” and some use superlatives. Arberry has rendered it “the Merciful, the Compassionate.” Fakhry uses the opposite order: “the Compassionate, the Merciful.” Some prefer “gracious” while other translations use an English superlative: “most merciful” or “most gracious.” However there is no real justification for this in the Arabic. Sale has translated the two terms by one English phrase: “the most merciful God.” This translation treats the two words as adjectives describing God directly. Jones, the most recent translation, follows the same formula: “the Merciful

red in 2007. We use the fifteenth edition of 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the Muslim attestation of faith says “There is no god but God; Muḥammad is the messenger of God.” Translating this as “There is no god but Allāh; Muḥammad is the messenger of Allāh” raises the same problem.

<sup>11</sup> He writes, “I have retained the word Allah throughout, because there is no corresponding word in English.”

and Compassionate God.” This is a grammatically permissible reading of the phrase, but does not capture the fact that Muslims understand the two adjectives as appositive, not attributive, adjectives. The only attempt to capture the parallelism in meaning and sound is found in Asad’s version, which has produced a long phrase: “the Most Gracious, the Dispenser of Grace.” We will discuss the implication of these choices in the final section.

### PERSIAN TRANSLATIONS

Persian was the first language into which the Qur’ān was translated. Salmān al-Fārisī, a companion of Muḥammad, may have undertaken the translation of particular chapters during Muḥammad’s life.<sup>12</sup> Verifiable efforts date back to ‘Abbasid rule (c. 750 - 1258).<sup>13</sup> *Tafsīr-i ṭabari* (circa 960) and *Qur’ān-i quds* (date unknown) contain the oldest extant Persian translations of the Qur’ān. Since 1980, more than fifteen translations of the Qur’ān have appeared in Iran alone. A major aspect of translation studies in Persian is devoted to the Qur’ān. Published since 1997, *Tarjumān-i vahy* (Translating the Revelation) is a scholarly Persian-language journal that examines Qur’ān translations in languages ranging from Swahili to Uzbek.

As for the *basmala*, all Persian translations have employed the “*bih nām-i*” [In the name] formula. Most translators, including Javad Salmasizadeh (1962), ‘Abd-al-Muḥammad Ayati (1988) and Baha’ al-Din Khurramshahi (1997), have rendered the phrase: *bih nām-i khudā-yi bakhshāyandah-yi mihrabān*. *Tafsīr-i ṭabari* uses the same wording but changes the order of the adjectives. *Bakhshāyandah*, one who forgives, is suggested for *al-raḥmān* while *mihrabān*, one

full of kindness, approximates *al-raḥīm*. As popular as this rendition is, it does not reflect the alliterative quality and semantic association of *al-raḥmān* and *al-raḥīm*. Although less commonly cited, Ali Musavi-Garmarudi and Karim Zamani have attempted to preserve this aesthetic quality by finding etymologically affiliated terms. They have respectively rendered it *bakhshandah-yi bakhshāyandah* (one who gives and forgives) and *mihrgustar-i mihrabān* (the dispenser of love and [one who is] loving).

*Qur’ān-i quds*, which contains a high number of Middle Persian words, unusually uses more than one translation of the *basmala*. The most commonly cited is: *bih nām-i khudā-yi mihrabāni-yi rahmat-kinar*. The latter adjective is archaic today; the equivalent offered in a footnote by the editor, Ali Rivaqi, is in Arabic: *rahīm*. The high volume of shared lexicon between Arabic and Persian offers translators room to negotiate different aspects of translation. For instance, in order to capture the appositive quality of *ar-raḥmān* and *ar-raḥīm*, Ali Akbar Tahiri has replaced the Arabic genitive construction (*idāfah*) with that of Persian: *bih nām-i khudā-yi raḥmān-i raḥīm* (instead of *ar-raḥmāni ar-raḥīm*). Overall, the historic interplay of Arabic and Persian has presented translators myriad strategies to approximate or compensate different aspects of the Arabic expression.

Unlike English, all Persian translations have opted for *khudā/khudāvand* instead of Allāh. In his collected essays on the problem of literary translation, Khurramshahi takes issue with leaving Allāh untranslated. He argues that even though the Arabic name for God is familiar to all Persian speakers (and many English speakers), it is only used idiomatically in expressions borrowed wholesale from Arabic such as *inshāllah*.<sup>14</sup> Using Allāh in English translation, according



<sup>12</sup> Mohammad Jafar Yahaghi (2002) 105

<sup>13</sup> Hassan Mustapha (1998) 200

<sup>14</sup> Baha’ al-Din Khurramshahi (2011) 322

to Khurramshahi, is a recent trend primarily supported by Saudi centers for the publication and distribution of the Qur'ān. The question of (un)translating Allāh, he argues, concerns the politics of translation more so than its poetics. Politics and poetics of translation may not be seen as separate entities with no bearing on one another. That said, Khurramshahi's view should be seen as a reaction to institutional promulgation of a narrow-minded articulation of Islam.

### BASMALA: TOWARDS A THEORY OF TRANSLATION

English and Persian versions examined in this note point to different aesthetic, linguistic and political choices. But how are translators to treat the *basmala* in its cultural senses? Could these formulas, focused on its Qur'ānic performance, offer a robust approach? Translating the *basmala* has thus far only been examined in the context of the Qur'ān. Bruce Lawrence (2005) has admirably analyzed several English translations of this iconic phrase with a keen eye to its literary and formulaic aspects. We put the *basmala* and its extended meanings in conversation with critical translation theories. Translating formulaic expressions has been conceptualized under different rubrics. Commonly used, the equivalence approach is focused on capturing the conceptual and linguistic meaning of formulaic expressions and idioms. In "Formulaic Expressions in Translation," Xosé Rosales Sequeiros (2004) convincingly questions the central rubric of the equivalence approach. He writes, "Equivalence is not a theoretically defined term, because there are more fundamental notions which govern the process of translation. Equivalence is a mere consequence, whenever it exists, of the translation choices made by the translator."

For instance, "In the name of" formulas for the *basmala* may approximate its semantic entry but falls short of communicating its cultural entry. Seeking linguistic equivalence provides mechanical translations that occlude its cultural idiomaticity. In the process of arriving at an interpretation, Sequeiros argues, the translator must be aware of the encyclopaedic knowledge embedded in culturally-formulated expressions. As such, what should the translator do when she encounters the *basmala* in literary contexts? Consider the following context, selected and translated from the work of the Qajar statesman 'Abdullah Mustawfi (1962):

Please eat! *bismillāh!* It is the meagre bread of a dervish.

A culturally initiated translator will not consider "In the name of God" as an option. The phrase here means: go ahead, serve yourself, get started. With a more foreignizing effect, we can leave it untranslated and perhaps offer commentary in a footnote.

Another instance is Mahmud Dowlatabadi's recent novel, *Bismil*. Translated into English in 2014 by Marin E. Weir, the Persian original has yet to gain a publishing permit from the Iranian state. Set during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), the novel is about a journalist who has been summoned to a military prison in order to write a fake story about the war. Discussing the novel with the major in charge, the journalist witnesses soldiers fighting over a water tank while dying from thirst outside. The title, used as an idiom, evokes the utterance of the *basmala* during the ritual slaughter of animals. Weir has rendered it *Thirst* which is thematically related to the novel and the practice of slaughtering; it is common to offer water to animals before they are killed. The original title is mentioned only in the copyright page while there is no transla-

tor's note explaining the English title. Our colleague, Samad Alavi, has acutely pointed out that the stylized typography of the title on the cover, which unmistakably recalls the Kufic Arabic script, echoes the displaced term *basmel*. As for the occurrence of *basmel* in the novel, the translator has cleverly incorporated it into an English phrase: "A bird cannot be destroyed, rather, a bird is *besmelled*." Then, he offers us an insightful footnote: "*Basmel* refers here to the supplication required in Islam before the sacrifice of any animal..."<sup>15</sup> Whatever the choice may be, translating the *basmala* and its idiomatic connotations requires a vigorous engagement with cultural entries embedded in formulaic expressions.



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<sup>15</sup> Weir (2014), 69.