

Chicago Tribune

A new look at a holy text

An English translation of the Quran by a Chicago grandmother has raised the hackles of Islamic scholars near and far

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Laleh Bakhtiar sits in front of her computer hours before dawn, recording verses from her translation of the Quran in a deep, raspy voice.

As she reads, she says "God," not "Allah." "Disbeliever," the translation of the Arabic "kufr," has been replaced with "ones who are ungrateful." There's mention of Jesus and Mary, not the common Islamic renderings Isa and Maryam.

Bakhtiar's English translation of the Quran, expected to hit bookstores next week, is considered the first solo effort of its kind by a Muslim woman -- a grandma from Chicago, at that.

This alone would draw attention. But her non-traditional approach, from one who is not part of the Islamic scholarly establishment and does not speak modern Arabic, has sparked controversy from Belmont Avenue to the Middle East.

A story about Bakhtiar on Dubai-based Alarabiya.net, a Web site associated with widely broadcast Al Arabiya TV network, was the best-read story for two days straight in the Arab world, said Al Arabiya journalist Hayyan Nayouf.

"Many people criticized her and said she didn't know Arabic so how could she translate the holy book," Nayouf said. Some raised conspiracy theories that the U.S. government was behind the translation, he said.

Bakhtiar, 68, the child of an Iranian doctor and an American nurse, who was raised Catholic before she converted to Islam, thinks the chatter has gotten far ahead of the substance.

"Hello! Let's look at this fairly," she said. "Why raise this before you've even seen it? Could you mind waiting?"

Bakhtiar hopes by using less divisive language toward people of other faiths, she will bridge the divide between Muslims and non-Muslims.

"When you translate kufr as disbeliever or infidel, you push people away," she said.

Some of her critics and supporters also are labeling "The Sublime Quran" a feminist translation, citing a controversial verse about how a husband can treat a straying wife. Though some translators render the word in question as "beat," Bakhtiar believes "go away" more closely conveys the meaning. Because Muslims are taught to read the Quran in Arabic, English translations are used only as supplements. There is no single authority that governs whether a translation is valid.

Many translations by non-Muslims, including one commissioned by Napoleon, emerged during the colonial era as Europeans once again engaged with the Muslim world.

It wasn't until the 1930s that Muslims began translating the text into English. Today, there are more than 20 English translations. Some contain sectarian biases while others are sprinkled with politics, said Khaleel Mohammed, religion professor at San Diego State University.

For Bakhtiar, the translation is just part of her continuing journey in Islam.

Her mother was a Protestant from Idaho. Her dad, a physician, was trained in America. Bakhtiar was born in Tehran, but raised in the U.S. and attended Catholic schools. Only after she married and returned to Iran did she convert to Islam.

She and her husband were taking classes with a family friend, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, now an Islamic studies professor at George Washington University. Nasr asked Bakhtiar what religion she was. When she said she knew nothing of Islam, he suggested she learn.

Since then, she has translated or written some 25 books on Islam.

Bakhtiar and her husband divorced, and she returned to the U.S. in 1988. At age 50, she got two master's degrees, then a doctorate in educational psychology and runs the Institute of Traditional Psychology out of Kazi Publications, an Islamic bookstore on Belmont Avenue.

She also taught at the Lutheran School of Theology until seven years ago, when she undertook her biggest project, translating the Muslim holy book.

"This translation of the Quran," she said, "is a culmination of 45 years of learning."

Bakhtiar follows Sufism, or Islamic mysticism. In Iran, she lived in a Shiite community. In Chicago, she has lived for 15 years in a Sunni community. She says she doesn't belong to any one sect: She's simply Muslim.

She also doesn't think she's a feminist.

She used to wear the hijab, the Islamic head covering. But she removed it after the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, when she felt her head covering, especially at airports, was working against its goal of modesty and attracting too much attention.

Today, her thick graying hair is pulled away from her face in a ponytail. She shares an apartment behind the bookstore where she spends most of her time studying and writing.

In translating the Quran, she began with individual words. With the help of Edward William Lane's Arabic-English Lexicon and three years' study of Quranic Arabic grammar, she tried to find a distinctive English term for each of the more than 90,000 words in the sacred text. This way, she hoped, the translation would be easier for non-Arabic speakers.

But when she came to a controversial verse long interpreted as meaning husbands could beat their wives if they strayed, it became personal. Bakhtiar had counseled Muslim women beaten by husbands who said this verse gave them that right. She thoroughly researched the word "dara ba," speaking to 45 Islamic scholars. The Lane lexicon provided the alternate meaning of "go away."

Another verse in the Quran that said Muslim women seeking a divorce cannot be harmed also appeared to contradict the traditional interpretation.

"To me, the God I love would not say husbands can beat wives or even have a threat that husbands can beat their wives," she said. "From the life of the prophet, I knew he didn't do that, so where is this misunderstanding coming from?"

In tackling that verse, she joined a wave of women intellectuals challenging traditional interpretations of Muslim texts.

Daisy Khan, executive director of the Asma Society, which gathered Muslim women from around the world last year, said the criticism is to be expected.

"Anytime you have a change like this coming from within the community, especially coming from a woman, you're undoubtedly going to ruffle some feathers," Khan said.

Critics, meanwhile, have assailed the idea that Bakhtiar, who has studied classical Arabic but does not speak the modern language, is able to translate the Quran.

"Arabic is not her first language and it shows," says a posting on Algeria.com.

"How can you translate something if you are not literate in the language?" asks another posting on Sunnisisters.com.

Islamic law professor Khaled Abou El Fadl of the University of California-Los Angeles said Bakhtiar has a reputation as an editor, not an Islamic scholar. Three years of classical Arabic is not enough, he said. Abou El Fadl also is troubled by a method of translating that relies on dictionaries and other English translations. He said problems arose when the Bible was translated from Aramaic to Hebrew and then to English.

But Bakhtiar notes that other well-known translators were not considered Islamic scholars. Still others, she says, didn't know Arabic. "The criticism is [there] because I'm a woman," Bakhtiar said.

A first printing of 5,000 copies is expected at stores such as Borders and Barnes & Noble next week, and on Amazon.com. In three months, a second edition including the Arabic will be published, and Bakhtiar is recording an audio version.

And someday soon she hopes to add a Web page where other women also record themselves reciting the Quran -- another break from tradition, but one she feels is crucial to bringing new voices to her faith.

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Why Quran?

The Tribune is changing the way it spells the name of the Islamic scripture to "Quran," to reflect a growing consensus about the best transliteration of the Arabic word for the text. For many decades, the Tribune and most English-language publications called the Muslim holy book the "Koran." But language and religion scholars widely share the opinion that "Quran" more closely renders the Arabic word, and common usage is changing to reflect that understanding.

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Differing translations

Laleh Bakhtiar's translation of the Quran offers a different reading of controversial Verse 4:34, which addresses how men should treat their wives.

Laleh Bakhtiar, 2007

"Those whose resistance you fear, then admonish them and abandon them in their sleeping place, then go away from them ..."

PREVIOUS TRANSLATIONS

Marmaduke Pickthall, 1930

"As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them."

Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 1934

"As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill conduct, admonish them (first), (next), refuse to share their beds, (and last) beat them (lightly) ..."

Thomas Cleary, 2004

"As for those of whom you fear perversity, admonish them; then leave them alone in bed; then spank them."

Note: Translators' additions are in parentheses.

Source: Laleh Bakhtiar

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