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Does Allah Translate ,God‘? Translating Concepts between Religions

Klaus von Stosch

The possibility of translating religious concepts from one religious framework to another seems to be one of the basic assumptions of comparative theology. For example, it seems to be necessary that ‘God’ is a translation of ‘*Allah*’ if we want to discuss whether Muslims and Christians believe in the same God. Although the micrological methodology of comparative theology makes it impossible to give any general answer to such a question,¹ some concrete efforts of comparative theology seem to depend on the possibility of such a translation. But is this precondition acceptable? Can ‘God’ be considered a translation of ‘*Allah*’? Are translations possible from one religious framework to another?

Some theologians deny this and they pretend that there exists a sort of untranslatability and incommensurability between religions like Islam and Christianity. They deny that Muslims and Christians are struggling with the same problems and using notions which can easily be translated from one religious framework to another. In the following contribution I will try to examine this problem by dealing with the notion of ‘God/*Allah*’, of ‘Christ/*Masih*’ and of ‘Spirit/*Ruh*’ in Christian and Muslim theology. I want to clarify whether they can be considered as translations and whether the possibility of translation really is a precondition of interreligious dialogue and of comparative work in a theological sense.

Is ‘*Allah*’ a Translation of ‘God’?

At first glance there seems to be no doubt that this question should be answered with “Yes.” Etymologically, the word ‘*Allah*’ is probably a composition of the definite article *al* (the) and the notion *elah* or *ilah*. *Ilah* comes from *a-la-ha*, which means worship.² For *Elah* there are

¹ Klaus von Stosch, *Komparative Theologie als Wegweiser in der Welt der Religionen* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2012), 194–9.

² Mohammed Ali Shomali, ed., *God: Existence and Attributes* (London: Institute of Islamic Studies, 2008), 13.

several definitions: Somebody, in whom people can find refuge, somebody who affects people, or a being which exists in secrecy.³ None of these definitions has any specific Islamic connotation. Moreover, the notion ‘*Allah*’ had already been used for God before the revelation of the Qur’an on the Arabian peninsula, and it was common among Jews, Christians, Hanafis and also among the polytheistic Arabs.⁴ Even until today Arabic Christians use the notion ‘*Allah*’ when worshipping the Christian God. And even in pre-Islamic times ‘*Allah*’ was worshipped as chief god at Mecca and he was the only god who was worshipped without idols.⁵ It was exactly this common notion of God among the different religions and world-pictures which opened up the possibility of interreligious debates for the Qur’an.⁶ Obviously enough, the Qur’an did not break completely with pre-Islamic images of God, but it tried to debate them, especially in arguing against any form of idolatry (*shirk*), i.e. the deification or worship of anyone or anything other than the singular God.

Although the etymological result seems to indicate that ‘God’ is simply the English translation of the Arabic notion ‘*Allah*’, whether this translation is appropriate on the factual level is highly disputed in current Christian theology. Do Muslims and Christians really believe in the same God such that it is legitimate to say that ‘God’ is just the translation of ‘*Allah*’? Muslim Salafi thinkers are not the only ones denying this view. An increasing number of Christian theologians of all denominations do so as well. One of the most influential Catholic critics of the identification of the Muslim and Christian God is the Roman Jesuit Felix Körner. For him the only possibility of referring to God is constituted through

³ Cf. Kāzem Mūsavī Boḡjnūrdī (ed.), *dāīratul m’ārife bozorge islamī* (= great islamic encyclopedea) (Teheran: The centre for the Great Islamic Encyclopaedia, 2001), v.10, 79.

⁴ Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung* (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964), 95–119.

⁵ F.E. Peters, “Allah,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, ed. John Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 127.

⁶ Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung*, 96 and 98.

witness and surrender because God is not like an object.⁷ Thus, even the translation of the word ‘God’ to another cultural context needs this kind of surrender. In this understanding you cannot refer to ‘God’ without being touched by God. Thus, a translation of ‘*Allah*’ as ‘God’ only seems to be legitimate if ‘*Allah*’ and ‘God’ are identified in the surrender of a person.

For Körner, references to God are mediated through a confident engagement which has its roots in the biblical history of God’s engagement in the world. He argues that the God of the Qur’an is not identical with the God of the Bible because the Qur’an does not connect to the Bible in a positive way, but opposes decisive moments of Jewish and Christian salvation history.⁸ Moreover, Körner assumes that the relationship of God to humankind in the Qur’an is not characterized by unconditional love and compassion and that God, from a Muslim perspective, always remains the transcendent God and is neither really touched nor even shaped by his creation.⁹ Thus, in this reconstruction of Islam there are at least three problems which prevent the identification of the Muslim and the Christian God and which make it disputable whether ‘God’ is really a translation of ‘*Allah*’: The overemphasis of God’s transcendence, the negative relationship to the Bible, and the ambivalent and arbitrary picture of God in the Qur’an. All in all, Körner seems to think that there is a sort of gap between Islam and Christianity grounded in their differing images of God: While Christianity essentially claims a communion between God and humankind, Islam seems to witness not the communion, but the confrontation of both.¹⁰

⁷ Felix Körner, “JHWH, Gott, Allah: Drei Namen für dieselbe Wirklichkeit?,” *Theologisch-Praktische Quartalschrift* 158 (2010): 34.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁹ Felix Körner, *Kirche im Angesicht des Islam: Theologie des interreligiösen Zeugnisses* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2008), 332.

¹⁰ Körner, “JHWH, Gott, Allah” 38.

When I discuss Körner's interesting points with my Muslim colleagues, it becomes immediately apparent that his claims are highly controversial. Many academically trained Western Muslims disagree with his interpretations of Islam and they insist on the possibility of translating '*Allah*' as 'God' and even of identifying 'God' and '*Allah*'. Let's go through the points of difference Körner assumes. Since the last one is perhaps the most challenging I will begin there. Is it true that in the Qur'an you cannot really rely on God and that you never know whether God really loves you? Is it true that God always remains transcendent such that he never enters into a deep mutual relationship with humans?

If you look at the Qur'an with these questions in mind, you will see that there are different possible answers. There are justifications for different images of God in the Qur'an, and in Muslim theology there are many different ways of approaching the notion and the properties of God. The large variety of possibilities is rather obvious, and it is clear that Körner correctly summarized some of those possibilities. But other Muslim theologians insist on the unconditional love and mercy of God who is close to humans and is touched by them. Mouhanad Khorchide, for example, says that compassion or mercy is the most important property of God and that it describes the very essence of God. He argues that in some verses of the Qur'an compassion and God are even identified with each other (e.g. in 7:56; 17:110). Moreover, it is only compassion which God has devoted himself to (6:12).¹¹ Not only God's creation, but also his revelation has to be understood as expressions of the unconditional mercy of God.¹² Especially the expression '*Al-Rahman*', which appears in the Qur'an 169 times, points to the unconditional nature of God's mercy and it literally means "the All-

¹¹ Cf. Mouhanad Khorchide, "Ich bin dem Menschen näher als seine Halsschlagader' (Sure 50,16): Gott und Mensch im Dialog," in *Der stets größere Gott: Gottesvorstellungen in Christentum und Islam*, ed. Andreas Renz et al. (Regensburg: Pustet, 2011), 81.

¹² Ibid., 82–5; Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980), 9.

compassionate or the All-merciful,” which should be distinguished from God’s mercy under certain circumstances which is expressed as ‘*Al-Rahim*’ 226 times in the Qur’an.¹³

Therefore, from this perspective God is not merely transcendent, but also interacts with humans. Or as Shomali puts it: “God is the One and nothing is like Him, but at the same time God is very close and immanent.”¹⁴ “He appreciates even the little good acts that we perform and thanks us.”¹⁵ The image of such a God, who is “nearest and responsive,”¹⁶ fits very well together with the image of the God of the Bible portrayed by Körner. And it can be supported by many verses of the Qur’an. For instance the Qur’an reminds us that God is nearer to us than our jugular vein (50:16), that he is close to us when we are asking something from him, and that he is the friend and protector of those who trust in him (3:68). “Verily he has full knowledge of all that is in men’s heart” (35:38).

Thus, it depends on your hermeneutic approach to the Qur’an whether you understand such verses as proof for a loving God caring for his beloved children or whether you are afraid of him as a big brother who is always watching and controlling you. And it also depends on your hermeneutic approach to the Bible if you understand this book as witness to a God of unconditional love and friendship to humankind. At least in Catholic theology today most theologians would argue like Körner or Christiane Tietz and would say that at the core of Christian belief there is the idea that God is “a God who is friendly to human beings and who is there for this world.”¹⁷ From this perspective God is absolute love and gives his love to us unconditionally through His word Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. God also shows His

¹³ Shomali, *God*, 18–20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁷ Christiane Tietz, “... mit anderen Worten ... Zur Übersetzbarkeit religiöser Überzeugungen in politischen Diskursen,” *Evangelische Theologie* 72 (2012): 100.

unconditional Love in his relationship to the people of Israel. Thus, the relationship of the Qur'an to the witness of God's love shown through Christ and through the covenant with the people of Israel is decisive for the question of whether 'God' can be translated as '*Allah*'.

Let's first of all take a short look at the relationship with Israel. Körner quotes two passages from the Qur'an in order to prove that the Qur'an does not accept Israel as the people of God. The first passage is the following: "But because of their breach of their covenant, we cursed them, and made their hearts grow hard: They change the words from their right places and forget a good part of the message that was sent them. ... But forgive them, and overlook their misdeeds: for Allah loveth those who are kind." (5:13) Is this passage really denying the particularity and distinctiveness of Israel, as Körner puts it?¹⁸

Again the answer to this question will depend on your hermeneutics. The text can be read in different ways and it also offers a reading which appreciates Israel. In this reading the Qur'an accepts and repeats the Jewish claim to a covenant with God (5:12) and in our passage it uses reproaches which the Bible itself has against Israel. It is a common Jewish idea that Israel breaks the covenant and does not respect the words of God. The most important point in this context is the end of the passage which makes clear that in the end God is all-merciful and that He overlooks their misdeeds and invites us to be merciful as well. Another passage quoted by Körner is: "If ye think that ye are friends to Allah, to the exclusion of (other) men, then express your desire for death, if you are truthful!" (62:6) Obviously enough there is no need to read this passage as a rejection of Judaism, but only as a rejection of an exclusivist reading of the particularity of Israel. Then, the meaning can be stated like this: "Only if you, the Jews, think that *only* you are friends of God and if you want to exclude everybody else from this friendship, God will not be satisfied with you." Rather than an affront against Judaism, this is a statement against any form of exclusivism.

¹⁸ Körner, "JHWH, Gott, Allah," 36.

However, it depends on your hermeneutics of the Qur'an whether you will accept this interpretation. And Muslims differ very much in their approach to the Qur'an. Thus, it is impossible to explain in a general sense whether 'God' really is the translation of '*Allah*'. Notions are always rooted in language games and forms of life. And if the Qur'an is rooted in a form of life which is very much in opposition to or in isolation from Christianity it is very difficult to see that the meaning of the notions can be different. That is why friendship and dialogue are so important for comparative theology.¹⁹ After such an existentially led dialogue the interpretations of scripture may change, new possibilities of interpretation arise and the translation of central notions may become different.

I think we can learn an important lesson from this insight for the subject of translation. There is no neutral position from which to decide whether a translation is correct or not. Moreover, you always have to keep in mind the target audience of the translation because their cultural and educational background will be decisive for their understanding. Language games are changing and we are making up the rules as we go along, as Wittgenstein puts it.²⁰ The meaning of notions is not fixed in a Platonic extraworld (or '*Hinterwelt*' as Nietzsche puts it), but it is in a constant state of flux. Thus, translations from one religious framework to another have to be connected with the forms of life of religious believers and have to be rooted in a shared human way of living. This shared human way of living can be different from situation to situation and it opens up very different ways of understanding.

Wittgenstein reminds us what happens when explorers come to an unknown culture and that it is the '*gemeinsame menschliche Handlungsweise*', the shared human way of living that helps us to understand it and to check any translation attempt.²¹ This shared way of living

¹⁹ von Stosch, *Komparative Theologie als Wegweiser in der Welt der Religionen*, 150.

²⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*. 9th ed. Werkausgabe 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), 83. All citations of *Philosophische Untersuchungen* refer to paragraphs.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 206.

is no fixed combination of patterns, but it has to be found in different ways in different situations. Thus, it is important to see how religious belief is done and in which kind of practices it is embedded if we want to understand its meaning. Common or similar ways of acting can be extremely helpful to get the meaning of words in unknown language games. Therefore, there is no general way of answering whether a translation, like the translation of '*Allah*' as 'God', is correct. If I consider a Muslim theology like the theology of mercy submitted by Mouhanad Khorchide, I feel very confident in translating '*Allah*' as 'God'. But if I look at a Salafi understanding of God, I am quite aware of a significant difference in the concept of God. I cannot identify their *Allah* with the God of Jesus Christ and I doubt whether in this context 'God' is a translation of '*Allah*'.

Thus, the translation depends on the context and the target audience. It is interesting that even a theologian like Khorchide, who strongly asserts that '*Allah*' should be translated as 'God' and that the God of the Bible and the God of the Qur'an are the same God, uses the notion '*Allah*' when writing a textbook for children. For Muslim children the Arabic word helps them in finding their identity in Germany and '*Allah*' is even used by very liberal theologians. Thus, it depends on the context whether the translation of 'God' as '*Allah*' is suitable and theologians should respect the possibility of both the translation of 'God' as '*Allah*' and the rejection of this translation. Which decision is the right can only be clarified in certain situations, contexts, and language games.

However, within the context of Christian theology it could be argued that the translation of '*Allah*' as 'God' should always be avoided because of the Qur'anic rejection of Christ. You could argue that if the Qur'an is opposed to the central claim of Christian belief, a Christian can never accept that '*Allah*' may be God and it would be better to avoid the misleading translation of '*Allah*' as 'God'. Thus, the references to 'Christ' in the Qur'an have to be considered if we want to understand whether the translation of '*Allah*' as 'God' can be appropriate.

Is ‘Masih’ a translation of ‘Christ’?

As mentioned above, for Körner the Qur’anic rejection of the Christian interpretation of the particularity of Jesus is compelling evidence for the separation of ‘God’ and ‘Allah’. Thus, I am now turning to the Qur’anic idea of Christ. My question now is whether the Qur’an really rejects the Christian idea of incarnation because such a rejection could count as evidence against the possibility of translating ‘Allah’ as ‘God’. In this context it will be important whether ‘Masih’ is the translation of ‘Christ’ and whether other titles like ‘son of God’ are correct translations from Christian language games because the correct translation seems to be a kind of precondition for understanding how the Qur’an relates to Christianity. If ‘son of God’ in the Qur’an and in Christian teaching have very different meanings, then the Qur’anic rejection of this title is not necessarily a rejection of Christian belief. If it is the case that the Christological titles have not appropriately (in the Christian understanding) been translated in the Qur’an, the chance increases that ‘Allah’ can be translated as ‘God’. The failure of the one translation seems to be the precondition of the success of the other one.

If we look at the Qur’anic account of Jesus, it is striking that important aspects of Christology are affirmed in the Qur’an. The Qur’an accepts Jesus as the word of God (3:45; 4:171). It also admits that Jesus is a messenger and prophet (19:30; 33:7) and a servant of God (19:30), which is a very important honorary title if it is read in the tradition of the Ebed-JHWH-songs. Moreover, the Qur’an speaks of Jesus as a spirit of God (4:171) and a sign for all peoples (21:91; cf. 23:50). Even the title *Masih* is frequently used in the Qur’an which is the Arabic word for Messiah, which can be translated as Christ. Thus, the question is whether or not it is possible to establish a sort of Christology based on the Qur’an or whether the translation of ‘Masih’ as ‘Christ’ is misleading. Is ‘Masih’ just the Arabic translation of ‘Christ’ and does the Qur’an appreciate the particularity of Jesus in such a way that it can be accepted by Christians as a translation of their beliefs into an Arabian context?

At this point it is usually claimed that there is an obvious anti-Christological and anti-Christian aspect of the Qur'an which is demonstrated through the argument that the Qur'an refuses to accept Jesus as God or as son of God (4:171). Indeed, the Qur'an sharply opposes the identification of Jesus Christ with God several times (5:17; 5:72; 19:35). Whether this refutation is really a refutation of Christianity and of Jesus Christ as the son of God in the orthodox Christian sense depends very much on the question of whether 'son of God' in the Qur'an really is a translation of the Christian belief. Is 'son of God' in the language of the Qur'an an appropriate translation of 'son of God' in Christian language games? Does the Qur'anic statement really want to oppose Christian belief in Christ?

To understand why an answer to those questions is not so easy, we need some information on the historical background of Christology in the 7th century, i.e. the time of the origin of the Qur'an. Orientalist research has shown that in the time of the revelation of the Qur'an there was significant debate between monophysite and Nestorian Christians on the Arabian peninsula.²² While in the south of Arabia there were Christian settlements with a Syrian origin which were influenced by monophysite elements in Christology,²³ Nestorianism was dominant in Persia because the kings of Persia made the Nestorian interpretation of Christianity a sort of state religion,²⁴ which was also influential in the Arabian peninsula. Between both extremes there were many different denominations and interpretations of Christology without any common nucleus which could reconcile the different groups.²⁵

²² Cf. Tor Andrae, *Der Ursprung des Islam und das Christentum* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1926), 27–8.

²³ Horst Bürkle, "Jesus und Maria im Koran," in *Wege der Theologie: An der Schwelle zum dritten Jahrtausend*, ed. Günter Risse et al. (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1996), 575.

²⁴ Andrae, *Der Ursprung des Islam und das Christentum*, 16–17.

²⁵ Martin Bauschke, *Jesus – Stein des Anstoßes: Die Christologie des Korans und die deutschsprachige Theologie* (Köln: Böhlau, 2000), 104.

Among this mixture, monophysite interpretations of Christology seem to have been the most influential. They had obvious tritheistic tendencies as is evident in the thinking of John Philoponus (†575).²⁶ One reason for this tritheistic tendency was the popular piety in oriental churches, which was influenced by old Egyptian ideas of Divine triads and which was closely connected with the adoration of Mary as a sort of goddess.²⁷ Epiphanius of Salamis (†403) for example mentioned “a group of Thracian women who emigrated to Arabia and who worshipped the mother of God as she was a Goddess”²⁸ – a development very much encouraged through the title of *Theotokos* (God-bearer), which was proclaimed at the council of Ephesus. Tendencies leading in the same direction can be observed in Judeo-Christian, Coptic, and Syrian theologies. They all tend to identify the Holy Spirit and Mary, and lead to the Divine triad of God the Father, Mother and Son, which is criticized in the Qur’an. The Holy Trinity gets the shape of a holy family which is a heresy from the Christian orthodox point of view, but which was already known among Judeo-Christians in Egypt as the Gospel to the Hebrews proves. In the 3rd fragment of this Gospel, the *Pneuma Hagión* is explicitly called the mother of Jesus.²⁹ Also a branch of the Montanists (the ‘Marianites’) claimed that Mary as Jesus is godlike,³⁰ and, in the monophysite Church of Abyssinia, Mary was worshipped as the Goddess Isis.³¹ Thus, there can be no doubt that Mary was very much taking the place of the mother goddess in the Christian cult in the Orient.³²

²⁶ Ibid., 153.

²⁷ Ibid., 154.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 157.

³⁰ Ibid., 155.

³¹ Andrae, *Der Ursprung des Islam und das Christentum*, 205.

³² Bauschke, *Jesus – Stein des Anstoße*, 155.

Naturally this monophysite transformation of Christianity has never been accepted by the majority of Christians. On the contrary, it was persecuted in the Empire and even in Arabia it was intensely debated. However, these debates were not dominated by orthodox believers, but by Nestorian interpretations of Christianity, especially after the conquest of the Arabian Peninsula by the Persians in 597.³³

If we reconsider the Qur'anic statements concerning Christ against the backdrop of those historical debates, it is possible that they just want to criticize monophysitism and its tendencies to tritheism. Thus, the accusations in verses like 5:17.72 seem to address monophysite Christians who worshipped Christ as 'Our God' or even as 'Almighty God' in their church service.³⁴ And whether the Qur'an is only rejecting the triades and tritheistic concepts of oriental popular piety in Christianity or the orthodox understanding of the Trinity and Christology is a difficult question which cannot be easily answered.³⁵

Interestingly enough, the reason for the Qur'anic refusal of identifying Jesus and God is that the Qur'an wants to defend God's self-sufficiency who is in no need of a guarantor (10:68) and that everything renders worship to him (2:116). But no Christian would deny this and so one must examine whether the Qur'anic rejection of the identification of Jesus and God and its rejection of the notion 'son' really points to the idea Christians have when they call Jesus the son of God. In this context it is striking that the Qur'an repeatedly states that Jesus is a real human being, and that he and his mother had to eat their daily food (5:75).

As only gnostic interpretations of Christianity would contradict this characterization it seems rather unclear whether the Qur'anic attacks are really addressed to orthodox Christianity. Consider for example that the Qur'an is not only criticizing the Christians

³³ Ibid., 156.

³⁴ Ibid., 151.

³⁵ As a first contribution to this ongoing discussion cf. Mouhanad Khorchide and Klaus von Stosch, eds., *Trinität: Anstoß für das muslimisch-christliche Gespräch* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2013).

because they call Christ the son of God, but also the Jews because they call Esra the son of God (9:30). This accusation is rather confusing because there are, at least today, no Jews asserting that Esra is the son of God at all. Thus, this verse cannot be addressed to the Jews of our day and it can also be supposed that the other claim is not directed at the Christians of today and perhaps not against orthodox Christianity at all.

In this context it might be instructive to consider an observation of the Muslim scholar Mahmoud Ayoub. He shows that the Qur'an never asserts that Christianity calls Jesus the *walad* of God, and that it is precisely the claim that a man can be the *walad* of God against which the Qur'an is arguing. In his point of view it is only a biological understanding of sonship which is criticized in the Qur'an, not, for example, a metaphorical understanding or the idea of a son which comes from the love of the father. This idea of loving unity could be translated into Arabic as *ibn* and from Ayoub's point of view this would be the better interpretation of the intimacy of Jesus and God as it is described in the Bible. Thus, the accusations of the Qur'an against the idea to commit *shirk* by saying that God has a *walad* can be understood as directed against the Arabs of Mekka who think that their Goddesses are biological children of God³⁶ and perhaps against some Jewish and Christian sects who adopted similar ideas. Although I do not think that Chalcedon is only defending a metaphorical understanding of sonship, it is also clear that it has not a biological, but a metaphysical truth in mind. Thus, we simply do not know how the Qur'an would comment on a metaphysical understanding of sonship within the framework of relational ontology which is the common framework of many modern Christian approaches to Christology.

All in all, it is more than questionable whether the Qur'an really attacks the idea of Christology which can be found in Christian orthodoxy. Perhaps Kenneth Cragg is right in saying that "the logic by which, for the Qur'an, Jesus can never be 'Son' to God is precisely

³⁶ Mahmoud Ayoub, *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue*, ed. Irfan Omar (New York: Orbis Books, 2007), 125.

the logic by which, for Paul and the New Testament, he is.”³⁷ However, it is clear that Muslims do not deify Jesus and that in their interpretations the Qur’an shows us that you “can find God in Jesus without deifying him.”³⁸ But this does not mean that the Qur’an does not appreciate the peculiarity of Jesus and it does not mean that the Qur’anic critique of Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity is really directed against orthodox Christianity.

If the Qur’an is not directed against orthodox Christianity does this mean that it believes in Jesus as Christ and that Islam can be understood as a branch of Christianity? Surely not! If the Qur’an calls Jesus *Masih* it does not repeat or translate the Christian beliefs. The Qur’an is not just a translation of Christianity in the Arabic context. It is obvious that the particularity of Jesus that is acknowledged in the Qur’an is not a Christian understanding of this particularity. The only thing I wanted to show is that it is not so obvious whether the Qur’an contradicts the Bible. In a certain understanding the Qur’an can be understood as relating positively to the Bible and as giving a new and different interpretation of Christ. Thus, I do not want to claim that the Bible and the Qur’an are saying the same things, but I want to show a way in which the differences one can find in them can be considered mutually enriching. For our topic we can learn that there is plenty of space between identity and contradiction. If Islam uses notions of its pagan and Christian context like ‘*Allah*’ and ‘*Masih*’ this does not mean that it wants to say the same thing as the religions it is dealing with. But shared notions in shared language games are the precondition for debates, and the Qur’an wants to enter into a debate with Christianity, not in the sense of total contradiction, but in the sense of differentiation and specification. However, there is a shift of meaning through the translation and sometimes it is important to reject the translation in order to show that a

³⁷ Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985), 30; Cf. John Flannery, “Christ in Islam,” *One in Christ* 41 (2006): 31.

³⁸ Muhammad Legenhausen, “Preface,” ed. Mahdi Muntazir Qa’im, trans. Al-Hajj Muhammad Legenhausen (Qom: Ansariyan Publications, 2009), 27.

certain debate is missing a decisive point. The translation of 'Christ' as '*Masih*' or the use of the notion of the 'son of God' in the Qur'an is not very helpful for mutual understanding because the Qur'anic understanding of Christian Christology is rather far removed from the mainstream of Christianity. At this point, critique of translation is necessary and new attempts at translation have to be made.

After this very different result in this second attempt of translation I would like to turn to a last short glimpse at the question of whether or not the Holy Spirit can be found in the Qur'an.

Is '*Ruḥ*' the translation of 'Spirit'?

As the Hebrew Bible frequently mentions the *Ruach* of God there are also plenty of passages speaking of *Ruḥ* as the Spirit of God in the Qur'an. It states that the Spirit was breathed into the first man (15:29; 32:9; 38:72) and that the Spirit gives inspiration by command of God to any of his servants He pleases (17:85; 40:15). Several times the expression of the Spirit is used in the context of Mary and Jesus (4:171; 19:17; 21:91; 66:12). But it is also used to express how the revelation was given to Muhammad (26:193; 42:52) and it is closely related to the angels (70:4; 78:38; 97:4). Most classical commentaries take such verses as evidence for the identification of the Spirit with Gabriel; although, the Qur'an nowhere explicitly makes such an identification.

“*Ruḥ* is one of only a handful of nouns in Arabic that can be either masculine or feminine according to the grammatical gender. The way in which the differing spirit passages intersect and interweave with one another, particularly in the passages on the conception of Jesus and the descent of the spirit on or upon the night of destiny,

suggest that the spirit serves to mediate not only the temporal and eternal but also the male and female.”³⁹

In two contexts the Qur’an even speaks of the Holy Spirit. The one occasion has to do with Jesus who is strengthened with the Holy Spirit (2:87.253; 5:110). The other occasion is the revelation of the Qur’an. It is the Holy Spirit which has brought the revelation from God (16:102) and in this context it is clear that the Qur’an is meant. *Ruḥ* is also in the center of the prayers of *Ramadan* (*Salat at-tarawih*) and it is asked for in order to get a connection with the vivid revelation of God.⁴⁰

All these points illustrate that there are some family resemblances between the usage of the Holy Spirit in the Bible and in the Qur’an. The Qur’an again is obviously articulating its ideas within Biblical metaphors. But as with Jesus it is very important for the Qur’an that the Spirit is also submitted to the command of God. For the Qur’an the Spirit is a force coming from God rather than something which has a place within Him. This is not necessarily in contradiction to the Christian idea, but at least a differentiation. Also, most Christians usually do not pray to the Holy Spirit but He/She is very clearly considered an instance in the secret of God.

Here translation becomes complicated because it is difficult to appropriately reflect the differentiations. And it becomes even more complicated because there are other Arabic terms which perhaps fit the idea of the Holy Spirit better than the term ‘*ruḥ*’. The spirit in the Qur’an is not as omnipresent as the Spirit in the Bible and its guidance is not stressed as strongly. It is connected more with angels than immediately with God. Perhaps the guidance itself (*hudan*) which is very often mentioned in the Qur’an can be a better link between the Biblical and the Qur’anic idea of God’s presence within our lives. Another possibility is the

³⁹ Michael Sells, “Spirit,” in *Encyclopedia of the Qu’ran*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, vol. 5 (Brill: Leiden-Boston, 2006), 117.

⁴⁰ I have to thank Muna Tatari for giving this hint to me.

99 names of God which can be closely related to the role of the Holy Spirit within the life of God. In any case it is obvious that the literal translation of the '*Ruḥ*' as 'Holy Spirit' is highly misleading because the Qur'anic and the Muslim uses of the term differ quite a bit.

Sometimes we need a change in terms in order to come to a good translation. And sometimes even such a new term is not sufficient because the concept is located in very different language games and more steps are necessary to have a suitable translation.

Conclusions

What are the implications for the possibility of translating religions which can be derived from what we tried to investigate in this paper? First of all, the attempt of a general translation of religions or the attempt of a general translation of certain notions like '*Allah*', '*Masih*' or '*Ruḥ*' does not make sense. You simply cannot say in a general way whether such translations are suitable because it depends on the context in which they are used. Translation has to focus on target groups and on certain situations to be clear and to make sense. As I tried to show the differences between Islam and Christianity are not so great that a mutual understanding is impossible. However, common language games or the sharing of forms of life are necessary if religious believers want to understand each other. And the establishment of a common discourse can shape the meaning of traditional concepts and notions. Thus, I am not so sure whether such a shift of concepts from one tradition to another should be called 'translation'. It always depends on the context whether or not you can consider 'God' a translation of '*Allah*', '*Masih*' a translation of 'Christ', etc.

Translation can be a starting point for a fruitful exchange, but it can also lead to confusions and it can be highly misleading. Translation can only have benefits if we are aware of its losses. So what are the benefits and what are the losses if we translate '*Allah*' as 'God', '*Masih*' as 'Christ' and '*Ruḥ*' as 'Spirit'? I think the most important benefit is the possibility of communication and of debate. Although my Muslim colleague probably has different ideas

concerning Christ than I do, the common language can be a tool to get in touch and to get to a deeper understanding of both one's own and the foreign interpretations. If both of us talk of 'God', it is easier to find out whether we have similar concepts or not. As theology is very much the witness of a dialogue between God and humankind it is very important to take the same notion in order to give space to the possibility that there is common history between God and religious believers of several religious traditions.

On the other hand, the common translation can be a loss of differentiation. It can disguise differences and lead to a superficial harmony. It can be a sign of taking over the ideas of the others and of not respecting their otherness. That is why sometimes it is better to use different terms and, for example, to insist that the Qur'an has no Christology but only a prophetology. Whereas it seems to me very helpful to translate 'God' as '*Allah*' in most contexts, it can be misleading to translate 'Christ' as '*Masih*' or 'Spirit' as '*Ruḥ*' because this neglects existing differences. However, it can also be problematic to reject such a translation because sometimes at a deeper level one can discover commonalities that are not realized in the beginning and that allow for translation. The only way to decide whether translations between religions are appropriate is the establishment of a common discourse between theologians of different religious traditions. Such a common discourse is needed especially between Muslims and Christians on those concepts used in both religious traditions. Thus, translations are not so much the precondition of such common discourses but their result. And comparative work is not so much dependent on translation, but translation is dependent on comparative work.

The result of a common discourse will not be that different religions are simply saying the same things with different concepts. And if they use the same concepts they will often want to say different things. That is why they are different religions and pluralism should not obscure this very simple fact. However, the most important purpose of my paper was to show that differences are not always contradictions, and I am under the impression that we can

learn much from the differences among religions. Just to mention three points which are related to my paper: I can learn from Islam that the speech of the unconditional nature of Divine love and mercy alone is not enough to explain the compassion of God because he wants to show it to us in our daily lives and he wants to open up to us the possibility of working with his good will. I can learn of the manifold ways in which the speech of God can be witnessed. And I can learn that the guidance of God can be expressed in diverse possibilities and that you should let yourself be influenced by it your whole life.

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