

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND ITS IMPACT ON BIBLE TRANSLATION IN SUDAN

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Introduction

Bible translation is essentially an interreligious dialogue. This is true because Bible translation has exported the Scripture into many local languages and has in turn enabled interreligious dialogue to take place in many countries, especially in Africa. In Sudan the dialogue between the two religions Christianity and Islam has moved one step further. It has facilitated the engagement of Muslims in dialogue with active Bible translators. But realistically, interreligious dialogue does not rank high on the list of priorities of the faiths involved. The simple reason is that the purpose of dialogue is not to convert or recruit, and so increase the number of adherents, but to build cordial relationships between different faiths. This does not fit well with religious fanatics who seem to be growing fast in the present world. In Sudan, Christian and Muslim fundamentalists have little or no involvement in interfaith dialogue.

The objective of this paper is to explore whether interreligious dialogue has any impact, negatively or positively, on Bible translation in Sudan. The paper is a product of an ongoing research project in a particular area on the border between Sudan and the newly born South Sudan. The study is now hampered by a new conflict and has made more research difficult.

Primarily, the paper gives a brief definition of the term interreligious dialogue and then looks at how the dialogue as well as social interaction could help us to learn from each other's religion in translating the Bible. Particular texts that are appealing and common to both faiths have been used by participants in this dialogue. This can be explored to see if a dialogue process based on these passages is acceptable to each faith. If so, can this be of help in translating the Bible? The paper will also look at the reactions or objections provoked among stakeholders in Bible translation (churches). Although the research is still in progress, ultimately it will provide a way forward for similar research in other parts of the globe.

Definition of interreligious dialogue

The three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) derive from the same root, and it is therefore of vital importance to establish a common ground that can promote understanding and advocate mutual respect and trust among their

adherents. If that can be done successfully, peaceful coexistence can be achieved globally. It is to be noted that religious wars have devastated the world throughout human history.

Interreligious dialogue is a many-sided term. Taylor, who was a long-time missionary in Africa (Zambia and later Uganda), defines the term as “a conversation between parties who are not saying the same thing and who recognize and respect contradictions and mutual exclusions between their various ways of thinking” (Taylor 1981, 84). In other words, the desire to listen and learn is the core of a faithful dialogue. Through dialogue, areas of agreement and disagreement are clarified and this leads to changed attitudes towards each other. The challenge to any faith group is therefore to interpret their religion in a way that allows the community to see the other faith community in a new way.

Yet there are other people who believe that interreligious dialogue provides a forum for proclamation of the gospel. This school of thought advocates the presentation of the gospel to those who have never heard or might have erred and lost the right path. They are fuelled by the Great Commission:

Go then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples . . . and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you always to the end of the age. (Matt 28.19-20)

When interreligious dialogue was introduced in Sudan at the height of the civil conflict, one known Presbyterian clergyman was adamant and argued that initiating dialogue with Muslims was an invalid and self-contradictory concept. For him peace could be achieved in the country only if the lost souls (Muslims) were won to Christ. He maintained that only when the whole world accepted and confessed Christ as king and saviour could peace prevail in all the corners of the earth (Gai 1990, 34-40).

When two members of the same family professing different religions were interviewed by the writer to give a simple definition of interreligious dialogue, their rendering was not far from the academic definitions such as that given by Taylor quoted above. The Muslim believer stressed that in their family, interreligious dialogue took place in all the everyday life activity they experience. To him the term denoted the expression and discussion of each one’s faith, and especially of what separates them. He continued to emphasize that dialogue does not only mean sitting together, but it includes the expression of one’s lifestyle: the way one eats, walks, and behaves in the family and society at large.

Social interaction

In Sudan, believers of different faiths reside, eat, and drink together as members of the same family. For instance, the head of the family can be a practitioner of traditional religion, while the wife can be a strong believer in Christ. One child can be a Muslim while the others follow any religion they consider appropriate. Being members of the same family or community, dialogue takes place among the adherents of the different faiths within the family, and it is easy for them to learn as well as speak and instruct. Given such situations, it is obvious that interreligious

dialogue is not a platform where hostile debate and arguments are expected; neither does it provide a forum to prove the superiority of one's belief over the other.

There is only one formal interreligious dialogue group in the former Sudan, and this is sponsored by the government. However, at the grass-roots level several dialogue groups exist. One such group is in South Sudan and the other is on the border with Sudan. These two are not independent of each other, and are linked to the Bible Society through the TAZI program. While the group on the border operates in secrecy, the other in the south does its work in broad daylight. This research focuses on the border group. Because of the sensitivity of the program, the town and names of the people involved in this endeavour are withheld.

The tribes engaged in dialogue, unlike many ethnic groups in Sudan, have no political structure. The highest organized unit is the extended family living in the same homestead, and the authority is vested in the oldest man living in the homestead. Yet anyone is free to disagree with the leader and can leave and make his own homestead anywhere. The freedom to leave is supported by the fact that the land is common property with no particular ownership.

Previously these people practised traditional religion, but today the situation is more complex. Many have embraced Christianity or Islam, whilst some still practice local religions which are sometimes infused with elements of Christianity and Islam. Conversions to Islam have been on an individual basis, mostly for material and educational benefit. Those who have converted to Christianity secretly adapted their indigenous beliefs and localized them in a variety of ways. Religious ceremonies are an important part of these people's lives. During the appointed time of the festivals or other social events, they return from cities to their villages of origin to celebrate with their extended families or communities. Perhaps John Mbiti, the African theologian, is correct when he so often stresses the notoriety of African religiosity (Mbiti 1992). Religion, be it traditional or any other, permeates every part of an African, and the Sudanese in the north or south are of course no exception.

The presence of churches and mosques in the area, together with the religious festivals, has become a catalyst for the peaceful coexistence of the community. Such events witness social interaction by the two faith groups and strengthen their coexistence. Although during the civil war many churches and mosques were torn down by the warring parties (the government and the rebels), this did not have any major effect on the people. The hostile political situation did little to fragment the people's peaceful coexistence.

At the peak of the war, a Muslim cleric who is a member of the religious dialogue program embarked on translating the Bible secretly. His argument to other Muslims was that Muslims must read the Bible in order to know and understand it. Four Muslims were selected and started to translate the Bible in the cleric's own house. Anticipating the danger of a translation by Muslims, a Christian clergyman felt that the translation would produce a corrupt Bible. He therefore approached his Muslim counterpart and told him that the Bible was inspired by God and would

convert to Christianity any person who translates it. On hearing this from a priest, the Muslim cancelled the project three months after starting it.¹

The Bible and the Qur'ān

In Sudan interreligious dialogue does not include Judaism, since Judaism is not practised in the country. Therefore, the dialogue is solely between Christians and Muslims, and based on the biblical and Qur'ānic texts.

The Bible and the Qur'ān are the standard textbooks used in dialogue in the project under study. The *hadith* and *sunnah* are considered important works in Islam, but their usage in this dialogue is minimal or even nil. Not many Muslims or non-Muslims in the area have ever heard about *hadith* and *sunnah* or know of their significance in Islam. Thus when the concept of these two works is mentioned in the dialogue, it is often met with resistance from both groups. They often question the relationship of these works to the Qur'ān and their relevance to the dialogue.

As for the Muslims, they believe in the Bible and say that it contains revealed scriptures, but the Bible they believe in is not the present-day Bible we have. To them the original scriptures were revealed to a number of God's messengers or prophets including Muhammad himself. The books revealed to these messengers of Allah are the Qur'ān, *Tawrāt*, *Zabur* and *Injil*, revealed to Muhammad, Moses, Daud, and Jesus respectively, while *Suhuf* (scrolls) were revealed to Moses and Abraham, who are both considered prophets.

The Islamic view of revelation has consequences for the view of authorship. There is no way whatsoever a prophet or any other human being can be the author of a revealed book. The justification is that a prophet can be a transmitter of a revealed book but not its author. Thus while the Jewish tradition attributes all the first five books of the Bible to Moses, to Muslims he is only the transmitter and not the author. Likewise, the Islamic tradition attributes the Gospels to Jesus as the transmitter, but there is absolutely no place for the Gospel authors as we know them, or the writers of the epistles. Therefore Muslims refuse to accept the authenticity of the present Bible. Alongside the problem of authorship, Muslim objections to the Christian Scriptures are based on their translation. They accuse Christians of depending on translations of the Bible as if they were the revealed text. While the Bible can be translated, the translation of the Qur'ān as a revealed book is in principle impossible. Thus, any translation of the Qur'ān is regarded as interpretive commentary, and this is exactly how they view our translated Bible.

Unfortunately, Muslims have never heard of many books contained in the Bible, for instance, the historical books, wisdom literature, the deuterocanonical books, and the epistles in the New Testament. In Sudan a classical view exists among Muslims that there was only one Gospel which was revealed to Jesus and it was originally revealed in Syriac. However, how this *injil* came to be four gospels is attributed to the corruption of the Christians. This view is commonly held by

¹ One of the Muslim translators of this project eventually converted to Christianity and became a strong born-again Christian. With his Islamic background, he became an asset to the church. He became a Bible translator in his mother tongue.

Muslim extremists who can rarely be persuaded otherwise. Thus the superiority of the Qur'ān is often proclaimed.

Supporting the superiority of the Qur'ān is a plethora of apocryphal literature which is being distributed in Sudan and also in Nigeria. (A considerable number of Nigerian Muslims have been living in Sudan for centuries.) These writings are often quoted in writings, debates, or dialogue. The most frequently quoted book is the so-called "Gospel of Barnabas." The description of Jesus in this book is almost the same as that of Jesus in the Qur'ān. Jesus is said to be the forerunner of Muhammad, whom he announced by name. His death on the cross is also denied because he is said to have been taken to heaven alive after completing his work on earth. According to the Muslim interpretation, Judas, who resembled him, was the one crucified in his place.

So, in the view of Muslims, the original Bible once reflected the true revelation from Allah but Christians over the centuries have corrupted or distorted it. The present text of the Bible is not its original form. In his book entitled *Ḥarakat al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn fī al-Sūdān 1944-1969* (1998), Hasan Ahmad refuted the originality of the present Bible when he said,

Just as the *Tawrāt* is not the Old Testament, or Pentateuch, as now received by the Jews and Christians, so the *Injil* mentioned in the Qur'ān is certainly not the New Testament, and it is not the four gospels as now received by the Christian church, but an original gospel which was promulgated by Jesus. (Ahmad 1998, 79; trans. E. K.)

The Qur'ān was therefore given in order to correct the distorted texts in the Bible. Texts in the Bible that agree with the Qur'ān are accepted and verses that disagree with it are rejected. On the other hand, the Bible contains many stories that are not mentioned in the Qur'ān and on many occasions Muslims are instructed to believe them. They are free to read them and pass them on if they so wish. This is a point that creates room for dialogue.

In another argument against the Bible, the Qur'ān is said to be in its original form, in contrast to the Bible which has been tampered with throughout history. The integrity and authenticity of the Qur'ān is not to be questioned and the book is not to be despised but should be treated as ultimate truth with utmost respect. Questioning the validity of the Qur'ān is tantamount to blasphemy. But the same Qur'ān abrogates some of the early revealed texts, meaning that it cancels the previous scriptures and renders them inapplicable. These abrogated texts are sometimes referred to as "satanic verses." Besides being guidance for the life of all mankind (Muslims), the Qur'ān confirms earlier revealed scriptures.

And we have sent down to you (Oh Muhammad) the book in truth, confirming the scripture that came before it and trustworthy in highness over it. (5.48; see also 19.30; 23.39; 87.19)

Thus the superiority of the Qur'ān and its finality as revealed scripture is upheld. The Qur'ān is the last revelation, just as Muhammad is the seal of the prophets.

It is miraculous and inimitable. Because of this, Allah has the responsibility of protecting and preserving it from corruption and distortion.

Practical interreligious dialogue

The dialogue under discussion takes place at the grass-roots level. It is not an academic practice nor of a philosophical nature, and is aimed at fostering good relationships across faiths. Thanks to the TAZI program run by the Bible Society of Sudan, the distribution of the TAZI New Testament, pamphlets, and other resources in the area is a catalyst in engaging Muslims to dialogue with Christians. Initially, the Muslims considered the TAZI New Testament and other related tracts as a provocation that would lead to clashes, but the materials softened their misunderstanding, and they appreciated the designs and Islamic cultural symbols, especially in the TAZI New Testament.

In addition to the TAZI program, which is an incentive in fostering relationships, the two decades of the recently ended civil war had a negative effect on both Christians and Muslims in the area. They both suffered the pain of the war together, and the suffering became a unifying rather than a dividing factor. Equally, most of the Muslim participants have seen the “Jesus Film,” which has had a great impact on their spiritual lives. Paradoxically, some of these Muslims were keen to participate in the dialogue even before they were approached to join.

The dialogue is between Christians and Muslims only. Those who profess African traditional religion are not included. This is specifically for two reasons: First, although these traditional people are well recognized in the society and their religion is respected, there is no history of practical confrontation between its adherents and those of the other faiths in the area. There is no reason therefore to engage them in the dialogue. Second, Islam considers them *kufar*, pagans or polytheists, with no formal religion. It follows that including them in the dialogue would shut the door for Muslims to join the forum.

This interreligious dialogue is headed jointly by a priest and a local imam. An imam is a prayer leader and preacher of sermons in the mosque. He may also be a teacher, and in smaller communities combines both functions. Initially, it was generally agreed that the meeting should be conducted in a nearby church hall until such a time that the group was capable of building its own center. For almost a year the meetings took place in the hall, but the group thought of having its own center so that the participants could discuss more freely with no fear even if they reached a heated debate. Religious clashes, especially in Nigeria, have always been a lesson for the community to learn from. When the local authority in the area was approached by the two leaders for a plot of land, it was not difficult for the authority to grant them land for this purpose.

According to the policy laid out for running the program, there is no special timetable or dates for the group’s meetings. The date for the next meeting is decided at each meeting. The group can meet on any day of the week except on Fridays and Sundays, the official days of worship for Muslims and Christians. Religious

holidays of the two faiths are considered holy and no meetings are scheduled to take place at such times.

Due to the situation prevailing in the country by then, the group developed a rule for accepting members, as well as guidelines for running the debate or dialogue. Women are excluded from membership in the dialogue. This is required mostly from the Muslim side because women in Islam take a second-class position in society. Although this concept is not in Christianity, Christians engaged in the dialogue agreed to go along with their Muslim colleagues and accepted not to include Christian women in the dialogue. Another condition is that the members should be mature people who are rooted in their own faiths. The members of “Scriptural Reasoning” groups, as developed by Peter Ochs of the University of Virginia, USA, are drawn from different countries and are academicians who are well-trained in their discipline; their discussions are more philosophical and theological, encompassing interfaith dialogue (Ochs 2002). But the members of the Sudanese interfaith group are from within the locality and are familiar with each other. Some may have attended theological colleges but in general they are not theologians.

During the formative period of the dialogue, and because of the sensitivity of the program, the number of members in the Sudanese interfaith dialogue was limited. However, after one year or so, the program attracted many people. It is worth noting that the Muslims in this area are mostly Fulani from Nigeria. They are generally known in Sudan as Falata and they are estimated to constitute 10% of the population of the area. Some of them are descendants of migrants who arrived five generations or more ago, while others are recent migrants. Yet others had been pilgrims to Mecca, settling either en route or on their return. After the Second World War, many of them arrived as rural and urban labourers or to take up land as peasant cultivators. Most of them retain all aspects of their culture and language. Having stayed in Sudan for a long time, they are very fluent in Arabic, the official language of Sudan, just like the Sudanese.

Reading the Scriptures

The method employed in this practice is simple. Each participant is given selections from the Bible and the Qur’ān prior to the meeting. This method enables the members to study and understand the verses well. Each person is to interpret the selections and decide how relevant they are for understanding the other person’s religion. In a nutshell, the idea is to look at the scriptures and see how they can be relevant and helpful to both Christians and Muslims in an area where they live and share together. This in fact has helped the members to understand each other’s faith better. Of course, as in any society, there are some disagreements. Those who feel dissatisfied in this venture of reading the scriptures together simply suspend their participation on their own, resulting in their quitting the project completely. However, new members continue to join in, and the dialogue is always lively.

In one of the meetings I attended, there was the issue of Abraham’s sacrifice to God. Was it Isaac or Ishmael that Abraham was instructed to sacrifice to God?

Like Judaism, Christianity and Islam both acknowledge Abraham as their ancestor and an example of righteousness and faith. His love and faith toward God is displayed by his willingness to sacrifice his son. There is no dispute over this in all these religions. The point of disagreement is the identity of the sacrificial son. As the story is presented in the Bible, God's command to Abraham to slaughter Isaac came in these words:

Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love so much, and go to the land of Moriah. There on a mountain that I will show you, offer him as a sacrifice to me. (Gen 22.2)

The same story is recorded in the Qur'an but in a different version. First, God's call to Abraham to sacrifice Ishmael came through a vision and not by a direct command. Second, the Qur'an is silent in naming the son to be sacrificed. It is assumed that Ishmael, being the first-born of Abraham from the slave wife, fulfills that role in this story. The story from the Qur'an states:

Oh my son! I see in a vision that I offer thee in sacrifice: Now what is your view! The son replied: Oh my father! Do as thou art commanded: thou wilt find me, if God so wills, to be one practicing constancy. (37.102)

The obvious point of agreement in both books is found in Gen 22.12 and Surah 37.105, where both say that Abraham raised up his hand and was about to sacrifice the child but God called to him not to perform the act. His attempt to slaughter the child is sufficient proof of his love and obedience.

In the discussion over whom Abraham sacrificed, Muslims stress that the original reading in Genesis clearly points out that it was Ishmael, but because the scribes later corrupted the original reading, they substituted Ishmael with Isaac. The Christians' argument is that the Muslims have missed the point that Isaac was born from a legal marriage and that Ishmael was not. This brought another argument on the legitimacy of children in the culture. One participant commented that in his own culture any child born out of wedlock or from a slave woman is not considered a biological child of the father. In other words, the child has no inheritance in the family. This he compared to the many children born by women captured during the civil war, who had children with their captors. These children have no rights to the property of their fathers even if the father has no other children. Instead, the father's paternal uncle will be the inheritor, and he is free to give the child a portion if he wishes to do so.

At the end of the debate, the question was raised as to whether there is really any difference as to which of his two sons, Isaac or Ishmael, Abraham took with him to be offered as a sacrifice to God. The participants agreed unanimously that debating legitimacy or who was sacrificed could bring down the trust the group has already built among themselves. Any other similar topics, if not handled properly, will make some members walk away. They therefore often stick to the aim of their dialogue, that the purpose is not to agree or disagree on the selected passage, but rather to learn and understand each other's faith and exegete the selection in order to agree on the meaning of the texts.

Usually the dialogue concludes with prayers. One member from each group is assigned to offer prayers for the adherents of each faith, and for other social problems that affect the community and the country at large. Although started in a small way, the group quickly gained many members, and will in future be capable of defusing any religious conflict between the two faiths, especially in this age of growing Christian and Muslim fundamentalism.

What Bible translation and interreligious dialogue can learn from each other in Sudan

Bible translation in Africa in general, and in Sudan in particular, concerns much more than simply a problem of language. It is learning about the other, studying their texts and religious practices and so translating them into one's own religion. In Sudan, Bible translation encompasses intercultural and interreligious dialogue. This does not mean that the Bible is being Islamized, but that we attempt to create a middle point where Muslims or people of other faiths can understand the Bible better.

Just as in TAZI publications, relevant symbols and pictures appealing to Muslims can be included in the translation. Sometimes symbols and pictures help those who are not well versed in Bible understanding. Difficult biblical concepts that are misunderstood by Muslims should be rendered in a way that is simple for Muslims to understand. In some cases, such terms can be substituted with Arabic terms that are familiar to Muslims. For Muslims, the Old Testament has many loopholes and scandals. Many see the book as supportive of injustices, racism, and human rights abuses. It is often associated with Judaism, and so this often raises issues relating to what they perceive as atrocities being inflicted on the Palestinians by Israeli authorities. It is vital that in translation the correlation of such negative ideas with the Old Testament should be countered.

As Diab correctly points out, "To counter negative reaction toward the Old Testament, translations should always be published with exegetical footnotes explaining issues that lead to misunderstanding of the image of God and unpleasant scenes in the Old Testament" (2009, 78).

Above all, each should stand rooted in his own religion and bear witness to his own religious faith and community. We are living in an age in which we cannot avoid living in the same family with members of different faiths. We should therefore show our love to them by sharing our belief through interreligious dialogue and Bible translation.

In conclusion, this research is only the beginning of work that I hope will endeavour to maintain a peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims. Sudan is now two separate countries after over fifty years of civil war. However, the relationships between the peoples of these two states, which have developed over the centuries, will not easily vanish in a day. Marriages and faiths have linked the two peoples and this will continue. To avoid religious conflict along the borders, there is a great need for interreligious dialogue. At the same time

Christians in Sudan² will need to have a Bible that will ease religious tension between Christianity and Islam.

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The Bible quotations are from the Good News Bible.

The Qur'ān is quoted from *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary* by A. Y. Ali, with modifications.

² Sudan split into two on 9 July 2011. The former northern Sudan maintains the name The Democratic Republic of the Sudan while the former southern Sudan is now referred to as the Republic of South Sudan.

Bible versions referenced in this issue (unless otherwise identified in individual articles)

CEV	Contemporary English Version	NET	New English Translation
FC	Français Courant	NIV	New International Version
GNB	Good News Bible/Translation	NLT	New Living Translation
GuNB	Gute Nachricht Bibel	NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
LXX	Septuagint	PdV	Parole de Vie
MT	Masoretic Text	TLA	Traducción en lenguaje actual