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Muslim Idiom Translations in Bangladesh

George King and Tom McCormick

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I George King: The Nature of and Need for Muslim Idiom Translations:

1. History of Muslim Idiom Translations (MIT) in Bangladesh

There has been a storm raging in recent times over Muslim Idiom Translations (MIT), that is, translations of the Bible for Muslim readers. In the beginning, it centred on the 2005 edition of the New Testament in Bengali entitled *Injil Sharif*. Controversy arose when it became known that this particular translation exchanged the terms, *Father* and *Son* as descriptions of God and Jesus, for other words deemed less offensive to Muslims. One example was to translate 'Son of God' as 'God's Messiah'. Since then, other language translations using similar non-literal renderings of familial terms have come to light.[1]

One outcome of all the negative publicity surrounding this discovery is that the general Christian populace is now more aware of Muslim Idiom Translations than ever before. However, for many people, all they know about MITs may be the errors that have been pointed out in a handful of Bible translations. Any Bible that bears the name *Injil Sharif* may now be viewed with suspicion.

Those who don't read and write Bengali may wrongly assume that there is only one Bengali *Injil Sharif,* when in fact there are at least five different

1 See Adam Simonwitz, 'Translation Chart for Muslim Idiom Translations of the Bible' <http://biblicalmissiology.org/2013/03/04/translation-chart-for-muslim-idiom-translations-of-the-bible> (2013, cited 27 May 2013) for more examples.

***George King**, formerly of Canada and currently leading a church in a multi-ethnic context in Birmingham UK, has served amongst Muslim peoples since 1984 including 12 years in Bangladesh, and headed the translation team that produced the 2000 Kitabul Mokaddos published by Bangladesh Bible Society. He also started the Al-Kitab Scripture Research Institute (http://al-kitab.org).*
***Tom McCormick**, MA (Westminster Seminary) PhD (Texas), PhD (ICS, Toronto) worked with Wycliffe among the Quechua in Peru and has also served with SIL/Wycliffe in other parts of the world, focusing on various hermeneutical theories, with special attention to continental philosophy as well as psychological (experimental and educational) theories of reading.*

published versions. The title, *Injil Sharif*, simply means *Glorious Gospel* and is an alternative title for the New Testament. *Injil Sharif* is well-recognized by Bengali Muslims as the name of the divine revelation brought to mankind through Jesus Christ. It is the same book which we know in the English-speaking world as the *New Testament*. Just as in English there are various versions of the *New Testament* (KJV, ESV, NIV, etc.), so in Bengali there are several editions of the *Injil Sharif*.

As a person with experience in Bengali language and culture, I am personally aware of the following *Injil Sharif* versions.

a) In 1920-22 Australian Baptist William Goldsack translated the four gospels into Bengali for Muslim readers, making it a very early Muslim Idiom Translation. Printed as four booklets, this was published in Calcutta by the British and Foreign Bible Society. Goldsack's work has been out of print for a long time, and it has been years since I have seen a copy with my own eyes. It may or may not have been entitled *Injil Sharif* in Bengali. According to one online source, even Goldsack's work was not actually the first Muslim Idiom Translation in Bengali. Beginning with a translation of Luke's Gospel in 1854, there were a whole string of Bible portions translated into Muslim Bengali by British Baptist missionaries. These missionaries followed William Carey, 'the father of modern missions', who had translated the Bible into the Bengali for Hindus in 1832.[2]
b) In the 1970s the 'William Carey Bible' was adapted by Christian workers for use among Muslims. It was done without the blessing of the Bangladesh Bible Society (publisher of the Carey Bible). The New Testament portion was entitled *Injil Sharif*. The Bengali in this adaptation was at university-level and therefore difficult for many readers. It was partly a stop-gap measure to fill a need while Christian workers anticipated the forthcoming release of (c) below.
c) In 1980 the Bangladesh Bible Society released the *Injil Sharif*. It quickly became the all-time best-seller in the history of the Bengali language.
d) In 2000 the Bangladesh Bible Society published the *Kitabul Mokaddos* (Holy Bible), containing a significant revision of the above 1980 *Injil Sharif*. The New Testament portion is also printed separately and called simply, the *Injil Sharif*.
e) In 2005 Global Partners published a new *Injil Sharif,* which is the translation that caused all the uproar in recent days. Of all the Bengali New Testaments that bear the name *Injil Sharif,* it is the only one to remove 'Father' and 'Son' and replace them with substitute titles having different meanings.

Since *Injil Sharif* is a generic title for the New Testament, all of the above translations rightly use the name. However, the waves of controversy that began with one version of the *Injil Sharif* may threaten to wash over all Bibles bearing that name, and

2 *Bengali Bible History*, <http://gochristianhelps.com/iccm/bengali/benghist.htm> (2012, cited 8 June 2013).

people ask, 'Why should we even have Muslim Idiom Translations? Why can't Muslims read from the same Bibles as their non-Muslim countrymen?' This is a valid question and one that I will seek to answer.

2. What is a Muslim Idiom Translation?

For our purposes here, a Muslim Idiom Translation will be defined as *a translation of the Bible into the vernacular of Muslims in a given culture*. By 'vernacular' I mean the everyday language spoken by ordinary Muslims, including the religious terminology they commonly use. At first glance, it might seem as if this is carrying things too far, something akin to translating the Bible specifically for factory workers. However, we will see that Muslims have a large religious vocabulary that significantly impacts their everyday language and therefore, is important for translators to consider. To ignore this vocabulary can hinder clear communication of the biblical message.

In 1923 the same William Goldsack who first translated the gospels for Muslim Bengalis also compiled the 'Mussalmani Bengali-English Dictionary: containing nearly six thousand Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Hindi words commonly used by the Muslims of Bengal'. The implication is that most of the 6,000 words are spoken only by Muslim Bengalis. This specialized dictionary is still in print and available from Amazon.com!

It is my contention that, almost without exception, Muslim language in any given culture is so different from that of the non-Muslim community that it merits a Bible translation specifically geared for the Muslim audience. This is because wherever Islam has gone, it has taken Middle Eastern language, culture and values with it. As a result, Islam forever leaves its unique and sizeable footprint on the language of that place, a footprint that manifests itself in the everyday speech of ordinary Muslims.

3. Names of God

There are literally hundreds of languages spoken by Muslims in the world today. In fact, it is true that '[m]ore than twice as many Muslims speak Indonesian, Bengali, or Urdu as speak Arabic'.[3] Yet wherever Islam is found, Muslims describe the Creator God using the Arabic word *Allah,* no matter what the local language may be. This uniformity is partly driven by the requirement to perform prayers in Arabic, even though Arabic may not be well understood by the worshipper.

Following on from this situation, someone might assume that a defining characteristic of a Muslim Idiom Translation is its choice of *Allah* as the normal rendering of the Greek *theos* or the Hebrew *elohim* to reference the one true creator God. Normally, that may well be the case, but not always.

For example, the 1980 Bengali *Injil Sharif* (#(c) in the list above) used the Farsi-based *Khoda* to refer to God and not *Allah* as one might naturally suppose. It may be worth noting here that Bengali has no religiously-neutral word for God. Since William Carey's time, most Bengali Bibles had used the Hindu word *Ishwar* for God, which

3 Daniel W. Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

was unacceptable for Muslim readers. *Khoda* was considered an Islamic word, but it did not carry the same negative connotations as *Allah* did among the primarily Hindu-background Christian community. Many Bangladeshi Hindus and Christians had suffered as part of a persecuted minority and tended to associate the word *Allah* with their persecutors.

However, by the time the entire Bible was translated and ready for publication 20 years later, a sizeable community of Muslim-background believers in Jesus had been raised up. I was part of a special meeting to which Muslim-background believers from all over Bangladesh were invited to discuss the forthcoming translation. In that meeting, those believers requested a specific word change to be made in the new Bible: change *Khoda* to *Allah*. And so it happened that the new *Kitabul Mokaddos* (Holy Bible) published in 2000 used the word *Allah* to describe God.

Although these believers had come to faith in Christ as the Son of *Khoda* (God), as translated in the 1980 *Injil Sharif*, their normal way of referring to God continued to be *Allah*. In their minds *Khoda* and *Allah* were the same, but *Allah* was their most common way to speak about God. They prayed to *Allah* as their heavenly Father and worshipped Jesus Christ as the Son of *Allah*, so it was desirable for them to have a Bible that called God by that same name.

Most Muslim Idiom Translations follow the same pattern, using *Allah* as the normal way of referencing the God of the Bible.

4. Names of the Prophets

In Islam, it is the custom (*sunna*) for a person who converts to Islam to take on a new Muslim name. Generally, the new name will be one of the 99 names of God, or the name of a prophet. The custom is similar for Muslim parents of a new child. This explains why there are so many men named *Mohamed* in the world! But it also helps us understand why names such as *Ibrahim, Ayyub, Yusuf, Musa, Harun, Yunus, Ilyas, Zakariyya, Yahya,* and *'Isa* are so common in the Muslim world. They are all considered prophets of Islam and therefore worthy names for a child.

However, some of the above-mentioned prophets of Islam are also famous Bible characters. It is astonishing to think that there are literally millions of men scattered throughout Muslim society with names like *Abraham, Job, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Jonah, Elijah, Zechariah, John* (i.e. the Baptist) and *Jesus*! All of them are nominal witnesses to the message of the Bible, and that's just the beginning.

Some 25 Islamic variations of Bible characters are mentioned by name in the Qur'an. More are recounted in traditional 'stories of the prophets' taught to Muslim children in the same way that Bible stories are read to children in Christian homes. A classic manual of Islamic law called *The Reliance of the Traveller* states that out of all the multitude of messengers God has sent to mankind, it is *obligatory* for Muslims to know 25 of them in particular.[4] The list of 25 names ends with *Muhammad*.

4 Ahmad ibn Naqib al-Misri, *Reliance of the Traveller,* trans. Nuh Ha Mim Keller, (Beltsville, Amana, 1994), 811.

Two others on the list are *Hud* and *Salih*, who are mentioned in the Qur'an but otherwise almost unknown. The remaining 22 on the list are all Bible characters! It is the joy of the MIT Bible translator to identify these people (and others) in the pages of the Bible so that Muslims may come to know and understand the truth about them.

5. The Lesser of Two Evils?

The English-speaking world enjoys the benefit of a largely non-sectarian religious vocabulary. Words like *scripture*, *prayer, faith, repentance,* and *worship* are not exclusively Christian terms. Religious words like these are part of the vernacular, even for English-speaking Muslims. People from almost any religious background can and do use such words with a clear conscience to describe their own religious ideas and practices.

However, when you look at religious vocabulary in other languages, it can sometimes be tied to a particular religious tradition with no suitable non-sectarian equivalent. One example is the Sanskrit-based Bengali word, *shastra.* In English it literally means *scripture,* but that doesn't tell the whole story. *Shastra* is also a technical term referring particularly to *Hindu* scripture.[5] William Carey once made reference to this fact when he wrote to his sisters about his Bengali Bible translation work that was then in process:

> The work of translation is going on, and I hope the whole New Testament and the five books of Moses may be completed before this reaches you. It is a pleasant work and a rich reward, and I trust, whenever it is published, it will soon prevail, and put down all the *Shastras* of the Hindus.[6]

Yet when Carey translated the Bible into Bengali, he chose *shastra* to describe the biblical scriptures in verses such as the following…

> All Scripture (*shastra*) *is* God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16).
>
> Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture (*shastra*) came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things (2 Pet. 1:20).

Based on the above verses, one could be forgiven for concluding that the 'Carey Bible' teaches that the Hindu *Shastras* are as inspired as the Bible! That is, if not for other statements like the following:

> And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures (*shastra*) concerning himself (Luke 24:27).

The above verse makes clear that the *shastra*, or scripture, being referred to is not the Hindu scriptures but the Old Testament. Hindus reading Carey's Bible would be comfortable with the terminology, but also learn the truth of the gospel.

By way of contrast, *shastra* is prob-

5 Mohammad Ali, Mohammad Moniruzzaman and Jahangir Tareque, *Bangla Academy Bengali-English Dictionary* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1994), 750.

6 W. Pakenham Walsh, *William Carey: India, 1793-1834*, <http://www.wholesomewords.org/missions/bcarey9.html> (n. d., cited 15 April 2013).

lematic for a Muslim Bengali reader because of what he sees as repulsive and idolatrous Hindu terminology. So what do you do? There is no suitable non-sectarian word available, and so you use the word for *scripture* commonly known by Muslim Bengalis – *kitab*. By the way, *kitab* is a very 'biblical' word. Derived from Arabic, it is related to the Hebrew *kethab* (book, writing; see Dan. 10:21; 1 Chr. 28:19).

6. Muslim Language is not just about Religion

To further complicate a Bible translator's task, there are many words with no religious connotations that are used only by people within a particular religious community. I already made reference to Goldsack's dictionary of 6,000 Muslim-Bengali words. Hindu-background Bengalis know water as *jol*, but Muslims call the same thing *pani*. To reply 'yes', a Hindu will say *ha,* while a Muslim says *ji*. The two communities greet each other differently. There is a multitude of specific designations for the various kinds of aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins, and they are markedly different between Hindu and Muslim families. Yet they are all speaking the same language!

But where do the local Bangladeshi followers of Christ fit into this situation? Which terms do they use? Well, it depends on which religious community they were converted from. In the past, most Christians had a Hindu family heritage, but in recent years, the number of Christ-followers with a Muslim family heritage has increased dramatically. All of this impacts Bible translation, making Muslim Idiom Translations not just important, but essential.

7. A Trip to the Village

One day I visited a Bangladeshi village just one mile from the busy highway running between the capital city and the nation's main seaport. My Bengali companion struck up a conversation with a local shopkeeper who couldn't take his eyes off my pale white skin. He didn't get to see many 'foreigners' and so I was quite a novelty. As they continued to chat, my friend spoke to the villager about Christian faith, to which the shopkeeper responded that in all his life up to that point he had never met a Christian.

A man like that would have been lost trying to read a non-MIT Bengali Bible. So much of what he read would have been utterly foreign—almost like another language. And yet it would have been Bengali.

That man's story is not unusual in the majority Muslim world. Muslims are born and die, never having met a follower of Christ. Their main knowledge of Christianity might be what they learn at school or at the mosque. They don't know the Christian *lingo* of the culturally-distant church and their Bible. They need a Bible in their own mother tongue—they need a Bible in Muslim language.

George King

II Tom McCormick: Agreements and Questions

George King has rightly noted that a storm has been raging in recent times over Muslim Idiom Translations (MITs). I am grateful for his comments, which help illustrate some of the difficulties we all face coming to terms with MITs. For George, 'a Muslim Id-

iom Translation [is] defined as a translation of the Bible into the vernacular of the Muslims within a given culture'.

One wonders: How else might a translation be a translation if not into the vernacular of a given people? Perhaps more to the point, though, how might such a definition distinguish an idiomatic translation (like the NIV or NLB) from an 'essentially literal' translation (like the ESV)? Are not all such translations 'into the vernacular of … a given culture'? However, 'the MIT storm' was provoked by something other than simply using 'the vernacular', by which George means 'the everyday language spoken by ordinary Muslims, including the religious terminology they commonly use'. Can we sort out what is an 'MIT issue' per se, and what might be 'optional'?

I begin with appreciation for the clarification of the 5-versions of the Bengali *Injil Sharif*. George presents us with a case study based on his experience as head of the translation team for the *Injil Sharif* (d), an admittedly MIT translation. But then, so is the controversial 2005 *Injil Sharif* (#5), an important example of an offending MIT translation. George notes: 'Of all the Bengali New Testaments that bear the name *Injil Sharif,* [the 2005 Bengali *Injil Sharif*] is the only one to remove "Father" and "Son" and replace them with substitute titles having different meanings.'

Evidently what George means by an MIT translation (e.g. d) is contrary to what so many others characterize as a 'MIT (excess or error?)'. So inflammatory has this perceived excess been that the Divine Familial Term (DFT) issue has been taken by many to epitomize the MIT paradigm per se. But is that fair? Evidently George is both decidedly for MITs and perhaps also against the DFT strategy of the controversial 2005 Bengali *Injil Sharif* (#5). What is going on here, and how might it help us consider what is and what is not an MIT, a difficult task based on one case study? Regardless, 'MIT' apparently means different things to different folk.

Let me raise questions with the help of George's paper.

As noted, 'a Muslim Idiom Translation will be defined as *a translation of the Bible into the vernacular of the Muslims within a given culture*'. Again: aren't all Bible translations an attempt to use the everyday, vernacular of whatever culture is the host? If that culture is 'Muslim', how would MITs be an exception? There is, apparently, something unique about the Muslim situation, distinguishing it from, e.g., George's reference to factory workers. There are two points I consider:

(i) Often the everyday 'vernacular' spoken by ordinary Muslims includes much commonly used religious terminology which if ignored 'can hinder clear communication of the biblical message'. And further, much of this (Bengali) vernacular is 'spoken only by Muslim Bengalis and not by non-Muslims'.

(ii) 'Islam forever leaves its unique and sizeable footprint on the language of that place, a footprint that manifests itself in the everyday speech of ordinary Muslims.'

1. Communication

The first point: This is a serious point, indeed, for no one wants to hinder communication of the biblical message; on

the contrary! And yet, many who resist MITs also claim they hinder communication of the biblical *message*, and that on essential matters. For example, to call God the Father simply 'Protector/Helper' or the Son of God 'God's representative', though biblical truths, hinders clear communication of the divine familial relations essential to the biblical message. But are these Divine Familial Term (DFT)-cases fair representatives of MITs? Evidently, King thinks not.

For support George mentions the 1923 'Mussalmani Bengali-English Dictionary' by Goldsack. Surely a valuable resource, though it is unclear how a 90-year old compilation of words of Arabic, Hindi, Persian, and Turkish origin incorporated in Bengali offers definitive assistance.

George's point is: 'The implication is that most of the 6,000 words are spoken only by Muslim Bengalis and not by non-Muslims.' How relevant is this? It's hard to say; thus my concerns are general, not Bengali specific.

First, I suppose it depends on how many of those words could naturally be used in a translation today. Second, I say 'could' because there may be alternative words (or phrases) suitably understood by both Muslims and non-Muslims. (We all know and can use infrequent words peculiar to 'non-native' subcultures.) Third, are there key words (like the DFTs) among the exceptions ('most' is not 'all'). For example, many claim that 'father' and 'son' are ordinary, everyday, shared terms for familial relationships as understood and used by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Since the terms are understood by both groups, they are available for use in the translation of the Bible, even if the Bible translation is specifically geared for a Muslim audience. If this is true for DFTs, what about *other* lexical items and linguistic features?

Fourth, George similarly contends that 'almost without exception, Muslim language in any given culture is so different from that of the non-Muslim community that it merits a Bible translation specifically geared for the Muslim audience.' Turning the tables, how understandable might an MIT be to non-Muslims? Would any points of difference be linguistic or religious-worldview preferences? Could compromises be reached? That is, fifth, how might any of this hinder or help the 'clear communication of the biblical message'? Finally, is not sorting this situation required regardless of any MIT-specific concerns? Are these not general matters of communication rather than specifically MIT distinctives?

Further, George claims that Muslim-audience Bible translations are warranted because 'wherever Islam has gone, it has taken Middle Eastern language, culture and values with it'. No doubt this is true, but is it true in a sense that always clearly distinguishes Muslims from non-Muslims? Are not some of the Middle Eastern cultural values shared by other cultures? Further, might there be Middle Eastern cultural values resonant with Kingdom values (perhaps present locally), for instance, 'hospitality'? If so, then there would be sharable, if not already shared, Middle Eastern cultural values, regardless of religion. Again, is not sorting out this situation required regardless of MIT-specific concerns?

Now, for sake of argument, consider: If it were true that the Bengali case

recommends a unique MIT, how is that different from the not uncommon challenge of multiple dialects of 'the same language'? It is true, as in the situation in which I worked, that decisions are made for different translations for different dialects; and so perhaps MITs and HITs (Hindu) might be recommended. I say 'might' since there are strategies for producing multi-dialectical translations.

2. Language Footprint

Now for our second consideration; George states: 'Islam forever leaves its unique and sizeable footprint on the language of that place, a footprint that manifests itself in the everyday speech of ordinary Muslims.' No doubt every culture or religion leaves a 'unique and sizeable footprint on the language of [its] place', Christianity and 'the West' included. That is not controversial.

However, do we not always find (a) remnants of the good creation and the image of God of its producers, (b) distortions due to the Fall, and (c) signs of God already at work redeeming and bringing all into unity in Christ (Ephesians 1:10)? This is the Creation-Fall-Redemption, and Consummation (thus no 'footprint' remains 'forever') motif applied to translations. If this is valid, then George's defence of MITs is (i) not unique to the 'M', and (ii) perhaps more a defence of 'vernacular' translations into the everyday language as spoken by ordinary people. But again, I do not know anyone, either pro- or con-MITs, who is opposed to that.

Might George's examples help us? Consider first, 'names' (Prophets and God); second, the case of other vocabulary; and finally, the 'Trip to the Village' story.

First, I appreciate George's discussion of the names of God. For one, listening carefully to the local believers is acknowledged. And yet, it is worth noting that the MBBs 'prayed to *Allah* as their heavenly Father and worshiped Jesus Christ as the Son of *Allah*'. That is, the association of the DFTs with the alleged 'Muslim word-name' Allah evidently did not provoke problems…for the MBBs. And yet, the common claim of many MIT advocates has been that associating Allah with 'Father' and 'Son' is anathema to Muslims, and so provocative of the worst misunderstandings that the DFTs must be modified if not eliminated from the biblical text.

Regarding the names of the prophets: If I understand George, he is recommending the 'Qur'anic' versions of these names, thus connecting with the 'idiomatic-vernacular expectations' of the audience, 'so that Muslims may come to know and understand the truth about them' from the biblical contexts. I join George in the joy of helping Muslims come to know and understand the truth about the names of the prophets.

My question, though is whether the paratext (footnotes) might provide that identification just as well as using the Qur'anic names directly in the text. Generally (local phonology allowing), MIT advocates have preferred the (dynamic equivalent) Muslim spelling in the text, while non-MIT advocates have favoured the formal equivalent in the text. Regardless, context is clearly a key. And yet, is there a conflict of contexts? The Islamic pattern of changing names upon conversion is also a context. Might that cultural-pattern recommend a personal and perhaps textual change to Abraham rather than

Ibrahim? Should an MIT follow the linguistic or cultural idiomatic pattern?

Second, what about the other vocabulary? Such vocabulary is religious and non-religious. George's religious examples are cases of using the common and preferred 'pre-Christian' local language term (the 'Hindu' *shastra* and the Muslim *kitab*) for the closest equivalent to the biblical term, and 'recharging' the word with biblical meaning from the biblical contexts. Thus we agree that biblical contexts are (potentially) very influential. Where, then, is the line between the work of contexts (linguistic and non-linguistic) and the work of words? Might this line be a distinguishing mark between MITs and non-MITs? Regarding the non-religious examples, I ask again: Are these simply (religiously-charged) multi-dialect situations?

Finally, the intriguing, yet not unusual, story of a trip to the village. George claims, 'A man like that would have been lost trying to read a non-MIT Bengali Bible', and he may be right, depending of course on the artfulness and style of that Bible. The situation, though, is illustrative of three further points. First, I don't think that George's solution necessarily follows. He says, 'They need a Bible in their own mother tongue—they need a Bible in Muslim language.' I would agree that they need language which they understand, but that may, yet need not be (i) 'in Muslim language' per se, nor (ii) only a Bible per se.

Regarding (i): I don't doubt that the way one might converse with Muslims is different from conversing with non-Muslims, nor that these ways of speaking include many ordinary, everyday-language differences. In itself, this is not unusual. For instance, male versus female styles of speech, even in English, are recognizably different. And yet, such differences have not recommended different translations for men and women. Further, how 'foreign' sounding might a legitimate translation of a foreign document be? And who decides? And on what basis?

Regarding (ii): Other materials might complement a non-MIT Bible. And regardless, such a man as described by George would probably need Christian friends to talk with, both for normal, nuanced personal communications, and also because such folk often are not literate. Second, is the Bible meant to be a 'stand-alone' document? Many say, no, not primarily. On what basis do we decide? Third, who, primarily, is the intended audience and readership for the Bible? Is it designed primarily as an evangelistic means, or is it for believers? Are these questions not prior to any MIT discussion? Apparently different understandings of a 'vernacular translation' depend on the answer.

I have raised a lot of questions…the easy part. May our on-going discussions help bring peace amongst God's family, and advance His glorious purposes and good pleasure.

Tom McCormick

III George King—Response

I want to express my appreciation to Dr. McCormick for a respectful and thoughtful response to my opening piece. His reply reveals an inquiring mind, as demonstrated by the more than 40 questions posed therein. I will plan to focus on just a couple of matters that seem paramount in our discussion.

1. What exactly is meant by 'Muslim Idiom Translation' (MIT)?

Why revisit this basic matter of definitions? The recent controversy surrounding MITs has been emotive and polarizing for many. The MIT definition given in the opening piece was broad in scope so as to try to embrace all Bible translations intended for a Muslim audience, not just those that have made the headlines.

Unfortunately, some readers of this article may think that all MITs are somehow connected to *Wycliffe Bible Translators*. Let us remind ourselves that MITs have been around a lot longer than the recent storm regarding Wycliffe would indicate. It was previously noted that as early as 1854, British Baptists in Indian Bengal published a Muslim Idiom Translation of the Gospel of Luke. *Wycliffe* on the other hand, was not founded until 1942, nearly 90 years later.

Similarly, some readers may believe that a MIT should be defined as a Bible translation for Muslims that *tampers with divine familial terms* (DFTs) by removing the words *Father* and *Son* when used in reference to God and Jesus. Even in Tom's remarks, his concerns about MIT excesses surface repeatedly, as if to say that failure to properly translate the *divine familial terms* is somehow intrinsic to the definition of a Muslim Idiom Translation. Tom himself makes the following cogent observation: *'So inflammatory has this perceived excess been that the DFT issue has been taken by many to epitomize the MIT paradigm per se.'*

The controversy over DFTs may well have poisoned many people into thinking that all MIT translation work should be abandoned. But imagine for a moment that a general movement is raised up to lobby against all English Bibles, simply because one, the *New World Translation*, mistranslates John 1:1 (*the Word became a god*) to suit the theological predilections of the *Jehovah's Witnesses*. All of us would view such a movement as uninformed and reactionary. It would be heading towards a fulfilment of the proverb, 'to throw the baby out with the bath water'. It is my fear that certain elements of the Christian community want to do just that in regard to Muslim Idiom Translations.

Returning to definition of MIT as *a translation of the Bible into the vernacular of the Muslims within a given culture*, is there any sense in which the offending MITs have failed to adhere to this definition? Absolutely. In Mark 14:36, Jesus prays to God as 'Abba, Father'. Rather than translate those words into Bengali, the 2005 Global Partners edition of the *Injil Sharif* completely avoids having Jesus refer to God as Father and renders those words instead as 'Rabbul Alamin'.[7] *Rabbul Alamin* is a divine title commonly uttered by Bengali Muslims in prayer. It comes originally from Arabic and means *Lord of the worlds,*[8] but has no hint of the meaning of *Father*. The 2005 *Injil Sharif* does not even bother to translate the Greek NT

7 See footnote 1.

8 One could consider using *Rabbul Alamin* as a functional equivalent to *Yahweh Sabaoth* (*LORD of Hosts* in the KJV, *LORD Almighty* in NIV) in the Old Testament, immediately understood and embraced by Muslim readers as referring to the God who is Lord over all creation.

phrase *Abba ho pater,* choosing to replace it with something more acceptable to Muslims. But a Bible translation is first and foremost, a *translation*. *Rabbul Alamin* is not a translation of *Abba, Father* at all, but a deliberate choice to not translate.

By way of contrast, the 2000 Bangladesh Bible Society *Injil Sharif,* says in Mark 14:36, 'Abba, Pita', literally, 'Abba, Father'.[9] Despite that clean literal translation of a Divine Familial Term, I do appreciate the dilemma MIT translators face regarding Divine Familial Term. The defining belief of Muslims is *Tawhid*, the *Oneness* of God, as stated in Surah 112:

> Say: He is Allah, the One and Only; Allah, the Eternal, Absolute; He begets not, nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him.[10]

Intrinsic to belief in *Tawhid* is the notion that Allah 'begets not, nor is He begotten'. If *Tawhid* is the most important belief for Muslims, then to deny *Tawhid* would logically be the greatest sin one could commit—and that is the case. *Shirk* is the sin of ascribing partners to God, including the belief that God has a son. This is the worst blasphemy and a Muslim is in danger of hellfire for just reading about it and considering the possibility that God could have a son. It is no wonder that MIT translators have searched for alternatives to a literal translation of the Divine Familial Terms.

2. 'A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver' (Prov. 25:11)

I personally struggled with the Divine Familial Terms issue, looking for suitable non-offensive options that would communicate the biblical truth of the Fatherhood of God and the Sonship of Jesus. In retrospect, I would give more consideration to an alternate rendering of 'Our Father in heaven' that our translation team discussed. In Matthew 6:9 our 2000 translation currently reads *amader behesti pita,* literally, *our heavenly father.* The team talked briefly about modifying that to *amader asmani abba,* which also means *our heavenly father*, but I hesitated because it seemed a bit radical to address God the Father, using anything other than *Pita* (a formal and traditional word for *father*).

Later, I heard some Muslim-background believers pray to God as *asmani abba*, and it struck me as beautiful and natural. Bengali Muslims already use the couplet *asmani kitab* as a well-known technical term to describe the four 'heavenly books' they believe Allah has revealed to mankind–the *Taurat* (Torah), the *Zabur* (Psalms), the *Injil* (Gospel), and the *Qur'an*. It is not a big stretch for a Muslim to utter *asmani abba*, since he is accustomed to saying *asmani kitab*.

In all this, I am theorizing that *a well-turned phrase may help to mitigate a theological offence*. It is bad enough if a theological concept is repugnant to your listener, but it is even worse if the unwelcome concept is also stated in a crass, disrespectful way. Unfortunately, the Divine Familial Terms in particular can easily sound vulgar to a Muslim ear because of the perceived

9 *Abba* is also a Muslim-Bengali word similar in meaning to *daddy*, implying both intimacy and respect. *Pita* on the other hand, is a more formal term used on official documents requesting the name of one's 'father.'

10 *The Holy Quran,* trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali (New Delhi: Goodword, 2005).

sexual connections. In a roundabout way, it is like the challenge translators of the English Bible have in translating the Greek of Mt. 1:25 (*ouk eginosken auten;* 'knew her not') clearly without being sexually explicit.

In my opinion, a 'well-turned phrase' may lessen the initial offence, and hopefully, help Muslims to move on to embracing God as heavenly Father and confessing that Jesus indeed, is the Son of God.

George King

IV Tom McCormick Final Response

I do appreciate George's concern to clarify what is meant by 'Muslim Idiom Translation' (MIT). We have made some progress, at least with regard to what an MIT need not be. According to George, an MIT need not tamper with 'Divine Familial Term (DFTs) by removing the words *Father* and *Son* when used in reference to God and Jesus'. To decouple MITs from Divine Familial Terms as two separate, though sometimes overlapping, issues is important to note. In George's assessment, to render the Greek NT phrase *Abba ho pater* with words having 'no hint of the meaning of *Father'* is simply 'not a translation … at all, but a deliberate choice to not translate'. This does help us sort out what is an MIT issue per se and what might be optional. And for that, we can be grateful. I am also appreciative of the governing role of biblical meaning noted.

I am not sure, though, how this helps define or clarify more positively what an MIT per se might be. The earlier definition proposed by George still, evidently, stands: 'a Muslim Idiom Translation will be defined as a translation of the Bible into the vernacular of the Muslims within a given culture'. But then so too do my earlier questions: how might such a definition distinguish an idiomatic translation from an 'essentially literal' translation? Are not all such translations 'into the vernacular of … a given culture'? I do think there is a baby in this bath water. How, though, might we rescue our little friend?

George's example of Matthew 6:9 in the 2000 Bangladesh Bible Society's *Injil Sharif* does shed further light. The point I infer is that the prayer life of Bengali former Muslim Christians (MBBs) offered a better solution than what was previously taken as a sensitive and accurate MIT rendering.

This example perhaps answers some of my previous inquiries, though I admit these are my own inferences: (i) an MIT Bible can be (is always?) primarily for believers, with special attention due to Muslim Background Belivers, (ii) from whose maturing lives together in the Christian community can emerge 'translation solutions'. Further, (iii) the 'vernacular of the Muslims within a given culture' is not simply an inherited and fixed standard but may be creatively modified by 'a well-turned phrase' which had not previously existed.

I am not surprised by this 'solution', as we are after all dealing with divine revelation and the on-going transformation of cultures. And yet, this also modifies, or at least clarifies, George's understanding of the vernacular in his definition of MITs. In particular, an MIT that included the new phrase *asmani abba* (patterned on *asmani*

kitab) is introducing a 'new idiom' (an oxymoron, I know), which is *not* 'religious terminology they commonly use.' Indeed, the suggested adjustment is not just terminological, but has much to do with culture and values as well. And if this is true for Divine Familial Terms as in this example, what about *other* lexical items like names, as well as other linguistic and sociolinguistic features like prayer languages?

As I suspect we all know and believe, the coming of the king leaves its own footprint, and from this example we see a glimpse of how a Christian community and a Bible translation can 'manifest itself in the everyday speech of [Muslim Background Believers, and thus perhaps also] ordinary Muslims.' Maranatha.

V George King Conclusion

Many thanks to Tom for his insightful comments and questions, which leads me to highlight the following:

> id·i·om noun \'i-dē-əm\ 1 a: the language peculiar to a people or to a district, community, or class : dialect.[11]

Muslim *Idiom* Translation means Muslim *Dialect* Translation. Some MITs are 'essentially literal', similar to the ESV. Other MITs are idiomatic translations not unlike the NIV. The Bengali *Injil Sharif* I worked on is an example of the latter, while the one adapted from the 'William Carey' Bible is the former. Both are Muslim *Idiom* Translations because they are translations into Muslim vernacular.

Asmani abba is a 'new idiom' because it represents a 'new theology'. Islam has no *heavenly father*. The individual words themselves are part of Muslim idiom, and that is crucial. It is easier to introduce new or unwelcome concepts if you 'speak the language'.

The issue of names is foundational to a true MIT. When an MIT identifies Moses as *Musa,* it is not because Arabic is better than Hebrew, but because Muslims know *Musa* as the prophet who led the people out of Egypt and gave them the Torah. Why insist on adherence to Hebrew forms, only to have a reader ask, 'Who is this *Moses*? Is it possible that he is Prophet *Musa*?' Both *Moses* and *Musa* reference the same prophet, so use the name Muslims actually know. Let us give God's Word to Muslims in their mother tongue.

11 *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/idiom> (2003, cited 8 June 2013).