

THE NAME AND THE NAMED: ALLAH OR GOD

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This essay examines the use of Allah and “God” in English through the relation between *lafz* (word), *maʿnā* (meaning), and *musammā* (the Named). Beginning from a personal editorial encounter surrounding the publication of the first volume of the *Integrated Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān* (IEQ) in 2013, and from an influential essay by Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, it argues that identity of intended Referent does not establish identity of meaning and that Allah and “God” cannot therefore be treated as fully interchangeable names.

The essay traces the pre-Qurʾānic use of Allah, the Qurʾān’s transformation of the semantic world surrounding the Name, and the classical understanding of Allah as the all-comprehensive Name that gathers the Divine Names and Attributes. It brings this tradition into conversation with William Chittick’s formulation that “only Allah is truly a universal name” and Toshihiko Izutsu’s description of Allah as the Qurʾān’s “one supreme focus-word.” The historical Islamization of the Persian *Khodā*, together with the later displacement of Arabic, Persian, and Urdu by English, then provides the basis for asking what it would mean for English itself to become an Islamic language: not simply a vehicle into which Islamic meanings are translated, but a receiving language whose semantic structures are transformed by revelation.

This question is tested through Gibril Fouad Haddad's recent *The Meanings of the Inimitable Quran*, which ordinarily renders Allah as "the One God" while explicitly permitting Islamic Arabic vocabulary to enter English untranslated. Particular attention is given to Q 2:163 and Q 112:1–2, where the Qur'ān distinguishes the Divine Name from propositions concerning Divine Oneness. Read alongside al-Bayḍawī, Haddad's principal exegetical guide, these passages show that a true theological description of the Named is not thereby equivalent to the revealed Name. The problem, therefore, is not finally how to make Allah fit English, but how to make English capable of receiving Allah.

The essay concludes by moving from translation, semantic transformation, and public representation to *dhikr*: Allah is not merely a word to be rendered or defended, but the Name by whose remembrance the heart is formed.

Keywords: Allah; al-Bayḍawī; *dhikr*; Divine Name; Gibril Fouad Haddad; God; Islamic English; *Khodā*; *lafz*, *ma' nā*, and *musammā*; language and revelation; Muslim cultural formation; Qur'ān translation; Qur'ānic semantics; semantic transformation; *tawḥīd*; Umar Faruq Abd-Allah; William C. Chittick.

A Conversation That Never Quite Began

Some thirteen years ago, during a telephone conversation, William Chittick, the Distinguished Professor in the Department of Asian and Asian American Studies at Stony Brook University, said to me, with a directness I have never forgotten: "I will never cooperate with you on any academic project, because in IEQ, you have used Allah instead of God."

His sentence startled me. It came from a scholar whose work I have long respected and whose contribution to the study of Islamic philosophy, Sufism, and especially Ibn 'Arabī is known throughout

the scholarly world. It was not the rejection of cooperation that remained with me so much as the reason given for it. How could the use of Allah—the Name that appears 2,699 times in the Qurʾān, the Name recited in every Muslim prayer, the Name invoked in remembrance, supplication, gratitude, fear, hope, and love—become an impediment to an academic undertaking devoted to the Qurʾān?

The conversation ended, but the question remained.

It returned whenever I encountered the argument that English-speaking Muslims should say “God” rather than Allah. It returned with particular force when, many years ago, I read Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah’s thoughtful essay “One God, Many Names,” in which he argues that English-speaking Muslims should embrace “God” as the proper English designation for the Creator. Dr. Abd-Allah states the issue in its strongest form at the outset. “The fact that Allah and the Biblical God are identical,” he writes, “is evident from Biblical etymology.” From the standpoint of Islamic theology and what he calls salvation history, he considers it “simply unacceptable” to regard the Biblical God and the God of the Qurʾān as anything but the same. He further describes the avoidance of “God” by English-speaking Muslims as “an ill-advised convention,” arising from the mistaken belief that only the Arabic word Allah carries a linguistic guarantee of theological authenticity.¹

I approach Dr. Abd-Allah’s argument with affection as well as respect. He is a careful scholar, and I have personal memories of his warmth and kindness. I vividly recall meeting him at Masjid al-Rashīd in Edmonton when he came for a visit. A few years ago, my daughter spent a month at a retreat with him in Spain and returned deeply impressed by his warmth, the generosity with which he remembered our encounter years earlier, and the depth of his spiritual presence. These memories remain part of how I approach his argument: intellectual disagreement need not begin in suspicion or end in estrangement.

There is also a gentle beauty in the name he chose upon entering Islam: Abd-Allah, one of the names most beloved to Allah and His Messenger, upon him blessings and peace. The hyphen itself keeps

1. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, “One God, Many Names” (Nawawi Foundation, 2004), 1–9, especially 2–3 and 6–8.

visible what the name declares—servanthood to Allah Most High. In that small mark, the relation remains alive: ‘*abd* of Allah. Wymann-Landgraf became Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, and English received the name because he bore it. His teachers, students, friends, readers, and publishers learned to pronounce it, write it, and recognize it. No one required that it be rendered ‘Umar the Discerner, Servant of God’ before it could become at home in English. A living person carried the name into the language, and usage did what usage always does: it made the unfamiliar familiar.

This essay does not question anyone’s right to say “God.” Nor does it seek to regulate the private language of prayer, devotion, or spiritual memory. A person may have first called upon the Creator under that English word, may have wept before God, hoped in God, feared and loved God, and then, upon entering Islam, come to know more fully the One toward whom the heart had already turned. Such personal history deserves respect, not correction.

But the matter changes when personal usage becomes public prescription. To say, “This is the word through which I first knew and loved the Creator,” is one thing. To say, “English-speaking Muslims ought to use this word, and their preference for Allah is misguided, alienating, or linguistically defective,” is something far larger. It moves beyond personal biography and devotion into a claim about how Muslims should name Allah Most High in one of the principal languages of the contemporary world. That claim requires examination.

English is no longer the exclusive possession of those born into historically Christian societies. It is not a sealed inheritance whose legitimate religious vocabulary was fixed before Muslims began to inhabit it. In a lighter mood, I have sometimes said that English is not the copyrighted property of the Queen of England. The serious point beneath the smile is that no class of native speakers possesses permanent jurisdiction over the semantic future of a living language.

Languages grow through use, receiving words through migration, trade, scholarship, worship, necessity, and love. What sounds foreign in one generation may become ordinary in the next. Hajj, Ramadan, hadith, halal, imam, and fatwa did not cease to be Arabic in origin when they entered English; nor did English cease to be English by

receiving them. They became part of its living vocabulary because speakers needed them, explained them, and kept using them until the language itself made room.

The question before us, therefore, is not simply whether “God” can refer to the same Divine Reality intended by Allah. It plainly can, in many contexts and for many speakers. The deeper questions are:

- What meaning appears in the mind when each word is spoken?
- What world of revelation, memory, doctrine, worship, and association does each name summon?
- Can identity of intended Referent establish full equivalence of meaning?
- And who possesses the authority to decide that Allah should yield to “God” in English Muslim discourse?

These questions become more urgent when we remember that the Islamic scholarly tradition has never treated Allah as merely the Arabic equivalent of a generic term for deity. The tradition differs over the word’s derivation, but its major grammarians, exegetes, theologians, scholars of the Divine Names, and spiritual authorities repeatedly identify Allah as the Name of Majesty, the Name uniquely reserved for the Creator, the Name of the Divine Essence, and the comprehensive Name under which all the other Beautiful Names are gathered. The IEQ article “Allah Most High” traces this understanding across the tradition in considerable detail.² It was the first article of the seven-volume reference work that presents all concepts, persons, places, events, and things mentioned in the Qur’ān through the lens of 1400 years of Muslim scholarship. It was placed at the head of the volumes, outside the alphabetical order followed for all but two entries, the second being Aḥmad, upon him blessings and peace. It was an intentional decision based on the *adab* practiced in the Islamic tradition.

Yet the scholar who objected has himself expressed this traditional position with striking clarity. In his introduction to *The Name and the Named*, he explains that Allah is the “all-comprehensive name,”

2. Muzaffar Iqbal and Naseer Ahmad, “Allah Most High,” *Integrated Encyclopedia of the Qur’ān*, vol. 1, 1–50.

because mentioning it implicitly gathers all the other Divine Names. Each of the other Names expresses a particular determination; Allah alone comprehends them all. His conclusion is unambiguous: “Only Allah is truly a universal name.”³

If Allah is uniquely comprehensive, what precisely occurs when it is replaced by “God”? What is preserved, and what may be lost? What travels across the act of translation, and what remains behind?

Dr. Abd-Allah’s own writings bring us close to another part of the answer. In “Islam and the Cultural Imperative,” he argues that Muslims in America must become producers rather than passive consumers of culture. They must embrace English as an indigenous language and make it capable of carrying the full breadth of Islamic life, learning, identity, and imagination.⁴ I agree deeply with that imperative. The difference concerns how such a transformation is to occur.

Does English become an Islamic language principally by rendering Islamic realities through its inherited Christian, biblical, philosophical, and secular vocabulary? Or does it also become Islamic by receiving Qur’ānic words, allowing their meanings to take root, and gradually enlarging its own semantic world?

The answer matters because English is no longer merely a language through which outsiders study Islam. Across large parts of the traditional lands of Islam, it has become a language in which Muslims themselves are educated, informed, professionally formed, and increasingly taught to think. I watched this transformation begin in Pakistan during the 1980s, when English-medium schools started to rapidly multiply. It was already possible to see that English would not remain merely an additional language of social advancement. For many in the next generation, it would displace Urdu as the language of serious reading, education, and intellectual formation. Within a generation that has become a reality.

I grieve that loss. But grief cannot substitute the responsibility

3. William C. Chittick, Introduction to Shaykh Tosun Bayrak al-Jerrahi al-Halveti’s *The Name and the Named: The Divine Attributes of God* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2000), 13.

4. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, “Islam and the Cultural Imperative” (Nawawi Foundation, 2004), especially pp. 1–3 and 7–11.

now before us.

If English is entering deeply into Muslim minds, Muslims must consciously infuse Islam into English. Otherwise, new generations may learn about Islam through a language whose conceptual architecture remains external to it. They may receive Qur'ānic realities through approximate equivalents, inherited scriptural associations, and categories formed elsewhere.

This essay is therefore not a plea to ban “God,” nor an attempt to close a conversation. It is an invitation to begin one more carefully. It is addressed primarily, though not exclusively, to three scholars whose work has enriched the study of Islam, and with whom I differ on this question. It is also addressed to translators, editors, teachers, imams, publishers, parents, and Muslim writers who now carry the responsibility of shaping the English in which future generations will encounter the Qur'ān. The task is not merely to translate Islam into English; it is also to allow Islam to transform English.

The Word, the Meaning, and the Named

Before asking whether Allah should be rendered as “God,” one must distinguish three things that are often collapsed into one: the word uttered, the meaning understood, and the Reality intended.

The first is the *lafẓ*: the audible or written form composed of particular sounds and letters. Allah and “God” are plainly different at this level. They belong to different linguistic histories, are formed from different letters, and awaken different associations before any formal definition is supplied.

The second is the *ma'na*: the meaning that arises in the mind and heart of the speaker and hearer. Meaning does not reside physically inside letters. The same word may carry different meanings for different persons, and what a speaker intends may not be what a hearer receives. One person may utter “God” while intending the One, transcendent Creator; another may hear the same word and think of the Trinity, divine fatherhood, incarnation, a remote first cause, an impersonal absolute, or merely a cultural expression inherited from childhood. Likewise, a person may utter Allah while holding a conception corrupted by association, mediation, resemblance, or inherited custom. Correct letters do not by themselves guarantee

correct knowledge.

The third is the *musammā*: the Named, the Reality to whom the word is intended to refer. Here the matter becomes more subtle. Two different words may be used with the intention of referring to the same Reality, yet this does not make their meanings identical. Unity of intended reference does not erase difference of semantic content.

It is often argued that because Arabic-speaking Christians say Allah, and because Muslims who speak English may say “God,” the two expressions are simply interchangeable. But this establishes only that both words can be used with reference to the Creator. It does not establish that they carry the same meaning, evoke the same revealed knowledge, occupy the same theological rank, or act upon the heart in the same way. The words “house,” *bayt*, *khāna*, and *ghar* may refer to the same building. Yet each belongs to a different language and may carry distinct emotional, literary, social, and historical resonances. Reference may converge while meaning remains layered and unequal. This is even more apparent with proper names, titles, and sacred designations, where memory and identity adhere closely to the word itself.

The problem becomes still more complex because reference is not a mechanical relation between a sound and an object. It involves intention, knowledge, and reception. A speaker may intend one thing while the hearer understands another. Two speakers may use the same word while intending different realities; two others may use different words while intending the same Reality, but knowing Him under very different descriptions.

Thus the question “Do Allah and ‘God’ refer to the same Being?” cannot be answered responsibly without asking: for whom?

- For the speaker who utters the word?
- For the hearer who receives it?
- For the community whose language has formed its associations?
- For the theological tradition that has defined its proper use?
- For the translator seeking an approximate equivalent?
- Or for the worshipper whose heart has been formed through

years of recitation and remembrance?

In one context, the answer may be yes: the speaker intends the Creator of the heavens and the earth. In another, the answer may be uncertain because the conception attached to the word includes predicates Islam explicitly denies. The same Named may therefore be intended while the knowledge, imagination, doctrine, and devotion carried by the name differ profoundly.

Etymology alone cannot resolve the issue. To discover that two words descend from ancient roots associated with invocation, lordship, power, or worship tells us something about their histories, but not everything about what they mean in a living religious community. Etymology traces ancestry; it does not determine present theological content.

This limitation becomes especially important in the present case. Even the etymology of the Name Allah is not a matter of settled unanimity within the Islamic philological tradition. Scholars differed over whether the Name is derived or underived and, if derived, over the root from which it derives; Jalāl al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Suyūṭī (849–911/1445–*ca.*1505) records nearly thirty opinions concerning its origin. One may therefore affirm a historical relationship among Arabic *ilāh*, Hebrew *elōah* or *Elohim*, and Aramaic or Syriac *Alāhā* without pretending that the internal history of Allah is philologically simple or uncontested. Cognacy may establish that words descend from a common linguistic ancestry. It cannot establish that the theological meanings borne by those words in later religious traditions are identical.

Dr. Abd-Allah’s opening claim thus compresses two distinct questions into one. The first is philological: are the relevant Semitic designations historically related? The second is theological: do the communities using them know, describe, and worship the Named in equivalent ways? An affirmative answer to the first does not establish an affirmative answer to the second. Lexical kinship concerns the history of words; theological identity concerns what is affirmed and denied of the One toward whom those words are directed.

The Qur’ān itself prevents this collapse: its first opponents frequently uttered the Name Allah and acknowledged Him as Creator, yet the Qur’ān judged their conception and worship to be

corrupted by association, mediation, and false attribution. They possessed the word and intended the Creator, but this did not make their knowledge of the Named sound. Shared designation, inherited ancestry, and even convergence of intended reference are therefore insufficient to establish equivalence of meaning.

The question is not whether related words can point toward the same Creator. They can. The question is whether etymology can prove that the meanings, predicates, devotional worlds, and revealed knowledge attached to them are identical. It cannot.

Nor can the question be resolved by appeal to translation practice alone. A word may function adequately as a translation in one sentence while remaining inadequate as a full substitute for a revealed Name. Translation frequently works through approximation. It succeeds by carrying enough meaning for a particular context, not by proving complete equivalence between the two words.

The distinction is especially important in relation to Divine Names. A Divine Name is not merely a convenient label selected by human convention. Within the Islamic tradition, the Names are taught by Revelation. They disclose what may truthfully be affirmed of Allah Most High and protect the believer from attributing to Him what He has denied of Himself. Their meanings are therefore inseparable from the revealed knowledge of the Named.

In the *Muqaddima* of his *Tafsīr*, Abū al-Qāsim al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (fl. ≤ 409/1018), one of the most penetrating philologists, ethical thinkers, and Qur’ānic scholars of the classical Islamic tradition, establishes a section entitled, “Chapter on the Defects That Prevent the Addressee from Understanding the Speaker’s Intention,” in which he writes:

The defects (*āfāt*) that prevent the addressee from understanding the speaker’s intention are three.

The first pertains to the discourse (*khiṭāb*) itself, whether from the standpoint of its wording (*lafẓ*) or its meaning (*ma’nā*). This has already been discussed.

The second pertains to the speaker (*mukhāṭib*), either because of an inadequate conception of what he intends to communicate, or because his expression falls short of conveying what he intends to communicate. The speech of Allah, Mighty and Exalted, is exalted above

every such deficiency.

The third pertains to the addressee (*mukhāṭab*), either because of the slowness of his understanding in conceiving such forms of discourse, or because his mind is preoccupied with something else. Even if such a condition existed among some of those addressed by the Qurʾān, it is impossible that it should encompass all of them, for it is inconceivable that mankind as a whole should fail to understand it.⁵

To translate a Divine Name is not merely to exchange one verbal sign for another. It is to ask whether the receiving word can carry the disclosure contained in the original, and what pre-existing meanings accompany it into the mind of the reader.

This does not make translation impossible. It makes translation responsible.

The question, then, is not whether “God” is always false when used for Allah Most High. It is not. The question is whether intended reference is sufficient to establish full equivalence, and whether a general English designation can replace without remainder the Name through which the Qurʾān discloses the One who speaks within it.

Two words may point toward the same Named without bearing the same meaning. A name does not merely identify; it summons a world. What world is summoned by Allah, and what the Qurʾān did to the word already present in Arabic before Revelation, must therefore be examined before any judgment about its replacement can be made.⁶

A Name Summons a World: Ayyūb and Job

English translations of the Qurʾān inherited a language already inhabited by the Bible. Long before Muslims began translating the Qurʾān into English, names such as Abraham, Moses, Noah, David, Solomon, John, Jesus, and Job had acquired settled places within

5. Abū al-Qāsim al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Taḥṣīr al-Rāghib*, 1:6.

6. For a fuller account of the classical discussions concerning whether Allah is derived or underived, and the range of opinions concerning its etymology, see Muzaḥḥar Iqbal and Naṣeer Ahmad, “Allah Most High,” *Integrated Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān*, vol. 1, 51–52, s.v. “Etymology.”

English religious consciousness. They were not merely convenient arrangements of letters. Each had gathered around it a scriptural narrative, a body of interpretation, artistic and literary representations, devotional associations, and a distinct moral persona.

The earliest Muslim translators of the Qurʾān into English therefore faced a genuine difficulty. Should they retain the familiar biblical forms, thereby making the Qurʾānic text immediately recognizable to an English readership? Or should they transliterate the Qurʾānic names—Ibrāhīm, Mūsā, Nūḥ, Dāwūd, Sulaymān, Yaḥyā, ʿĪsā, and Ayyūb—and require English to receive them on Qurʾānic terms?

The matter cannot be settled by observing that Abraham and Ibrāhīm, or Job and Ayyūb, are intended to identify the same historical person. Identity of intended referent does not ensure that the two names place the same prophetic figure before the reader. Ayyūb, upon him peace, provides an especially revealing example.

The Qurʾān mentions him four times. Twice he appears within assemblies of Prophets whom Allah guided, elected, and entrusted with revelation. In the two passages devoted to his trial, the narrative is strikingly compressed. Details of the affliction recede; the prophetic character stands forth. Ayyūb, upon him peace, calls upon his Sustainer without abandoning *adab*, receives mercy and restoration, and is sealed by Divine praise: *Indeed, We found him patient. How excellent a servant, ever-returning unto Us* (Q 38:44). The Qurʾānic account directs attention to his station as a servant: patient, supplicating, and ever returning to Allah Most High.

Muslim historical and *Qışaş al-anbiyāʾ*³ literature later incorporated many details derived from Israelite accounts, although the authenticity of these materials has frequently been questioned. Yet even where such reports entered Muslim literature, the Qurʾānic measure remained decisive. The character placed before the believer is the Prophet whom Allah Himself praised as patient and excellent in servanthood.

The Biblical Job, who lived “in the land of Uz,” enters the reader’s consciousness as a man described as upright and God-fearing, surrounded by children, wealth, servants, and honor. He then becomes the subject of a heavenly trial: his possessions are destroyed,

his servants slain, his sons and daughters killed, and his body afflicted with painful sores. At first he worships and refuses to charge God with wrong; but after seven days of silence with his companions, he curses the day of his birth, laments his suffering, defends his innocence, disputes with his friends, and repeatedly asks why God has made him His target. The drama expands through many chapters of argument until God answers him from the whirlwind, overwhelms him with the signs of Divine knowledge and power, and restores his fortunes.

The Qur'ānic Ayyūb, upon him peace, appears within a markedly different frame. When his trial is mentioned, almost all external detail disappears. We hear only his restrained cry: *Affliction has indeed befallen me; though You are the Most Merciful of the merciful* (Q 21:83), and, *Satan has indeed touched me with hardship and pain* (Q 38:41). Allah responds, removes his affliction, restores his family, and closes the account with His own judgment: *Indeed, We found him patient. How excellent a servant, ever-returning unto Us* (Q 38:44).

The English reader therefore meets Job through a vast drama of calamity, lament, disputation, Divine interrogation, and restoration; Ayyūb appears through a handful of Qur'ānic verses governed by servanthood, supplication, mercy, patience, and return. The contrast can be so pronounced that Mawdūdī, after considering the Biblical passages, wrote that it is difficult to believe they concern the same person whom the Qur'ān presents as “a paragon of patience” and an exemplar for the devout.⁷

Our concern here is not a comparative study of the Qur'ān and the Book of Job, nor the question of whether both traditions intend the same ancient figure. It is what happens in translation when the name “Job” enters a Qur'ānic verse. For a reader formed within English biblical culture, the name does not arrive alone. It brings a book, a narrative, a history of interpretation, and a recognizable religious and literary character. The translation may preserve the intended identity of the person while importing a persona formed by another scripture.

A translated proper name can therefore perform two actions at once: it can assist recognition and redirect imagination. The reader sees “Job” and may assume that the Qur'ān is referring to the figure

7. Mawdūdī, *Tafhīm*, sub Q 21:84.

already known from the Bible. The Qurʾānic verses can then be read as a shortened version of the prior narrative rather than as a sovereign revelation presenting Ayyūb according to its own purpose, measure, and prophetic teaching. What appears to be a harmless linguistic accommodation may quietly subordinate the Qurʾānic presentation to a scriptural memory already resident in English.

The name Ayyūb, by contrast, creates a moment of necessary distance. It may initially be unfamiliar, but that very unfamiliarity allows the Qurʾān to introduce its Prophet on its own terms. The reader must ask: Who is Ayyūb? What does Allah say of him? Why is he praised? What kind of patience does his supplication reveal? The name does not permit an inherited persona to answer before the Qurʾān has spoken.

This does not require biblical forms to disappear from every Muslim discourse. Audience, genre, readability, and purpose all require judgment. It does mean that such forms are not neutral, and that familiarity is not the same as fidelity. The Qurʾān translator must ask not only, “Will the reader recognize this name?” but also, “What will the reader think has been recognized?”

Ayyūb and Job thus return us to the distinction between the word, the meaning, and the Named. The two names may point toward the same Prophet, but they carry different narratives and may summon different characters. Identity of referent does not guarantee identity of persona.

The same principle applies with still greater consequence to the Divine Name. “God” may be intended to refer to Allah Most High, yet the English word does not enter the sentence emptied of its prior history. It carries centuries of Christian doctrine, biblical translation, philosophical abstraction, literary usage, devotional memory, secular dilution, and ordinary speech. Some of these associations may accord with Islamic truth; others may be incomplete, and still others are explicitly negated by the Qurʾān.

Allah likewise does not enter Muslim speech as an empty Arabic sound. It bears the Qurʾānic disclosure of the One it names, the testimony of faith, the call to prayer, the opening of every sura but one, the rhythm of remembrance, and the accumulated worship of generations.

Ayyūb and Job therefore prepare us to perceive what is at stake in Allah and “God.” In both instances, translation may preserve intended reference while changing the world that gathers around the Named. A name does not merely tell us whom to look toward. It may also determine whom we think we see.⁸

The Word Allah Before the Qur’ān

The word Allah did not first enter Arabic with the descent of the Qur’ān. It was already known in the language of the Arabs, appearing in pre-Islamic poetry, invocations, oaths, personal names, and inherited forms of religious speech. The Qur’ān itself addresses people for whom the word required no lexical introduction. When asked who created the heavens and the earth, subjected the sun and the moon, sent down rain, or held dominion over creation, they would answer: Allah (Q 29:61–63; 31:25; 39:38; 43:9, 87). The dispute between the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, and his first hearers was therefore not ordinarily over whether a being called Allah existed, but over who Allah is, what belongs to Him alone, and what human beings owe Him.

Pre-Islamic Arabia was not religiously uniform. Its people included remnants of the religion of Ibrāhīm, upon him peace, alongside those who acknowledged Allah as Creator while worshipping intercessors, attributed independent powers to idols, denied Resurrection or Prophecy, or ascribed the course of life and death to Time. The Qur’ān addresses these differing conditions without reducing them to a single creed.

Yet among many of the idolaters, the word Allah retained a supreme reference. They did not necessarily place their idols above Allah; rather, they placed them between themselves and Him. *We worship them only that they may bring us nearer to Allah* (Q 39:3). They called these beings their intercessors with Allah (Q 10:18), assigned to Him daughters while reserving sons for themselves (Q 16:57; 37:149–53; 43:16–19), and joined partners to Him in worship despite

8. For a fuller treatment of the Qur’ānic account, the exegetical tradition, and the relation between Ayyūb, upon him peace, and the Biblical Job, see Muzaffar Iqbal, “Ayyūb, upon him peace,” *Integrated Encyclopedia of the Qur’ān*, vol. 1, 295–299.

acknowledging Him as Creator.

Their error did not lie in pronouncing an unknown or false name. They pronounced the true Name while attaching false claims to the One named by it. A word may remain stable while its meaning is corrupted; the *lafẓ* may be preserved even as the conception of the *musammā* becomes disfigured. To utter Allah is not, by the utterance alone, to possess sound knowledge of Allah. The Qurʾān did not accept the pagan Arabs' acknowledgement of Allah as sufficient, because the meanings, relations, and acts of worship attached to that acknowledgement violated the truth of Divine Oneness.

Their recognition contained truth: Allah created, governed, provided, and rescued from danger. But this truth was mixed with contradiction. They affirmed Him as Creator while assigning to creatures a share in His worship; acknowledged His sovereignty while imagining that access to Him required intermediaries whom He had not authorized; and invoked Him sincerely in peril, only to return to association when safety came (Q 10:22–23; 29:65; 31:32).

The Qurʾān repeatedly exposes this fracture. If Allah alone created, why worship what creates nothing? If He alone gives provision and answers the distressed, why call upon those who possess nothing? If all dominion belongs to Him, what independent authority could an idol, angel, ancestor, or imagined intercessor possess? The Qurʾānic argument proceeds from partial acknowledgement to uncompromised *tawḥīd*.

The pre-Qurʾānic presence of the word Allah therefore cannot be used to diminish the significance of the Qurʾānic Name. To say that pagan Arabs already used it, and that it was therefore simply the ordinary Arabic word for God later adopted by Islam, confuses verbal ancestry with revealed meaning. Its presence before revelation shows that the Qurʾān addressed its first hearers through their own language; it does not show that their understanding of the word was left intact.

Revelation often takes up words already present in human speech and gives them their true measure. *Ṣalāt*, *zakāt*, *īmān*, *islām*, *taqwā*, *ākḥira*, and *kufṛ* were not combinations of sounds first heard with the Qurʾān. But after the Qurʾān, they no longer belonged merely to their prior range of usage. Revelation ordered them, deepened

them, joined them to one another, and placed them within a divinely disclosed world.

The same is true, supremely, of Allah. The Qurʾān did not encounter an empty word awaiting content, nor did it simply approve everything its hearers already associated with it. It retained what was true, rejected what was false, restored what had been forgotten, and disclosed what lay beyond unaided human knowledge.

Thus, to say that pre-Islamic Arabs knew the word Allah is true. To say that they therefore knew Allah as the Qurʾān made Him known is not. They knew that He created the heavens and the earth, but they did not guard His exclusive right to worship. They knew His Name and turned toward Him in extremity, yet joined others to His authority and did not remain with Him in ease. They possessed a fragment of recognition without submitting to all that the recognition required.

Here the distinction between the Name and the Named reaches a deeper level. The Name may be present upon the tongue while the Named remains veiled from the heart by false attribution. Human beings may inherit a true word and fill it with inherited error.

This also explains why the statement that different communities “believe in the same God” may be true at one level and still leave the essential theological question unresolved. They may intend the Creator of the world, the God of Abraham, the ultimate object of worship; yet what they affirm and deny of that Creator may differ radically. Sameness of intended reference cannot by itself settle the question of truth.

The Qurʾān itself provides the model. It did not deny that its first opponents intended Allah when they spoke of the Creator. It judged the meanings they attached to Him and the worship they directed elsewhere. They did not lack the word. What they lacked was the truth the word demanded. And so the Qurʾān descended—not merely to repeat the Name already known, but to reveal who Allah is.

The Same Word, a World Remade

The word remained. Its letters were not altered, nor was a new designation coined for the Creator. Yet the world of meaning surrounding the word was subjected to revelation. What was true

within the inherited conception was affirmed, what was false was removed, what had been forgotten was restored, and what lay beyond unaided human knowledge was disclosed by Allah Himself.

The continuity of the word must not conceal the magnitude of the transformation. Pre-Qur'ānic Arabs could say Allah while attributing daughters to Him, seeking access through idols, assigning creatures a share in His worship, and resisting the Resurrection and the Messenger He had sent. The Qur'ān did not permit these meanings to remain attached to the Name; it judged the inherited semantic world in which they had taken root.

The transformation begins with negation. Allah is not one among several divine beings. He has no partner in dominion, no offspring, no equal, no likeness, and no need of mediation imposed upon Him by human imagination. *Say: He is Allah, One; Allah, the Self-Sufficient. He begets not, nor was He begotten, and none is comparable unto Him* (Q 112:1–4). In four brief verses, an entire world of false attribution is removed from the Name.

The Qur'ān repeatedly performs this purifying work. *There is nothing whatsoever like unto Him* (Q 42:11). *Vision comprehends Him not, though He comprehends all vision* (Q 6:103). *Exalted is He above what they associate with Him* (Q 10:18). *They have not measured Allah with His true measure* (Q 6:91; 22:74; 39:67). Each negation protects the believer from enclosing Allah within inherited images, analogies, genealogies, and categories drawn from creation.

But Qur'ānic negation does not leave an emptiness. It clears the ground for disclosure. Allah is the Creator of the heavens and the earth, but the Qur'ān does not leave “Creator” as an isolated proposition. He creates, sustains, governs, gives life and death, sends rain, brings forth vegetation, and knows what enters the earth and what emerges from it, what descends from heaven and what ascends into it. Not a leaf falls but He knows it; no creature moves upon the earth but its provision rests with Him; no soul dies except by His leave and at its appointed term.

The Name is thus surrounded by acts of continuous lordship. Creation is not an event abandoned to its own mechanisms. Every moment depends upon Him. *All who are in the heavens and the earth ask of Him; every day He is upon a matter* (Q 55:29). The world is not merely

something Allah once made; it remains, at every instant, something He sustains.

The Qur'ān also transforms acknowledgement of lordship into the demand for worship. The pagan Arabs' admission that Allah created the heavens and the earth did not suffice, because they did not draw from it the conclusion revelation required: *O mankind, worship your Lord, who created you and those before you, that you may become reverent* (Q 2:21). Creation calls for servanthood, provision for gratitude, sovereignty for obedience, mercy for hope, and judgment for fear. The Qur'ān does not permit the human being to acknowledge Allah cosmologically while withholding himself devotionally.

Allah is therefore not merely the highest being within an account of the universe. He is the One to whom the whole human being belongs. The Name enters every dimension of life. One begins in His Name, seeks refuge in Him, trusts Him, repents to Him, calls upon Him, remembers Him, loves Him, fears Him, hopes in Him, and returns to Him. What had been a word within the religious vocabulary of Arabia becomes the center around which consciousness, worship, ethics, law, memory, time, and destiny are ordered.

This transformation is already visible in the opening of the Qur'ān: *In the Name of Allah, the All-Merciful, the Ever-Merciful*. The Name is immediately joined to mercy. The One who is Lord of all worlds is also the All-Merciful, the Ever-Merciful; the Master of the Day of Judgment; the One whom alone the servant worships and from whom alone he seeks aid (Q 1:1–5). In the space of a few verses, cosmology, mercy, judgment, worship, and dependence are gathered around Allah.

The Qur'ān continues to disclose Him through His Names. He is the Living, the Self-Subsisting, whom neither slumber nor sleep overtakes; to Him belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth; no one intercedes except by His permission; His knowledge encompasses what lies before and behind His creatures; His Throne extends over the heavens and the earth, and preserving them does not weary Him (Q 2:255). He is the Knower of the unseen and the seen, the King, the Holy, the Source of Peace, the Giver of Security, the Guardian, the Mighty, the Compeller, the Supremely Great; the Creator, the Originator, the Fashioner; His are the Most Beautiful

Names (Q 59:22–24).

These passages do more than supply theological information. They teach the human being how to know Allah through the Names by which He has made Himself known. Allah becomes the gathering point of a disclosed plenitude. Mercy does not stand apart from majesty, nor knowledge from power, nor nearness from transcendence, nor forgiveness from judgment. The One named by Allah is not reducible to any single attribute, image, function, or relationship.

The Qurʾān also transforms the relation between the Name and the human heart. Allah is not merely spoken about; He speaks. He addresses, commands, promises, warns, consoles, forgives, tests, guides, and calls. The human being does not stand before an abstract theological object but before the One who says, *I am near; I answer the call of the caller when he calls upon Me* (Q 2:186), and, *Remember Me, and I will remember you* (Q 2:152).

The Name becomes relational without ceasing to be transcendent. Allah is nearer to the human being than his jugular vein (Q 50:16), yet nothing resembles Him. He is with His servants wherever they are (Q 57:4), yet He is exalted above all limitation. He hears the plea uttered in secrecy and knows the thought not yet spoken. The Qurʾān does not preserve Divine nearness by reducing transcendence, nor transcendence by rendering Allah remote.

The believer learns, therefore, not merely that Allah exists, but how to stand before Him: as servant before Lord, creature before Creator, dependent before the Self-Sufficient, sinner before the Forgiving, weak before the Strong, bewildered before the Wise, fearful before the Protector, and hopeful before the All-Merciful. The semantic transformation of the Name is inseparable from the spiritual transformation of the one who receives it.

The Qurʾān carried the word Allah from inherited recognition into revealed knowledge, from partial truth into uncompromised *tawhīd*, and from acknowledgment of creation into exclusive worship and conscious servanthood. It did not empty the word of all prior meaning. The Arabs' recognition that Allah created and governed was not false; revelation retained that truth, removed what contradicted it, and unfolded its consequences. If Allah alone creates and governs,

worship and trust belong to Him alone. If intercession occurs only by His permission, no intermediary possesses independent power. If He is One, every form of partnership is false. If all return to Him, life cannot be understood apart from judgment.

The Qur’ān thus did not substitute one referent for another, nor persuade the Arabs to abandon the word Allah for a more accurate term. It transformed their knowledge of the One they already intended. The letters remained, but false divine genealogy and idolatrous mediation were removed from their semantic field. Around the Name, revelation gathered creation, command, mercy, judgment, worship, remembrance, and return.

The Arabs knew the word; the Qur’ān disclosed the Named.

This bears directly upon the English word “God.” It may truthfully refer to Allah Most High and may be uttered by a Muslim with sound belief and complete sincerity. But its capacity to refer does not mean that it arrives already bearing the Qur’ānic disclosure. Like the pre-Qur’ānic word Allah, it comes with inherited meanings—some true, some incomplete, some shaped by Christian doctrine, philosophical abstraction, or secular habit.

The demanding question is therefore not simply whether “God” and Allah can point toward the same Divine Reality. The pre-Qur’ānic use of Allah has already shown that identity of intended Referent does not guarantee adequacy of conception. The question is what the Qur’ān must do to the English word “God” before that word can bear, without distortion, the knowledge of Allah disclosed in revelation.

Perhaps it can be purified, deepened, and reordered. Perhaps generations of Muslim speech can invest it with more explicitly Qur’ānic content. Yet another question remains: if revelation has already given us the Name Allah—the Name through which this entire world of meaning was disclosed—why should English-speaking Muslims be required to surrender it?

Before answering, we must listen to those who reflected most deeply upon the Name itself. The understanding that Allah is not merely one designation among others is not a modern linguistic preference; it belongs to a long and remarkably continuous scholarly tradition.

The Name That Gathers All Names

The Qurʾān remade the world within the word Allah; the scholars who received the Qurʾān recognized in Allah a Name unlike any other name: the Name of Majesty, the Name of the Divine Essence, the Name uniquely reserved for the Creator; and, for many, the Supreme Name under which all the other Names are gathered. The master-grammarians Sibawayh (d. 180/796) called it “the most definite of all definites” (*aʿraf al-maʿārif*)—a description for which he is said to have received great benefit after death, as was revealed to someone in a dream vision (al-Zarkashī, *Maʿnā*, p. 106; al-Samīn, *Durr*, sub Q 1:1).

Scholars reached this understanding through a sustained philological inquiry perhaps without parallel in the treatment of any other name. Grammarians, lexicographers, exegetes, theologians, and scholars who wrote specialist works on the Divine Names examined the word with extraordinary care. They asked whether it was Arabic or inherited from an earlier language; whether it was derived or underived; whether it originated as a proper noun or became one through predominant usage; and, if derived, from what root and through what linguistic process.

Extensive discussions on the etymology of the word “Allah” are found both in exegeses and in specialized works on the Divine Names. For instance, al-Rāzī discusses it in his *Tafsīr* as well as in his *Lawāmiʿ al-bayyināt*, a major treatise on Divine Names and Attributes; al-Bayḍawī devotes a section to its discussion in his *Tafsīr* (sub Q 1:1). Al-Suyūṭī, in his commentary on al-Bayḍawī’s exegesis, titled *Nawāhid al-abkār wa shawārid al-afkār*, lists “around thirty opinions” on the etymology of Allah—including the following: (i) that the word is of Syriac (*suryānī*) origin (meaning the Syriac considered to be the primordial angelic language; see Language and Speech); (ii) that it is Arabic but underived; and (iii) that it is derived but its root is known to Allah alone (*Nawāhid* 1:126–144). Al-Suyūṭī quotes, among others, the polymath Saʿd al-Dīn Masʿūd b. ʿUmar al-Taftāzānī (722–792/1322–1390), who said, “Just as the speculations are bewildered (*tahayyarat al-awhām*) in [regard to] His essence and His attributes, so they are confounded [regarding] the word signifying Him (*al-lafẓ al-dāll ʿalayhi*), as to whether it is a noun or an adjective, derived or underived, a proper name (*ʿalam*) or not a proper name, and so on” (*Nawāhid* 1:127).

According to the vast majority of scholars (*al-jumhūr*), Allah is originally a proper and underived noun (al-Shawkānī, *Nayl al-awṭār* 1:18). Abū Ḥanīfa, al-Shāfi‘ī (150–204/767–820), al-Ghazālī (450–505/1058–1111), al-Bayḍawī (d. 685/1286), and al-Suyūṭī all hold this view. According to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (543–606/1148–1209), the majority of Mu‘tazilis and most of the littérateurs (*al-udabā’*) consider it a derived word (al-Rāzī, *Lawāmi‘*, p. 80). “This name is exclusively reserved for the Creator Most High (*al-Bārī ta‘ālā*)” (al-Māwardī, *sub* Q 1:1; al-Rāghib, *sub* ʿ-l-h; al-Rāzī, *Lawāmi‘*, pp. 79–81).

Among the principal derivational accounts is the view that Allah arose from *ilāh*, “deity” or “object of worship,” through the elision of the initial *hamza* and the addition of the definite article. Yet even within this account, the proposed root meanings proliferate. The word has been connected to worship, bewilderment, refuge, tranquility, yearning, hiddenness, and elevation. Al-Bayḍawī presents these possibilities before judging it more likely that Allah began as a descriptive designation and, through exclusive and predominant usage, came to function as a proper Name reserved for the One truly worthy of worship.

The history of the word was therefore disputed far more extensively than its unique theological status. Whether scholars regarded Allah as underived from the beginning or as a designation that became exclusively proper through usage, they all agreed that it belongs uniquely to Allah Most High. Other proper names identify one individual among others of the same class. Allah does not distinguish one deity from several beings who equally possess divinity. It names the One who belongs to no class or genus and has no equal.

Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb al-Māwardī (364–450/974–1058), al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, and Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ‘Umar al-Rāzī (543–606/1148–1209) likewise state that the Name is exclusively reserved for the Creator Most High. The Qur’ānic question, *Do you know any who could be His namesake?* (Q 19:65), was understood not merely as a challenge to find another bearing the same sound, but as an affirmation of His absolute incomparability. No one else is truly named Allah because no one else is what the Name signifies.

This exclusivity becomes clearer when Allah is considered alongside the other Divine Names. Words such as merciful, knowing, generous, and mighty may be applied to created beings in limited and dependent senses. Their application to Allah is absolute and incomparable, but their linguistic forms are not confined to Him alone. Allah is not shared in this way. It does not name a quality that may be possessed finitely by one and infinitely by another; it names the One to whom all perfect qualities belong.

The same distinction appears in predication. One says: Allah is the All-Merciful, the Knowing, the Wise, the King. These Names disclose particular perfections of the One already named. Al-Bayḍāwī brings this grammatical structure directly into his theological argument: Allah is described by the Divine Attributes, while no other word bears the same comprehensive relation to them. He then argues from the testimony of faith. If Allah were merely one descriptive attribute, There is no god but Allah would not establish uncompromised Divine Oneness, just as “There is no god but the All-Merciful” would not, by its verbal form alone, preclude the imagined existence of another deity bearing a different description. The *shahāda* concludes not with one Divine quality, but with the Name of the One to whom every quality of perfection belongs.

Abū Ḥanīfā accordingly regarded Allah as the Supreme Name. The IEQ article records the same position across a broad range of authorities, including Abū Muḥammad Sahl b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Yūnus b. Rafī‘ al-Tustarī (200–283/815–896), Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (224–310/839–923), Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Ishāq Ibn Mandah (310–395/922–1005), Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī (560–638/1165–1240), al-Rāzī, Abū l-Faḍl Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Karīm b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Aḥmad b. ‘Isā b. al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī (658–709/1260–1309), and Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī al-Harawī (d. 1014/1606). The tradition contains other views concerning the identity of the Supreme Name, and the reports invoked in that discussion require their own careful study; the prominence of Allah within it is nevertheless unmistakable.

Ibn Mandah gives the matter an especially luminous formulation. In his *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, he titles the discussion “On Gnosis of the Greatest Name of Allah by which He Named Himself and which He Honored above all other forms of remembrance.” He connects this

to the Qur'ānic declaration, and surely the remembrance of Allah is greater (Q 29:45). The Name Allah, he writes, is the key to gnosis of the Divine Essence; Allah has withheld it from all other creatures, made it the beginning of faith and the central pillar of Islam, and joined to it the acts by which faith begins, refuge is sought, obligations are undertaken, and all things begin and end. Ibn Mandah is describing not a lexical equivalent, but a revealed Name around which religious life is ordered.

Muḥibb al-Dīn al-Sayyid Muḥammad Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (1145–1205/1732–1790), gathering centuries of reflection into a concise definition, writes: “Allāh is the proper Name of the Essence (*al-dhāt*) of the Necessary Existent (*wājib al-wujūd*), combining all attributes of perfection (*al-mustajmi' li-jamī' šifāt al-kamāl*); He is free from all deficiency and cessation (*al-munazzah 'an al-naqṣ wa-l-zawāl*); to Him the existence of everything else is referred; and all that is said concerning His Essence, Attributes, and Acts is an exposition of this Name” (al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-'arūs, sub 'l-h*; see also Ibn Abī Sharīf, *Kitāb al-Musāmara*, p. 21; al-Qārī, *Mirqāt al-mafātīḥ*, 3:917).

Here we reach the heart of the matter. Allah does not signify a bare Divine identity stripped of meaning, nor merely identify the possessor of one attribute among many. It names the One whose Essence is unknowable in itself, but who has made Himself known through His Names, Attributes, and Acts. All that revelation teaches concerning mercy, knowledge, life, power, will, speech, wisdom, majesty, beauty, forgiveness, justice, nearness, transcendence, creation, command, and return unfolds beneath this Name.

Its comprehensiveness must nevertheless be understood carefully. To say that Allah gathers the Divine Names does not mean that the human being comprehends Allah by pronouncing it. The Divine Essence remains beyond created knowledge. Al-Rāzī insists that “no one but Allah knows Allah,” distinguishing knowledge that He exists from knowledge of what He is in Himself. Abū Maṣṣūr Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd al-Māturīdī (d. 333/ca.945) likewise holds that human beings know of Allah only what He discloses through His signs and acts, while the Sufi tradition repeatedly affirms that Allah alone guides to Allah. The Name gathers all Names; the human mind does not thereby encompass the Named.

Each Divine Name opens a path of knowledge: the Merciful discloses mercy, the Knowing knowledge, the Forgiving forgiveness, the Wise wisdom. Yet no single Name exhausts the One named. Allah gathers them all without reducing Him to their sum. The Names are many; the Named is One. Their meanings may be distinguished while the One to whom they belong is indivisible.

The traditional distinction between the Name of the Essence and the Names of Attributes gives this comprehensiveness further precision. To call Allah the Name of the Essence does not mean that the inaccessible Divine Essence is contained in a word. It means that the Name refers to Him in His total Divine Reality, not under the aspect of one particular attribute alone. The Name points to Him with every perfection belonging to Him, even though no creature can comprehend what He is in Himself.

Allah therefore gathers what would fragment a merely human conception. He is the First and the Last, the Outwardly Manifest and the Inwardly Hidden (Q 57:3); the Majestic and the Beautiful; the One who forgives and the One who judges; the Near and the utterly Incomparable. The Name does not isolate mercy from majesty, transcendence from nearness, or beauty from power. It gathers without confusion what revelation affirms without contradiction.

The Qur'ān itself displays this relation between the comprehensive Name and the other Names: *He is Allah, besides whom there is no god, the Knower of the unseen and the seen; He is the All-Merciful, the Ever-Merciful; then: He is Allah, besides whom there is no god, the King, the Holy, the Source of Peace, the Giver of Security, the Guardian, the Mighty, the Compeller, the Supremely Great; and finally: He is Allah, the Creator, the Originator, the Fashioner; His are the Most Beautiful Names* (Q 59:22–24). The order matters. Allah is named first, and the Names that follow disclose His perfections. They do not supplement an inadequate proper noun; they unfold the inexhaustible perfections of the One named by it.

This Qur'ānic structure also answers the suggestion that retaining Allah leaves the English reader with an opaque foreign sound. The Name need not be replaced in order to be understood; its meanings must be unfolded. The Qur'ān unfolds them, the tradition unfolds them, and teaching, translation, commentary, worship, and remembrance continue that unfolding. A Name abundant in meaning

calls not for removal but for exposition.

Nor is its Arabic form an accidental shell to be discarded once an approximate conceptual equivalent has been found. The Name belongs to the wording of revelation. It is recited, written, remembered, invoked, and joined to acts of worship. Its pronunciation itself became an object of careful transmission: scholars discussed the magnification and attenuation of its double *lām*, as well as the legal consequences of corrupting its vocalization in prayer and oath. Such attention would be unintelligible if the Name were merely a replaceable vehicle for a general idea.

None of this renders the English word “God” false or prevents its use in translating Qur’ānic sentences. What requires examination is the larger claim of equivalence. A word capable of general Divine reference is not thereby shown to be equivalent to the Name of Majesty, the Name of the Divine Essence, the Name uniquely reserved for the Creator, the Name with which the testimony of faith concludes, and the Name under which all other Divine Names are gathered.

The tradition did not formulate its answer in the vocabulary of modern translation theory, but its implications are difficult to miss. If Allah is the Name that gathers all Names, its replacement is not simply the exchange of one synonym for another. It asks an English word to bear a revealed comprehensiveness whose presence within that word must first be demonstrated.

“Only Allah Is Truly a Universal Name”

William Chittick’s own account of the Divine Names brings the question into especially sharp focus. In his introduction to *The Name and the Named*, he begins not with translation but with remembrance. The Qur’ān, he writes, repeatedly encourages *dhikr Allāh*, and *dhikr* means not only remembrance but mention. To remember Allah is therefore to mention His Name or Names, whether verbally or inwardly. Prayer, Qur’ānic recitation, and other acts of worship keep the Divine Name before the tongue, mind, and heart; the scholars of theology and Sufism consequently devoted sustained attention not only to the meanings of the Names but also to the effects each Name may produce within the soul of the one who remembers it. A Divine Name, in this account, is not merely a lexical item conveying

information about its Referent. It is remembered, mentioned, recited, and spiritually operative; it forms the consciousness of the worshipper.

Chittick then turns to Ibn ‘Arabi’s teaching concerning the human being as the comprehensive locus of the Divine Names. The full reality of Allah is made known to created beings through His Names, and human perfection requires the gathering of their diverse properties in harmony and balance. Every other creature manifests a limited configuration of Divine Names; the human being, and supremely the perfect human being, possesses the capacity to reflect them all.

At the center of this exposition stands a Prophetic ḥadīth that bears directly upon the comprehensiveness of the Divine Names. Chittick first gives it in the familiar English form, “God created man in His own image,” and then offers what he calls the more literal rendering: “Allah created Adam upon His own form.” He draws attention to the Name Allah because, in his reading, the ḥadīth concerns the comprehensive human capacity to manifest the totality of the Divine Names, and Allah is the “all-comprehensive name.”

The interpretive history of the ḥadīth is more complex than this rendering alone might suggest. The phrase *‘alā ṣūratihī*—“upon His/his image” or “upon His/his form”—contains a pronoun whose referent was disputed by major ḥadīth commentators and theologians. Three broad interpretations emerged. The pronoun could refer generically to the human being whose face must not be struck or cursed; it could refer to Ādam, upon him peace, meaning that Allah created him from the beginning in his completed form without the successive stages through which his progeny pass; or it could refer to Allah Most High, with “form” understood in a manner befitting Divine transcendence and without likeness between Creator and creature.

Al-Rāzī examines all three readings and prefers the second. On this interpretation, the ḥadīth does not predicate a Divine “form” of which Ādam is an image; it proclaims the exceptional immediacy of his creation: Allah brought him into being at once with his complete form, faculties, and capacities. Al-Rāzī nevertheless also explains the third interpretation, according to which “form” may signify attributes: Ādam was created with such qualities as knowledge, life, hearing, and

sight, although no created attribute resembles the Attributes of Allah Most High. Aḥmad b. ‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Maḥmūd b. Aḥmad Ibn Ḥajar al-Kanānī al-‘Asqalānī (773–852/1371–1449) gives a related explanation and cites the variant wording, “upon the form of the All-Merciful.” Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Ibn Taymiyya (661–728/1263–1328), by contrast, rejects the other interpretations and insists that the pronoun refers to Allah, while equally affirming that whatever is attributed to Allah belongs to Him in a manner utterly unlike creation.

Chittick’s interpretation therefore belongs within this third current of the tradition and, more particularly, within the metaphysical vision of Ibn ‘Arabī that governs his introduction. He is not simply translating a grammatically transparent sentence. He is selecting and unfolding a particular traditional reading: Ādam, upon him peace, was created as the comprehensive human form capable of manifesting all the Divine Names, and the Name Allah is indispensable to that argument because it alone gathers those Names.

This qualification makes Chittick’s wording still more significant for the present inquiry. His choice of Allah is not forced upon him by an uncontested grammatical referent; it is required by the theological interpretation he wishes to convey. “God created man” provides an immediately recognizable English formulation, but it does not preserve the specific relation between the comprehensive human form and the all-comprehensive Divine Name upon which his Akbarian reading depends. Allah, in Chittick’s exposition, identifies the Name necessary to the metaphysical argument. Had the English word already carried that precise theological function without remainder, there would have been no need to restore Allah and explain its comprehensiveness.

Chittick’s explanation gives that comprehensiveness its full conceptual force. When one mentions Allah, one implicitly mentions every Divine Name: the All-Merciful, the All-Forgiving, the Just, the Creator, the Generous, the Powerful, the Exalter, the Abaser, and all the other Names, whether enumerated as ninety-nine, one thousand and one, or understood to be without number. Every other Divine Name possesses a particular meaning that distinguishes it from the others. The Merciful discloses mercy, the Just justice, the Forgiving forgiveness, the Creator creation. Each names Allah under

a particular aspect; Allah alone gathers them all.

Hence Chittick's formulation that gives this section its title: "Only Allah is truly a universal name." The statement governs the metaphysical argument that follows. Ādam, upon him peace, was taught all the Names because the human form possesses a comprehensive capacity. The cosmos manifests the Names in differentiated multiplicity; the human being gathers them in relative unity. Both are related to the Name Allah precisely because Allah brings together every Divine Name without being limited to the specific characteristic of any one of them. Chittick's language here closely accords with the scholarly tradition examined in the preceding section. Allah is not simply one designation placed beside the Merciful, the Knowing, the Powerful, and the Wise. It is the Name of the One to whom all these Names belong. The other Names disclose particular perfections; Allah names their indivisible possessor in the comprehensiveness of His Divinity.

There is also a striking dimension to Chittick's own usage. Throughout the introduction, he ordinarily writes "God" in English prose. He speaks naturally of God's Names, God's mercy, God's creation, and knowledge of God. Yet when the argument reaches the comprehensive Name, he retains Allah. At precisely the point where theological exactness requires the Name that implicitly gathers every other Name, "God" no longer performs the distinction he wishes to make.

There is no necessary contradiction in such a practice. A scholar may distinguish between ordinary translation and technical theological usage, regarding "God" as a natural English designation while retaining Allah when a particular doctrinal distinction requires it. But such a practice makes the objection with which this essay began difficult to understand. The *Integrated Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān* did not retain Allah because its editors imagined that "God" always names another deity, or because they believed English incapable of speaking truthfully about the Creator. It retained Allah because the Qur'ān is not merely speaking of a generic supreme being; verse after verse discloses the One named by the all-comprehensive Name. If Chittick's own exposition requires Allah at the decisive theological moment, an encyclopedia devoted to the Qur'ān can reasonably require the same precision.

His opening discussion of *dhikr* presses the matter further. Remembrance, as Chittick presents it, is not the abstract recollection of a Divine concept. It entails mention of the Name or Names, and those Names exercise effects upon the souls of those who invoke them. If the Names are spiritually differentiated, their verbal forms cannot be wholly indifferent. To remember *al-Rahmān* is to remember Allah under the disclosure of all-encompassing mercy; to remember *al-Ghafūr* is to turn toward Him as the Abundantly Forgiving; to remember *al-Ḥakīm* is to receive the disclosure of wisdom. To remember Allah, according to Chittick, is implicitly to remember all the Names together.

Allah thus possesses a function in remembrance that no particular Divine Name possesses: it gathers without restricting and names the Named without confining Him to one aspect of His self-disclosure. Whether “God” can perform precisely the same work within the heart cannot be settled simply by identity of intended Referent. It may indeed do so for a worshipper whose knowledge and spiritual formation have invested the English word with deeply Qur’anic content, and nothing in this argument requires denying the reality of another person’s devotion. What does not follow is that the two words are therefore semantically, revelationally, and spiritually interchangeable.

Chittick’s own analysis gives reason for caution. Every Name, he tells us, has its specific characteristic; the Names produce effects upon those who remember them; and Allah alone implicitly includes them all. These claims establish the precision of naming rather than its neutrality. “God” and Allah may be used to intend the same Divine Reality, yet Chittick assigns to Allah a meaning and function he does not assign to “God”: it is the all-comprehensive, truly universal Name. Equality of Referent therefore does not erase distinctions among the names through which the Referent is known and remembered.

A quiet testimony to the same distinction appears in the book that carries Chittick’s introduction. The publisher explicitly states that Allah has not been translated as “God” in the text because of the sacramental nature of the Name and because it is the personal Name of the One God, assumed by no other. This is the publisher’s statement and should not be attributed to Chittick himself, but its presence in the same volume is significant. The book introduces readers to the

Divine Names in English while allowing Allah to remain irreducible.

The volume thereby performs translation and reception at once. The meanings of the Divine Names are explained through English, while the Name Allah enters English without being dissolved into an inherited equivalent. English is asked to expand rather than the Name being asked to contract. This is precisely the linguistic possibility for which the present essay argues. It does not require that every occurrence of Allah in every text remain untranslated, for genres and purposes differ; nor does it require “God” to disappear from Muslim English. What it resists is the demand that Allah should disappear—that English-speaking Muslims ought ordinarily to replace it, or that retaining it constitutes a failure of translation, cultural belonging, or theological communication.

Chittick’s own words make such a demand difficult to sustain. If only Allah is truly a universal Name, retaining it in English is not an indulgence in foreignness; it preserves a theological universality that translation may otherwise obscure. And if the Name gathers all Names, English does not become poorer by receiving it. English receives, in one word, a world.

Khodā: The Word Before Islam, the Meaning After Revelation

Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah’s treatment of the Persian word *Khodā* offers another instructive case in the history of sacred language. His larger argument is that no human community possesses a monopoly upon valid names for the Supreme Being. Humanity’s primordial knowledge of the Creator, joined to the universal sending of Prophets, has left traces within the world’s languages. English “God,” Arabic Allah, Hebrew *Elohim*, Aramaic *Alāhā*, and many other names may differ in linguistic ancestry while nevertheless carrying genuine reference to the One Creator. Within this wide human inheritance, he presents *Khodā* as an ancient and dignified Indo-European designation long used by Persian-speaking Muslims without compromising *tawhīd*.

In a footnote, he traces *Khodā* to the Old Iranian *Hwa-Taw*, literally “self-able” or “self-powerful,” hence “Ruler” and “Lord.” He calls it a name of majesty indicating self-sufficient omnipotence and notes that, although English “God” and Persian *Khodā* may appear cognate, they arise from different Indo-European roots.

The philological point is valuable. It establishes that *Khodā* possesses an ancestry of its own and cannot be dismissed as an impoverished or irreligious substitute for Allah. It also confirms what no serious account of Islamic civilization should deny: Persian-speaking Muslims have invoked Allah Most High through the word *Khodā* for more than a millennium, and the word has borne some of the most luminous poetry, prayer, metaphysics, and spiritual instruction in the Islamic tradition. Rūmī could say *Khodā*, Sa‘dī could say *Khodā*, and Ḥāfīz could say *Khodā*. Generations of scholars, saints, mothers, children, rulers, artisans, and ordinary believers have uttered the word with faith, love, fear, hope, and surrender.

Its validity as a designation for Allah Most High is therefore not in question. What etymology cannot tell us is what happened to the word when Persian entered the world formed by the Qur’ān. The derivation from *Hwa-Taw* explains something about its pre-Islamic ancestry; it does not explain the transformation of its meaning once Persian-speaking peoples received the Qur’ān, entered the worship of Allah alone, learned the Divine Names, prayed toward the Ka‘ba, recited revelation in Arabic, and began to inhabit a world ordered by *tawhīd*.

Pre-Islamic Persian was not an empty linguistic field awaiting an Arabic equivalent for a concept it already possessed in completed form. It carried a rich religious inheritance of its own: cosmology, ritual, sacred history, conceptions of good and evil, heavenly powers, intermediary beings, kingship, judgment, purity, and the relation between the visible and invisible worlds. *Khodā* belonged within that prior semantic world. When Persian speakers began to use it for Allah, they did not merely substitute one sound for another while retaining all inherited meanings intact. The word had to be disentangled from conceptions incompatible with the Qur’ān, joined to the uncompromised Oneness of Allah, and placed within a semantic order increasingly governed by revelation.

I attempted to describe this process some years ago in “English as an Islamic Language.”⁹ When Islam came to Persia, the language already possessed a conceptually rich religious structure. Persian Muslims who used *Khodā* for Allah therefore had to dissociate

9. *Islam & Science*, Vol. 10 (Summer 2012) No. 1, pp. 3–6.

their Qur'ānic knowledge from earlier beliefs and reconfigure the semantic map of Persian. The transformation was not instantaneous, but over generations *Khodā* became a patently Islamic word.

By “patently Islamic” I do not mean that the word became Arabic in disguise or that all traces of its linguistic ancestry disappeared. Its living content within Muslim Persian came to be governed by the Qur'ānic disclosure of Allah. *Khodā* came to signify the One without partner, offspring, likeness, or rival; the Creator of the heavens and the earth; the Living, the Self-Subsisting; the All-Merciful, the Forgiving, the Knowing, the Wise; the One alone worthy of worship; the One before whom every servant stands and to whom every soul returns.

The word survived, but its semantic world was transformed. A language becomes Islamic when revelation enters it deeply enough to correct its categories, reorder its meanings, create new relations among its words, and determine what may and may not be truthfully affirmed. Persian therefore retained *Khodā* while transforming what *Khodā* could mean; retained Persian poetic forms while filling them with Qur'ānic images, prophetic memory, and the language of longing for Allah; and retained inherited vocabulary while placing it beneath a new supreme focus: Allah, revelation, prophecy, worship, judgment, mercy, and return.

The Qur'ān's own transformation of Arabic provides the closest precedent. It did not reject the language of the Arabs and create another. It took up an existing language, purified its religious vocabulary, restored primordial truths, corrected false associations, and placed Allah at the center of its semantic order. As I wrote in that earlier essay, Allah became the supreme focus-word presiding not merely over one religious field but over the whole Qur'ānic vocabulary and the conceptual systems contained within it.

Persian underwent an analogous, though not identical, transformation. The word *Khodā* did not descend in the Qur'ān; it was not the revealed Arabic Name by which Allah named Himself in the final revelation. Yet through translation, teaching, worship, poetry, commentary, and centuries of faithful use, it came to bear a deeply Qur'ānic meaning.

The Persian example therefore does not prove that all Divine

designations are interchangeable. It shows that languages can be transformed by revelation. Indeed, the Persian case supports this essay's argument more strongly than it supports the claim that Allah should yield to "God." Persian did not become Islamic because Muslims preserved its inherited semantic structures unchanged; those structures themselves were reconfigured by revelation.

The more exact analogy is therefore not that Persian Muslims said *Khodā* rather than Allah and English-speaking Muslims should consequently say "God" rather than Allah. It is that Persian Muslims received the Qur'ānic world so deeply that *Khodā* itself was transformed. English-speaking Muslims must likewise ask how English is to be transformed by the Qur'ān.

That transformation may include the purification and deepening of "God." It may also include the reception of Allah. The two processes need not be mutually exclusive. Persian did not cease using Allah because it used *Khodā*. Allah remained in Qur'ānic recitation, prayer, supplication, legal formulas, theological discourse, poetry, and ordinary Muslim speech. *Khodā* did not expel Allah from Persian, nor did Allah render *Khodā* illegitimate.

Their coexistence is instructive. A language may possess an indigenous designation for the Creator while also receiving the revealed Name in its Arabic form. The two may function in overlapping yet distinguishable ways: one may carry vernacular intimacy, while the other preserves direct attachment to the wording of revelation. Over time, each may illuminate the other. Persian therefore offers English-speaking Muslims something richer than a demand to choose between "God" and Allah: semantic transformation without linguistic amputation.

Yet the analogy has historical limits. Persian did not merely acquire a Muslim population that continued to speak an otherwise unchanged language. Over centuries, it became one of the great languages of Islamic civilization. Qur'ānic meanings entered its poetry, theology, philosophy, law, ethics, historiography, mysticism, courtly life, and ordinary speech. The transformation of *Khodā* was sustained by an encompassing civilizational order. The word lived within a world of prayer, recitation, scholarship, sacred memory, and communal practice that continually returned it to the *tawhīd* disclosed

by the Qurʾān.

Persian-speaking Muslims could also look toward Salmān al-Fārisī, Allah be pleased with him, as an embodied sign of such a passage. He crossed from one inherited religious world into the companionship of the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, without ceasing to be Persian. His belonging was not erased but transfigured. In the well-known Prophetic declaration, “Salmān is from us,” Persia itself seemed to receive a place within the intimate household of Islam. The Islamization of Persian was therefore civilizational, not merely lexical.

English occupies a different historical position. English-speaking Muslims cannot claim for it the relative civilizational enclosure within which Persian acquired its Islamic meanings. English belongs to many peoples and is now global in reach, while its dominant cultural, theological, philosophical, literary, and institutional inheritances remain deeply connected to Western civilization—first Christian, then increasingly post-Christian and secular.

Even in the Muslim mind, English often arrives bearing that history. It comes through educational systems whose conceptual structures were formed elsewhere; through biblical vocabulary; through modern philosophy and the social sciences; through colonial administration; through global media, commerce, technology, and entertainment. Muslims speak English, but they do not govern the principal forces that determine its meanings.

Persian Muslims could gradually surround *Khodā* with a civilizational world in which the Qurʾān supplied the supreme measure of truth. The English word “God,” by contrast, remains exposed to powerful and continuing formations outside Islam. It may signify the Trinity in one context, a remote deistic creator in another, a philosophical absolute in a third, a cultural remnant in a fourth, and an empty exclamation in a fifth. A Muslim may fill the word with Qurʾānic meaning within his own heart without being able to assume that the language surrounding him has undergone the same transformation.

The difference may therefore be stated with some precision: *Khodā* was Islamized within a civilization increasingly ordered by Islam; “God” is used by Muslims within a language whose dominant

semantic order remains external to Islam.

This does not invalidate the Muslim use of “God,” but it makes a claim of complete equivalence far more difficult to sustain. It also strengthens the case for retaining Allah. In Persian, *Khodā* and Allah could coexist within an Islamic civilization capable of holding both words inside a Qur’ānic world. In English, Allah may be needed precisely as the revealed anchor that prevents the Islamic conception of the Divine from being absorbed into meanings already dominant in the language. The Name enters English not because English has already become Islamic, but as one of the means through which English may be Islamically transformed.

Dr. Abd-Allah rightly insists that attachment to Allah should not lead Persian or Urdu speakers to disparage *Khodā*. No believer should mock a name through which generations have called upon the Creator with sound faith and sincere devotion. The converse must equally be granted: respect for *Khodā* does not require the displacement of Allah, nor does respect for “God.”

What matters finally is not which inherited word can be defended by an honorable etymology, but what revelation has done—and must continue to do—to the language in which Muslims speak. Etymology can tell us where a word came from; the history of revelation, worship, and transformed consciousness tells us what the word became.

Khodā before Islam and *Khodā* after Islam are joined by continuity of sound and ancestry. Between them lies a civilizational event: the entrance of Persia into the Qur’ānic world. The same word endured, but a different heaven opened within it.

English has not yet undergone such a transformation. Its heaven remains contested. And that may be precisely why the Name Allah must remain visible within it.

English is Already a Muslim Language—but Not Yet an Islamic Language

I grieve the loss of Urdu not only because a generation has lost an inherited language, but because a people has begun to lose the history of its own formation.

Urdu did not arise as an artificial project imposed from above.

It emerged organically within a unique civilizational encounter. Old Hindi received Persian words, idioms, images, and modes of expression while continuing for centuries to be called Hindi, Hindavī, or Hindustānī. In the Hindavī of Amīr Khusrāu during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, this developing language found a master architect. Persian and the languages of India did not merely stand beside one another in his work; they entered into creative intimacy.

Later, following the Muslim conquest of the Deccan and the movement southward of noble families, scholars, soldiers, administrators, poets, and artisans, another form of this language flourished as Dakhinī. It became a vehicle of courtly culture, devotion, storytelling, and poetry, eventually producing a poet of the stature of Walī Dakhinī. When his poetry reached the north, a further literary transformation began. Rekhta emerged as a language in which Persianate forms, Indian speech, Islamic memory, and the life of cities found a new and remarkably supple expression.

The change was visible even to foreign observers who misunderstood its history. Writing in 1689, John Ovington described what he called the language of the “Moors” as different from that of the ancient inhabitants of India, while noting that it borrowed its written characters from others. His terminology and assumptions are confused, but his recognition is important: he could already see that a new linguistic and cultural formation had come into being. What had appeared was more than another vernacular; a civilizational language had been born.

Urdu carried within it layers of memory. Its everyday grammar remained rooted in the soil of India, while Persian supplied much of its literary refinement, intellectual vocabulary, ethical expression, and imagination. Arabic entered through Persian and also directly through the Qurʾān, *ḥadīth*, law, theology, worship, and the sciences of Islam. The language became a meeting place in which several inheritances were not merely preserved but transformed into a new unity. By the early eighteenth century, this literary world had matured visibly. In 1715, Nawāb Ṣadr al-Dīn Khān produced a complete *dīwān* in Rekhta. In 1751, during the reign of Aḥmad Shāh Bahādur, Khān-i Ārzū composed an Urdu-Persian dictionary. Such works testify not only to the development of a language but to the consciousness of a

relationship: Urdu knew itself in conversation with Persian.

That relationship remained living within recent memory. Persian was not an antiquarian language in my childhood; my grandfather spoke it. That single fact now feels almost unbelievable. What belonged naturally to one generation has become inaccessible to many of their descendants. With the weakening of Urdu, millions of South Asian Muslims have not merely lost ease in one language; they have also lost one of the principal bridges through which Persian remained near.

When Persian recedes, more than a body of poetry disappears. A whole intellectual and spiritual geography begins to fade: Sa'dī and Ḥāfiz, Rūmī and Jāmī, the Persian *tafsīr* tradition, ethical manuals, devotional poetry, chronicles, letters, biographies, courtly *adab*, and the centuries-long conversation between Persian and Arabic. Persian once carried Arabic learning into the hearts and homes of vast Muslim populations who did not speak Arabic as their mother tongue. It mediated the language of revelation without claiming to replace it.

Urdu inherited much of that mediating function. When Urdu weakens, Persian often disappears behind it; and when Persian disappears, one of the great pathways by which South Asian Muslims approached Arabic, the Qur'ān, and the wider Islamic intellectual tradition also collapses. Urdu does not recede alone; a whole layered world recedes with it.

Yet the grief does not end with Urdu or Persian. Arabic itself is being lost—not only among non-Arab Muslims but increasingly among Arabs. The introduction to the first volume of the *Integrated Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān* described this rupture as historically recent. Until the middle of the twentieth century, a substantial proportion of literate Muslims possessed at least a working knowledge of Arabic. Colonial and modernist systems of education progressively displaced Arabic and weakened the institutions through which religious and intellectual knowledge had been transmitted. The result was not merely diminished linguistic competence but severance from the primary sources of the tradition and exile from its spiritual and intellectual worlds.

That severance has deepened. Across the Gulf, English-medium schools now educate generations of Muslim children whose spoken

language may remain Arabic while the language of sustained thought, science, history, literary formation, and intellectual ambition becomes English. Even Madina, the City of the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, is home to numerous European and American “international” schools in which children may grow up physically close to the Mosque of the Prophet while becoming linguistically distant from the language of the Qur’ān.

Geographical proximity to revelation no longer guarantees linguistic proximity to revelation. A child may live in Madina and yet encounter the world principally through categories, texts, curricula, and histories formed elsewhere. He may recite the Qur’ān correctly while lacking the linguistic depth needed to hear its internal resonances; she may speak colloquial Arabic at home while thinking most seriously in English. The language of revelation can remain upon the tongue while receding from the architecture of the mind.

More is happening here than the replacement of one language by another, for English often enters the Muslim world as a replacement for an entire linguistic ecology. It displaces Urdu, behind which stood Persian, behind which stood Arabic. It enters Arab societies and displaces the higher registers of Arabic itself. It becomes the language of professional competence and intellectual prestige, while inherited languages are confined to domestic familiarity, religious ceremony, emotional expression, or nostalgia.

What disappears in this process cannot be recovered through vocabulary lists alone. A language carries accumulated acts of perception. It holds historical memory, forms of courtesy, hierarchies of value, rhythms of thought, metaphors of the soul, ways of speaking about knowledge, family, death, beauty, shame, generosity, authority, and worship. It contains the afterlife of generations. When a people loses such a language, it does not merely lose words; it loses pathways into itself.

The Introduction to IEQ spoke of a “cultural schizophrenia” produced by modern systems that remove the intellectual, social, political, economic, and cultural fabric of the Muslim world with material foreign to its spiritual ethos.¹⁰ It also observed that readers who lack Qur’ānic Arabic must approach the Qur’ān through

10. *Integrated Encyclopedia of the Qur’ān*, “Introduction,” p. i.

translations necessarily conditioned by the age, location, and intellectual and spiritual standpoint of the translator.

Translation is necessary, often generous, and sometimes transformative. The danger arises when it becomes the only remaining access while the language into which Islam is translated retains conceptual structures shaped largely outside the world of revelation. The reader may then believe that he has crossed into the Qur'ānic world when in fact the Qur'ānic world has been compressed into categories already familiar to English. Under these conditions, English becomes simultaneously indispensable and dangerous. It is indispensable because millions of Muslims now learn, teach, write, read, and think through it. English is already a Muslim language in the sociological sense: it is spoken in Muslim homes, schools, mosques, universities, businesses, and institutions; it connects Muslims across ethnic and national boundaries; and it is one of the principal languages through which Islam is now encountered by Muslims themselves. Yet it is not yet an Islamic language in the deeper civilizational sense.

A language becomes Islamic not merely when Muslims speak it, but when revelation reshapes its semantic order; when Qur'ānic distinctions enter its conceptual structure; when inherited words are purified, qualified, deepened, or displaced; when new terms take root because the language did not previously possess what they carry; and when worship, scholarship, literature, education, and ordinary faithful life together create within it an Islamic world. By that measure, English remains unfinished. Its dominant religious, philosophical, literary, academic, and institutional inheritances remain Western—first deeply Christian, then increasingly post-Christian and secular. Even when Muslims speak English, they often do so through systems of education whose foundational concepts were formed elsewhere. The language of religion, law, freedom, nature, selfhood, knowledge, morality, history, and society comes already shaped by long intellectual histories that are not neutral.

A Muslim may use these words while intending meanings drawn from revelation. Unless those meanings are consciously taught, defended, and established through sustained usage, however, the inherited semantic order of English continues to think beneath the Muslim speaker. One may believe that one is merely using a tool, but

languages are never only tools. They carry worlds and quietly invite their speakers to inhabit them.

Retreat from English is neither possible nor desirable. It has already become one of the languages of the Muslim world, and the responsibility is therefore to transform it. But that responsibility arises under conditions of loss. We failed to prevent English from displacing some of the languages through which Muslims once received their history, literature, ethical formation, and access to revelation. We must not allow it also to displace the meanings those languages carried.

English must be made to bear what it has displaced

Those meanings cannot survive merely as translated remnants placed inside quotation marks, glossary entries, or nostalgic recollections. They must enter the living structure of English. Qur'ānic terms must be taught, repeated, normalized, and allowed to form new relations within it. English words must be judged for what they carry and for what they conceal. Some will be retained and deepened; some will need qualification; some will prove inadequate; and some Arabic, Persian, or Urdu terms must remain because their removal would destroy distinctions the tradition cannot surrender.

This is the larger purpose within which IEQ was conceived. It is not merely a repository of information but a path back: an English-language work intended to bring fourteen centuries of Muslim scholarship on the Qur'ān into a contemporary language while remaining securely within the spiritual, intellectual, and methodological norms of the tradition itself. It seeks to address Muslims severed from primary sources, non-Muslims seriously seeking to understand the Qur'ān, and scholars who require access to the Muslim exegetical tradition. IEQ is, in this sense, a response to linguistic exile. It cannot restore to every reader the Arabic he or she has lost, nor revive by itself the Persian and Urdu worlds now receding. But it can refuse to compound that loss. It can carry the voices of the tradition into English without pretending that English already contains every category the tradition requires. It can allow terms to enter, remain, and gradually become at home.

The use of Allah belongs within this larger undertaking. It is not an isolated editorial preference, but part of a refusal to allow English

to become the final stage of a process in which Urdu, Persian, Arabic, and then the meanings they carried all disappear in succession. The Name Allah remains visible as an anchor to revelation. It tells the reader that English is receiving something it did not create and must not presume to exhaust. It preserves a direct relation to the Qurʾānic word even while the surrounding meanings are unfolded in English. It marks the point at which translation becomes reception, and reception becomes transformation.

English may now be the language in which millions of Muslim children learn to think. It must not become the language in which they forget who they are. If Urdu, Persian, and even Arabic are receding from their formation, then English must be made to carry what it has displaced—not as a museum of translated remains, but as a living language reshaped by the Qurʾān. The languages that once carried us are receding. If English is now to carry our children, it must be made capable of carrying them home.

The Cultural Imperative—and Its Unfinished Question

Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah’s argument now returns in a more demanding form. In “Islam and the Cultural Imperative,” he insists that Muslims must not remain passive consumers of the cultures in which they live. Islam, he argues, has never required peoples to erase their inherited languages, customs, aesthetic forms, or social habits merely because these arose outside Arabia. Rather, when Islam entered new lands, it distinguished between what was sound and what was corrupt, affirmed what could be retained, transformed what required correction, and enabled peoples to produce cultures genuinely their own and genuinely Islamic.¹¹

His examples are civilizational. Islam did not make Chinese Muslims cease to be Chinese, nor Africans cease to be African. It did not produce one flattened cultural form repeated from Morocco to Indonesia. It generated a family of Islamic civilizations, each recognizable in its local language, architecture, dress, food, poetry, social etiquette, and artistic expression, yet joined to the others through revelation, worship, law, scholarship, and the Prophetic model. The universality of Islam did not destroy particularity; it gave

11. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, “Islam and the Cultural Imperative” (Nawawi Foundation, 2004), especially 1–3 and 9–11.

particularity a new center.

From this principle, Dr. Abd-Allah draws an urgent conclusion for Muslims in America. They must cease living through imported cultural forms that remain foreign to their children and alien to the society in which they have taken root. English must be embraced as an indigenous Muslim language. Muslims must produce literature, education, art, public speech, social institutions, and forms of communal life through which Islam can become intelligible and beautiful within the American setting.

On this need to make English a living Muslim language, Dr. Abd-Allah and I stand much closer than our differing usage of Allah and “God” might suggest. Muslims cannot inhabit English indefinitely as tenants; they must become makers of meaning within it. Language and culture are not neutral containers into which Islamic content can simply be poured without remainder. Forms shape what they carry, words possess histories, and symbols act upon the imagination. A community that does not shape the language in which it lives will gradually be shaped by meanings others have placed within it.

But if Muslims are called to transform English rather than merely conform to it, why should that transformation stop at the Name Allah? Why should English receive Muslim architecture, poetry, clothing, cuisine, humor, ethical sensibility, educational institutions, and public rituals, yet be protected from receiving the Name most central to the Qur’ānic world? Why should indigenization require every Islamic reality to be rendered through vocabulary already naturalized before Muslims arrived?

Here two impulses within Dr. Abd-Allah’s argument come into tension. One is transformative: Muslims must produce culture, reshape inherited forms, and make English capable of bearing Islam. The other is accommodative: English-speaking Muslims should ordinarily use “God” because it is the established English term, whereas Allah may appear foreign, sectarian, or misleading. Both arise from legitimate concerns. The first seeks civilizational agency; the second seeks intelligibility and common ground. A wise community must speak intelligibly to those around it, and linguistic obscurity should never be mistaken for fidelity. Yet when intelligibility is made to require the disappearance of an indispensable Qur’ānic

term, accommodation begins to limit transformation.

A culture is transformed not only when new things are produced through familiar words, but also when it learns words it did not previously possess, receives meanings that unsettle inherited assumptions, and allows another revelatory world to become audible within it. The history of Islamic civilization offers abundant examples. Arabic itself received words from other languages. Persian absorbed Arabic terms without ceasing to be Persian. Urdu emerged through prolonged intimacy among Indian, Persian, Arabic, Turkic, and other linguistic worlds. Swahili, Hausa, Malay, Turkish, and numerous African and Asian languages became bearers of Islamic civilization by receiving Qurʾānic vocabulary and making it their own. The entrance of an Islamic word into a language may therefore mark the beginning of cultural creation rather than a failure of cultural belonging.

Allah is, of course, Arabic in linguistic form. The question is whether English-speaking Muslims possess the right—and perhaps now bear the responsibility—to make it part of English Muslim usage. Ordinary life suggests that this process is already well underway.

A Muslim child born in Canada, Britain, the United States, Australia, or South Africa may speak no language more fluently than English and still experience Allah as one of the most intimate words of childhood. It may be heard in *bismi-llāh* before eating, *al-ḥamdu li-llāh* after receiving, *in shāʾ Allāh* when hoping, *mā shāʾ Allāh* when admiring, *astaghfiru llāh* after error, and *Allāhu akbar* in prayer, fear, wonder, and joy. To such a child, Allah is not an import awaiting naturalization; it is the Name of the One to whom the family turns.

The foreignness attributed to the word may therefore belong more to the observer than to the Muslim speaker. A word can remain foreign to dominant public culture while being intimate within the life of a community. Repeated faithful use can carry that intimacy outward until the larger language itself learns to receive it. Cultures change not only when minorities learn the vocabulary of the majority, but also when the majority encounters, hears, and eventually understands words brought by those who now share the language.

Dr. Abd-Allah's own name makes the point with particular grace. When Wymann-Landgraf entered Islam, he became Umar Faruq

Abd-Allah. The Name did not remain sealed inside Arabic; it entered American English through his life. Students, colleagues, publishers, institutions, and readers learned to pronounce and write Abd-Allah because they wished to address the man who bore it. The hyphen keeps visible the bond the name declares: ‘*abd* of Allah Most High.

His life has therefore already enacted something of the cultural process for which this essay argues. English received Umar, Faruq, and Abd-Allah without ceasing to be English. The unfamiliar became familiar because a human being carried the names with dignity, service, learning, and love. There is no linguistic reason why the same process cannot occur with Allah itself.

To extend the cultural imperative to its natural conclusion is to recognize that Muslims who become producers rather than consumers of culture must participate in determining which words English will receive. If English is to become an indigenous Muslim language, its legitimate sacred vocabulary cannot have been completed before Muslims arrived. The presence of Allah within English need not signify failed assimilation; it may be one of the clearest signs that Muslims have begun to belong without surrendering the center from which they belong.

None of this requires “God” to disappear from English Muslim speech. Allah and “God” may coexist, just as *Khodā* and Allah coexist in Persian. Context, audience, literary rhythm, translation, instruction, and individual devotion will continue to shape usage. But coexistence is fundamentally different from prescribed displacement. The former allows the language to grow; the latter fixes the boundaries of its sacred vocabulary in advance.

Dr. Abd-Allah asks Muslims to trust Islam’s capacity to enter and transform culture. On this point, he is surely right. The unfinished question is whether English will also be trusted to receive Allah.

When the Name Becomes a Proposition: Gibril Fouad Haddad’s “The One God”

The unfinished question with which the preceding section ended—whether English will also be trusted to receive Allah—has acquired an unexpected contemporary illustration in one of the most recent substantial English renderings of the Qur’ān. Gibril Fouad Haddad’s

The Meanings of the Inimitable Quran: A Lesson-Based Rendering in English is especially instructive because the difficulty it presents cannot easily be attributed to distance from the Islamic scholarly tradition. Haddad is deeply conversant with *tafsīr*, Arabic philology, and the canonical *qirāʾāt*; his rendering takes al-Bayḍāwī's *Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-taʾwīl* as its principal exegetical guide; and its Introduction repeatedly emphasizes the impossibility of transferring the Qurʾān fully into another language.¹² The work is therefore not the product of a translator unaware of what lies behind the Arabic. Its importance for the present argument arises precisely from the opposite circumstance: it shows what may happen even when a translator knows how much the Qurʾānic language carries.

Haddad begins from what he calls the “untranslatable Qurʾān.” No other linguistic medium, he observes, can reproduce the density of polysemy, concision, cohesion, and variant readings available within the revealed Arabic. Translation can therefore only begin to reflect what the original contains. His chosen method seeks to hold together two obligations which he traces through Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī (1114–1176/1702–1763): *ad litteram*, remaining as close as possible to the words, syntax, order, and even formal features of the Arabic; and *ad sensum*, producing intelligible English even when clarity requires expansion.¹³ The canonical readings are allowed to enter the translated line where Haddad considers their distinction significant, and *tafsīr* may determine lexical choice when literal transfer alone would conceal something important.

The result is a translation whose governing principle Haddad himself calls “*tafsīr*-contextual literalism.” The phrase is revealing. Literalism here does not mean lexical invariance. A Qurʾānic term may receive several renderings according to the exegetical context. In another methodological discussion, concerning the translation of *kāna* in descriptions of the Prophets, Haddad goes further and describes one such intervention as a “lexico-doctrinal must”: the English tense may be altered or supplemented by “ever” lest ordinary English imply the cessation of a Prophetic quality which, in his

12. Gibril Fouad Haddad, *The Meanings of the Inimitable Quran: A Lesson-Based Rendering in English* (Abu Zahra Press, 2026), Introduction, 1.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

understanding of the verse, continues to characterize the Prophet. Doctrine and *adab* may therefore legitimately act upon the lexical and grammatical form of the translation.

The importance of this becomes evident when Haddad turns to the vocabulary of Islam in English. Under the heading “Islam-related Arabic terms that are now part of the English language,” he lists a remarkable range of words that, in his judgment, no longer require translation or even italicization: *dhikr*, *fatwa*, *fiqh*, *Hajj*, *halal*, *imam*, *jihad*, *qibla*, *Ramadan*, *salat*, *Sharia*, *sunna*, *zakat*, and many others. He then extends the principle beyond terms already fully naturalized. “Key names, terms and phrases,” he writes, may require “multiple, equally valid renderings,” each determined by “tafsīr-contextual literalism.”¹⁴ His first and most consequential example is *Allah*, for which he gives two alternatives: “the One God; *Allah*.” He similarly offers several possibilities for *al-dīn*—“faith-system; faithful obedience; the faith; religion”—and for *al-Islām*—“submission; Islam; self-resignation; surrender.”¹⁵

The question raised by “the One God” can therefore be stated more precisely than it could if Haddad had offered no explanation of his practice. He is not treating the phrase accidentally as a convenient substitute for *Allah*. He has consciously classified the Name among those expressions whose meaning may be rendered contextually, and he regards “the One God” and “*Allah*” as equally valid English possibilities. The issue is whether they are in fact equivalent in the relevant sense. Is a proper Name revealed in the *Qurʾān* interchangeable, according to context, with a theological proposition that is unquestionably true of the One named?

The distinction developed earlier in this essay between *lafz*, *maʿnā*, and *musammā* becomes particularly useful here. There can be no theological objection to what Haddad intends by “the One God.” The *musammā* is *Allah Most High*. The *maʿnā* expressed by the phrase is also true: *Allah* is One, without partner, equal, offspring, or associate. The difficulty lies elsewhere. A true meaning predicated of the Named does not thereby become lexically identical with His Name. Haddad is not mistranslating Islamic doctrine; he is translating

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

a proper Name by means of an Islamic doctrinal proposition.

His own historical example makes the distinction sharper. In explaining Shāh Walī Allāh's Persian interlinear rendering of the Qur'ān, Haddad notes that the Indian scholar used *Khodā* for Allah.¹⁶ But the Persian case is not merely an example of replacing an Arabic word with a convenient native equivalent. As we saw earlier, Persian had already undergone centuries of Islamic semantic formation. Its inherited religious vocabulary was progressively reordered through revelation until *Khodā* could function within a thoroughly Islamic semantic universe. That history was central to an argument I made in 2012: when Qur'ānic terms pass into another language without losing their richness, the process cannot remain one-directional; the terms must also "simultaneously transform the semantic structures of the receiving language."¹⁷ The question posed by Haddad's translation is therefore not whether Persian Muslims once said *Khodā*. They did, and the word became Islamic through centuries of use. The question is what kind of transformation English itself must undergo if it is now to carry the Qur'ānic world.

The opening sura already displays Haddad's method in concentrated form.¹⁸ The *basmala* becomes, "In the Name of the One God, the All-Beneficent, the Most Merciful," and *al-ḥamdu li-llāhi rabbi l-'ālamīn* becomes, "Praise belongs to the One God, the nurturing Lord of the worlds." In Q 1:4 the canonical readings *Mālik* and *Malik* are simultaneously preserved as "Owner/King of the Day of Retribution." Q 1:5, *īyyāka na'budu wa-īyyāka nasta'īn*, is rendered, "You do we worship and You do we ask for help!" The page thus exhibits several distinct translational operations at once. A difference among canonical readings is made visible by "Owner/King"; the fronting of *īyyāka* presses upon English syntax until the translated sentence itself acquires an unusual form; *rabb* is exegetically enlarged to "nurturing Lord"; and Allah becomes "the One God."

The first of these operations shows the seriousness of the project. Haddad is willing to disturb ordinary English in order not to efface a

16. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

17. *Islam & Science*, Vol. 10 (Summer 2012) No. 1, 3–6.

18. Haddad, *The Meanings of the Inimitable Quran*, p. 23.

distinction present in the Arabic. The same concern appears almost immediately in Q 2:2, where he renders *dhālika l-kitāb* as “that is the Book,” rather than the almost universal “this is the Book.” This is not accidental. Years earlier, reviewing *The Study Quran*, he had criticized its use of “This,” invoking al-Rāzī and al-Bayḍāwī for the significance of the demonstrative of remoteness.¹⁹ The new translation practices that earlier judgment. It is attentive to the semantic force of a demonstrative, to differences among canonical readings, to word order, and even to grammatical forms whose theological implications might be misunderstood in English.

All the more reason, then, to ask what happens to the distinction between Allah and other Qur’ānic expressions concerning the Divine.

The opening verses of al-Baqara quickly establish the ordinary pattern. Q 2:7 reads, “The One God has sealed over their hearts”; Q 2:8, “We believe in the One God and in the Last Day”; Q 2:9, “They deceive the One God and those who believe”; Q 2:10, “so the One God increased their sickness.” The English is doctrinally intelligible in every case, yet cumulatively something has changed. “The One God” functions less as a Name than as a repeatedly inserted theological description. In *āmannā bi-l-lāhi wa-bi-l-yawmi l-ākhir* (Q 2:8), for example, the Arabic gives two compact objects of faith—Allah and the Last Day. The English has already interpreted the first before the sentence can proceed: “the One God and the Last Day.” Likewise, when Q 2:9 says that the hypocrites seek to deceive Allah and those who believe, the verse is not itself making a proposition about Divine Oneness. That truth has entered the line because it has been built into the translator’s standing replacement for the Name.²⁰

The difficulty becomes unmistakable at Q 2:163: *Wa-ilāhukum ilāhun wāḥidun lā ilāha illā huwa*.

Haddad renders the opening, “And the God of you all is One God, there is no god but He....” Here “One God” has an exact Qur’ānic basis: *ilāhun wāḥidun*. The Qur’ān itself has chosen a common noun and predicated Oneness of it. Yet in the immediately surrounding

19. Gibril Fouad Haddad, review of *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., in *The Muslim World Book Review* 36, no. 3 (2016): 20–25, at 21.

20. Haddad, *The Meanings of the Inimitable Quran*, p. 25.

verses the proper Name Allah is also repeatedly rendered “the One God.” Thus Q 2:164 speaks of signs through which “the One God” gives life to the earth; Q 2:165 speaks of those who take rivals apart from “the One God,” loving them “like the love of the One God,” while those who believe love “the One God” more intensely.²¹

This is the point at which the distinction ceases to be merely terminological. The Qur’ān distinguishes the Name from the proposition; the translation causes them to converge.

Al-Bayḍāwī, Haddad’s principal exegetical guide, preserves precisely the semantic structure that the Arabic presents. He glosses *wa-ilāhukum ilāhun wāḥidun* as a general address meaning that “the one deserving worship from you is one; he has no partner who may rightly be worshiped or called an *ilāh*” (*al-mustaḥiqqu minkum al-‘ibādah wāḥidun lā sharīka lahu yaṣīḥḥu an yu‘bada aw yusammā ilāhan*). He then describes the following *lā ilāha illā huwa* as a “confirmation of the Oneness” (*taqrīrun li-l-waḥdāniyya*), removing any possible supposition that another deity might exist while merely lacking the right to be worshiped by those addressed. Oneness is therefore doing explicit semantic work in the verse; it has not already been absorbed into the designation that precedes it. Al-Bayḍāwī further notes that *al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm* may function as “two further predicates” (*khabarān ākharān*) of *ilāhukum*. The verse identifies the One entitled to worship and then successively predicates what is true of Him.²²

Q 2:163 itself does not contain the proper Name Allah, and al-Bayḍāwī need not be made to prove more than he says. His importance here is more exact: he establishes that *ilāhun wāḥidun* is a genuine predicative expression of Divine Oneness, the very expression whose English equivalent Haddad elsewhere places in the lexical position occupied by Allah. *Allah* and *ilāhun wāḥidun* do not perform the same linguistic work in the Arabic. One names; the other describes and predicates. Their *musammā* is one, but their *lafẓ* and semantic function are not therefore identical.

The same transformation appears in Q 2:173. The Qur’ānic clause *inna l-lāha ghafūrun raḥīm* gives the Name and then predicates two Divine Names or Attributes of the One named. Haddad renders

21. Haddad, *ibid.*, p. 42.

22. Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-ta’wīl*, sub Q 2:163.

it, “Truly the One God is All-Forgiving, Most Merciful.” Again, everything asserted in the English is theologically true. Yet the architecture has shifted. The Arabic begins with Allah and allows *ghafūr* and *rahīm* to disclose something of Him. The English begins by interpreting Allah through one particular theological description and then adds the two attributes that the verse itself predicates. A Name capacious enough to gather the Divine Names has become a phrase foregrounding one truth about the Named.²³

Haddad does not apply this replacement absolutely. At Q 2:255, the opening of *Āyat al-Kursī* is rendered emphatically: “ALLAH—there is no god but He, the All-Living, the Ever-Sustainer!”

The proper Name suddenly reappears, in capitals. Two verses later, however, *Allāhu waliyyu lladhīna āmanū* becomes “The One God is the patron of those who believe.” The alternation accords with Haddad’s stated principle that “the One God” and “Allah” are contextually available renderings. But it also reveals the pressure under which the policy operates. The translation itself seems at certain moments to require the irreducibility of the Name, only to return elsewhere to the descriptive substitute.²⁴

The rendering of *walī* as “patron” in Q 2:257 also illustrates the broader method. “Patron” selects something from the semantic field but brings with it a distinct English history: sponsor, benefactor, customer, protector, even the language of patron saints. Haddad uses the word naturally in his own Introduction—“Allah is the patron of success here and hereafter”—so the choice is clearly deliberate.²⁵ Elsewhere *rabb* repeatedly becomes “nurturing Lord,” making one dimension of Lordship explicit inside the translated expression itself. In Q 109:6, *lakum dīnukum wa-liya dīn* becomes “To you your faith-system and to me mine.” Here too the Introduction has already informed us that “faith-system” is one of several contextual renderings Haddad assigns to *dīn*.²⁶ The translation continually moves between

23. Haddad, *The Meanings of the Inimitable Quran*, p. 43.

24. Haddad, *The Meanings of the Inimitable Quran*, p. 55.

25. Haddad, *The Meanings of the Inimitable Quran*, Introduction, p. 2.

26. Haddad, *The Meanings of the Inimitable Quran*, p. 667; Introduc-

lexical rendering and compressed *tafsīr*, making explicit within the English phrase what the translator judges the Arabic to carry in context.

Nothing about this method is inherently frivolous. On the contrary, it arises from a serious recognition that ordinary English equivalents are frequently inadequate. “Lord” does not exhaust *rabb*. “Religion” does not exhaust *dīn*. “Protector” does not exhaust *walī*. Haddad knows this, and his enlarged expressions are attempts to prevent semantic loss. The difficulty is that explanation placed inside the lexical slot inevitably selects. “Nurturing Lord” foregrounds nurture from the many relations gathered by *rabb*; “faith-system” gives *dīn* a conceptual and almost sociological cast; “patron” chooses one English relation to represent the density of *wilāya*. The translator knows that English lacks exact equivalents, yet the solution remains largely to make the English phrase carry more.

The treatment of *zakāt* reveals another possibility. In Q 41:7 Haddad simply retains “the zakat.” On the same page, Allah appears as “the One God,” while *rabb al-‘ālamīn* becomes “nurturing Lord of the worlds.” The asymmetry is important. English is permitted to receive *zakāt* because translation would lose too much; the Arabic word can therefore enter the language and acquire its meaning through use. Haddad’s Introduction explicitly authorizes this process, and his list of naturalized Islamic vocabulary shows how extensive it has already become.²⁷

That principle is almost identical to the proposal made in my 2012 essay “English as an Islamic Language.” There I argued that *īmān*, *kufī*, and *ṣalāt* do not possess semantic fields parallel to “belief,” “disbelief,” and “prayer”; that Persian became an Islamic language through the reconfiguration of its semantic map; and that English likewise requires conscious transformation if it is to carry Islamic texts adequately. I suggested that this would occur partly through the infusion of Arabic terms into English, noting that Hajj, Ramadan, and Jihad had already become sufficiently naturalized not to require typographical quarantine, and I singled out zakat as an example of a

tion, p. 12.

27. Haddad, *The Meanings of the Inimitable Quran*, p. 461; Introduction, p. 12.

word that continued use could make equally at home.²⁸ More than a decade later, Haddad's Introduction independently gives almost the same list and the same linguistic permission.

The convergence is striking. Haddad accepts that English can receive *dhikr*, *fiqh*, *jihad*, *qibla*, *Ramadan*, *salat*, and *zakat*. He does not require an inherited English equivalent before these realities may enter the language. Usage can naturalize them; explanation can deepen them; English can expand around what it has received.

Why should this process stop at Allah?

The question becomes still more significant because Haddad has not always spoken of Allah as though it were merely one contextual rendering among others. Reviewing Abdur Raheem Kidwai's survey of English Qur'an translations, he objected to the title *God's Word* and wrote that "Muslims by and large prefer to use the actual Name of Allah, Most High and Exalted." In his review of *The Study Quran*, he described its use of "God" as "the inevitable rendering of the divine Name," placing that decision within a broader criticism of the translation's biblicized English. Elsewhere, reviewing a study of European Qur'an translation, he commended attention to the "polysemic potential" of the Qur'anic text and explicitly noted the doctrinal subjectivity and political agendas that can underlie lexical choices in translation. These earlier observations provide an exact standard by which the present rendering may be considered. A translation choice is never simply a transparent window onto the Arabic. It can encode doctrine, inherit associations, suppress distinctions, or create new ones.²⁹

Haddad is therefore right to resist the assumption that one

28. Iqbal, "English as an Islamic Language," pp. 3–6.

29. Gibril Fouad Haddad, review of Abdur Raheem Kidwai, *God's Word, Man's Interpretations: A Critical Study of the 21st Century English Translations of the Quran*, Academia.edu, 2019, p. 4; Haddad, review of Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, *The Muslim World Book Review* 36, no. 3 (2016): 20–25, at 21; Haddad, review of Ziad Elmarsafy, *The Enlightenment Qur'an: The Politics of Translation and the Construction of Islam*, *The Muslim World Book Review* 30, no. 2 (2010): 20–23, especially 20–21.

English word must invariably correspond to one Arabic word. But the same insight should make us cautious about the reverse assumption: that several expressions may be regarded as “equally valid renderings” merely because they point toward the same doctrinal truth. The proper Name and a proposition about the Named are not interchangeable simply because the proposition is true.

No passage makes this clearer than *Sūrat al-Iklās*.

The *basmala* again begins, “In the Name of the One God, the All-Beneficent, the Most Merciful.” Then comes Q 112:1:

Qul huwa Llāhu aḥad.

Haddad renders it:

“Say, ‘It/He is the One God. One.’”³⁰

Everything that has been discussed thus far is concentrated in those few words.

Al-Bayḍawī’s analysis makes the structure of the Arabic unusually explicit. He first gives two possible understandings of *huwa*. It may be the “pronoun of the affair” (*al-ḍamīr li-l-sha’n*), in which case the following clause supplies its predicate; or it may refer to the One about Whom the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, had been asked: “the one about whom you asked me is Allah” (*alladhī sa’altumūnī ‘anhu huwa Llāh*). He then construes *aḥad* as either an apposition/substitute or a second predicate (*badal aw khabar thān*). Whichever syntactical analysis is adopted, Allah and *aḥad* remain formally distinct elements in the verse rather than a single lexical expression.

Al-Bayḍawī then gives the distinction extraordinary theological depth. *Aḥad*, he writes, “indicates the comprehensive sum of the Attributes of Majesty, just as Allah indicates all the Attributes of Perfection” (*yadullu ‘alā majāmi‘ ṣifāt al-jalāl kamā dalla Llāh ‘alā jamī‘ ṣifāt al-kamāl*). He proceeds to explain the “true One” (*al-wāḥid al-ḥaqīqī*) as the One whose Essence is transcendent above every form of composition and multiplicity (*munazzah al-dhāt ‘an anḥā’ al-tarkīb wa-l-ta’addud*) and above what either would entail: corporeality, spatial delimitation, participation in the Divine Reality or in those properties uniquely entailed by necessary existence, intrinsic power, and perfect wisdom.

30. Haddad, *The Meanings of the Inimitable Quran*, p. 673.

The semantic work is therefore distributed rather than duplicated. Allah indicates all the Attributes of Perfection; *aḥad* gathers the Attributes of Majesty disclosed through true Divine Oneness. The enormous theological content of Oneness has not been left unstated by the Qurʾān, nor does it need to be inserted into the translation of Allah in order to secure *tawḥīd*. The verse itself gives *aḥad* that work to do.

Allah is the Name. Aḥad is what is predicated of Him. The Qurʾān names and then declares. It does not need to embed the declaration of Oneness inside the Name in order to secure *tawḥīd*; it gives each word its place.

Once the translation has already turned Allah into “the One God,” the next Qurʾānic word—*aḥad*—has nowhere to go except: “the One God. One.”

At that moment the problem is no longer theoretical. We can hear what happens when English is asked to absorb the Qurʾān without first being willing to receive its language.

The next verse makes the moment still more revealing:

Allāhu l-Ṣamad.

Haddad renders:

“ALLAH, the Eternally-Besought.”³¹

The Name returns, now in capitals. It would be too simple to call this inconsistency, since Haddad has already declared both “the One God” and “Allah” contextually valid. Something more interesting is taking place. The two verses expose an internal tension between explanatory replacement and the irreducibility of the Name. In the first verse, Allah becomes a proposition and *aḥad* is left to repeat what the proposition has already said. In the second, the translation itself seems to allow the Name to stand before the predicate that follows it.

Al-Bayḍawī makes this second verse still more consequential. He glosses *al-Ṣamad* as “the master to whom one turns in needs” (*al-sayyid al-maṣmūd ilayhi fī l-ḥawāʾij*), explaining that Allah alone is described by this absolutely, for He is utterly independent of all besides Him while everything besides Him depends upon Him in every respect. He then pauses explicitly over what he calls “the repetition of the expression

31. Haddad, *The Meanings of the Inimitable Quran*, p. 673.

Allah” (*takrīr lafẓat Llāh*), explaining that it serves to indicate that whoever does not possess this quality does not deserve Divinity (*li-l-ish‘āri bi-anna man lam yattaṣif bihi lam yastahiqq al-ulūhiyya*).³²

The repetition is therefore not incidental. The Arabic gives:

Allāhu aḥad.

Allāhu l-Ṣamad.

Allah ...

Allah ...

Al-Bayḍāwī hears the second occurrence as the deliberate “repetition of the expression Allah” (*takrīr lafẓat Allāh*) and assigns that repetition exegetical significance. Haddad’s English gives instead:

“the One God. One.”

“ALLAH, the Eternally-Besought.”

What disappears is thus not merely a stylistic recurrence but a feature of the revealed wording which the very *mufasssīr* governing the translation has told the reader to hear. The first verse substitutes a doctrinal proposition for the Name; the second restores the Name whose repetition al-Bayḍāwī regards as meaningful.

Here the classical understanding examined earlier in this essay becomes indispensable. Allah is not one attribute among the Divine Attributes. It is the all-comprehensive Name. William Chittick, drawing upon the tradition, calls it the Name that implicitly gathers all the other Divine Names. Al-Bayḍāwī has now given us a formulation of striking precision: aḥad “indicates the comprehensive sum of the Attributes of Majesty, just as Allah indicates all the Attributes of Perfection” (*yadullu ‘alā majāmi‘ ṣifāt al-jalāl kamā dalla Llāh ‘alā jamī‘ ṣifāt al-kamāl*). Long before the present essay, Toshihiko Izutsu described Allah, within the Qur’ānic semantic universe, as the “one supreme focus-word” presiding not simply over one semantic field but over “the entire vocabulary comprising all the semantic fields.” I cited that formulation in the 2012 essay precisely while arguing that the Qur’ān did not merely employ the existing Arabic vocabulary but reordered its semantic world around revelation.³³

32. Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-ta’wīl*, sub Q 112:1–2.

33. Iqbal, “English as an Islamic Language,” p. 4.

The convergence is remarkable. Al-Bayḍawī, speaking from within the classical exegetical tradition, says that Allah indicates all the Attributes of Perfection. The later metaphysical tradition speaks of Allah as the all-comprehensive Name. Izutsu, approaching the Qurʾānic vocabulary through semantic analysis, identifies Allah as its “one supreme focus-word.” Different forms of inquiry converge upon the same fact: Allah does not function within the Qurʾān as one descriptive expression among others. The Name gathers, orders, and stands at the center of the semantic universe disclosed by revelation.

This gives the present problem a scale larger than any single translation choice. If Allah is the supreme focus-word of the Qurʾānic vocabulary, then replacing it does not merely alter one item within the lexicon. The Name stands in relation to every major Qurʾānic field: creation, command, mercy, judgment, worship, guidance, revelation, repentance, life, death, resurrection, reward, punishment, love, fear, hope, and return. “The One God” states one magnificent and foundational truth about Allah, but it does not thereby gather everything gathered by the Name. It selects a predicate from within the revealed knowledge of the Named and places that predicate where the Qurʾān has placed the Name itself.

This is why the issue cannot finally be settled by appealing to referential identity. The *musammā* is unquestionably One. Nor can it be settled merely by asking whether “the One God” expresses sound theology. It does. The question concerns what happens when a true theological description is made to occupy the linguistic place of the comprehensive revealed Name. A true theological description is not thereby equivalent to a revealed Name.

Haddad’s translation is valuable precisely because it makes the larger linguistic problem visible. Its strange moments are not produced by indifference to the Qurʾān. They often arise from the translator’s desire to make English bear more of what he knows the Arabic contains. “Nurturing Lord,” “faith-system,” “patron,” “Owner/King,” the retention of *zakāt*, the pressure placed upon English word order, and the alternation between “the One God” and “ALLAH” all testify to a sustained struggle with the inadequacy of equivalence. The problem is therefore deeper than choosing better English synonyms. At some point the search for equivalents reaches its natural limit.

What then?

The answer was already implicit in the transformation of Arabic under the Qurʾān, in the Islamization of Persian, in the emergence of Urdu, and in the argument for an Islamic English. The receiving language cannot remain sovereign over what it receives. Some of its words will be corrected; others deepened; others displaced; and some revealed or tradition-bearing words will have to enter it intact because no pre-existing equivalent can carry their semantic and spiritual history. The process is reciprocal only in a limited sense: English gives the new term grammatical habitation, but revelation determines the reality around which the language must learn to reorder itself.

In 2012 I described this as the need for Qurʾānic terms to “simultaneously transform the semantic structures of the receiving language.”³⁴ The argument now returns with greater force. English has already shown itself capable of receiving Arabic words. Haddad’s own Introduction provides the evidence. It has received *Hajj* and *Ramadan*, *imam* and *fatwa*, *jihad* and *halal*, *dhikr* and *zakat*.³⁵ Some have become so ordinary that their Arabic origin no longer marks them as foreign in normal English prose. Others are still in the process of becoming at home. None required English to possess an exact lexical equivalent before they were permitted to enter.

Allah asks no greater linguistic concession. What is required is something more demanding: that Muslim users of English have enough confidence in revelation to allow the Name to enter; enough patience to teach what it means, and enough continuity of use for future generations to hear Allah without first experiencing the word as foreign. This is not a refusal of translation. It is the recognition of where translation must yield to reception, and where reception must become transformation.

The issue, then, is larger than whether Haddad should have written “Allah” where he has written “the One God.” His translation brings into unusually sharp relief the prior condition of every attempt to render the Qurʾān into English. If English is approached as a finished semantic world whose inherited vocabulary supplies

34. Iqbal, “English as an Islamic Language,” p. 4.

35. Haddad, *The Meanings of the Inimitable Quran*, Introduction, pp. 11–12.

the terms within which revelation must make itself intelligible, the translator will repeatedly be forced to compress Qurʾānic realities into approximations, explanatory compounds, and doctrinal paraphrases. If, however, English is understood as a living language capable of being corrected, enlarged, and reordered under revelation, another possibility appears. The Qurʾān need not surrender every word at the border. English may itself cross toward the Qurʾān.

The problem is not finally how to make Allah fit English. It is how to make English capable of receiving Allah.

The Name Is Not to Be Surrendered to Misrepresentation

Behind the preference for “God” over Allah lies a pastoral concern that deserves to be taken seriously. For generations, anti-Muslim polemic has claimed that Allah is the name of a specifically Arab deity, a tribal god, a moon god, or some being other than the God worshipped by Ibrāhīm, upon him peace. In the contemporary West, such claims have circulated through missionary tracts, sermons, radio broadcasts, websites, political campaigns, and popular media.

Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah rightly seeks to expose their falsehood. Arabic-speaking Christians have long used Allah for the Creator, and the Semitic languages possess closely related Divine designations. As he writes, Muslims must not create the impression that they do not worship “the Biblical God, the God of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, the tribes of Israel, Moses, Jesus, and all the prophets.”³⁶

The clarification is necessary; the proposed remedy is not. To conclude that Muslims should ordinarily abandon Allah in English because the Name has been misrepresented grants hostile representation an authority it does not possess. It allows those who have falsified the Name to determine whether Muslims may continue to utter it in public. Prejudice cannot become a principle of sacred language.

If Allah has acquired “bad press,” the relevant question is who produced that representation, through what history, and for what purpose. A campaign of misrepresentation does not disclose the meaning of a word; it discloses the intentions of those who

36. Abd-Allah, “One God, Many Names,” p. 7.

misrepresent it. Hostility is not philology, repetition is not proof, and public misunderstanding does not alter the truth of the Name.

The history of anti-Muslim polemic also gives little reason to believe that hostility would end if Muslims replaced Allah with “God.” The objection has rarely been only to a word. It has been directed toward the Qur’ān, the Prophethood of Muḥammad, upon him blessings and peace, Islamic worship, law, communal life, and the Muslim claim to stand within the Abrahamic inheritance. Were the Name removed, the polemic would simply relocate itself. Muslims cannot educate prejudice by yielding to it or become intelligible by allowing their opponents to decide which parts of Islam may remain visible.

The Qur’ānic precedent is instructive. The first opponents of the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, knew and used the word Allah. Their error lay not in linguistic unfamiliarity but in false attribution, divided worship, and refusal of revelation. The Qur’ān did not respond by selecting another name less burdened by their corrupt conceptions. It retained Allah and disclosed who Allah is. Error was corrected by revelation rather than retreat.

The same principle applies now. If people have been taught that Allah is a foreign deity, Muslims must explain that Allah is the Creator of all peoples and all worlds. If they have been told that Allah is an Arab god, Muslims can point out that Arabic-speaking Christians also say Allah and that the Qur’ānic Lord is bound to no tribe, territory, race, or language. If they imagine that Muslims worship another being, Muslims must teach the continuity of Prophecy while stating honestly the doctrinal differences that remain. The answer to the misrepresentation of Allah is patient disclosure of who Allah is.

Such disclosure must preserve both common ground and theological truth. Muslims may say without hesitation that when a sincere English-speaking Christian says “God,” and a Muslim says Allah, both may intend the Creator of Ibrāhīm, upon him peace. That shared intended reference is real and may open the door to conversation. It does not erase doctrinal difference.

The Qur’ān itself affirms that Christians and Muslims speak of the Creator while judging certain Christian claims concerning Him to be false: that He is one of three, that the Messiah is Divine, that He

has a son, or that Divine Unity can be articulated through Trinitarian relations. To state this is not to claim that Christians consciously intend another creator. It is to affirm the principle already established by the Qur'ānic treatment of pre-Islamic Arabia: human beings may intend the true Named while attributing to Him what is untrue.

The pagan Arabs often intended the supreme Creator when they said Allah, but convergence of reference did not make their conception adequate. Likewise, the use of “God” across different communities may indicate a shared intended Referent without proving shared knowledge of Him. Unity of reference must therefore not be purchased at the cost of theological vagueness.

Here Allah may serve not as a barrier to conversation but as an invitation to greater precision. The Muslim may say: by Allah, I mean the One God of Ibrāhīm—the One without partner, offspring, incarnation, equal, or likeness; the Creator, Sustainer, Judge, Forgiver, and only One worthy of worship. The Name opens the explanation rather than closing it.

Replacing Allah with “God” may sometimes conceal the very difference that needs to be understood. An English reader may move through a Muslim text assuming that the familiar word carries all the doctrinal associations already attached to it. Surface ease can therefore leave the underlying conception unexamined. Allah interrupts that ease and may compel the reader to ask: Who is Allah?

That question is not a failure of communication. It may be the beginning of communication. A word that arrests inherited assumption can perform more educational work than one that passes unnoticed beneath it. Familiarity can aid understanding, but it can also create the illusion of understanding; the apparently foreign word may make room for the Named to be encountered anew.

None of this means that Muslim public speech should become needlessly opaque. A preacher, teacher, writer, or translator must know the audience. Sometimes “Allah—the Arabic name for the One God” may be useful. At other times Allah and “God” may be used together; in still other contexts, “God” may communicate adequately and naturally. Wisdom governs speech, but wisdom is not capitulation to prejudice.

The pastoral desire to reduce misunderstanding must also be

balanced by another pastoral responsibility: not to teach Muslim children that the revealed Name at the center of their worship is a public embarrassment, an ethnic peculiarity, or an impediment to belonging. A child who learns Allah at home but is taught that respectable English requires “God” may gradually absorb a distinction far larger than vocabulary. The language of prayer begins to belong to a private and foreign sphere, while the language of public intelligence belongs elsewhere. The child comes to inhabit two worlds: one in which Allah is remembered and another in which the Name must first be translated before it may be admitted.

The cost is formative, not merely linguistic. An Islamic English should help heal this division rather than deepen it. The Name uttered in the home, the mosque, the classroom, the book, and the public square should not have to cross a border each time it moves between them.

Dignity is also at stake. Muslims rightly ask others to learn the names of their persons, cities, foods, festivals, and institutions. They do not ordinarily accept that every unfamiliar name must be replaced by a familiar English equivalent before it can enter public life. Respectful coexistence requires the capacity to receive another community’s words. There is no reason the Name Allah should be granted less hospitality.

To retain it is not to demand that every reader already understand it; it is to trust that understanding can be taught. Nor does a word cease to be foreign only when the majority approves it. Languages change because communities use words before complete cultural permission arrives. A community that waits for such permission will never participate fully in transforming the language it inhabits.

The public meaning of Allah will therefore not be changed through argument alone. It will be changed—if Allah wills—through the lives of those who bear the Name in their speech. When neighbors see mercy shown in the Name of Allah, justice upheld in the Name of Allah, promises kept in the Name of Allah, the hungry fed in the Name of Allah, knowledge pursued in the Name of Allah, and injury forgiven for the sake of Allah, the word begins to gather another public history. A name is defended not only by definition but by embodiment.

Dr. Abd-Allah's own life offers an example. For decades, students and readers have encountered Allah within the name Abd-Allah through a scholar known for learning, spiritual warmth, and cultural intelligence. The Name did not become less intelligible because he retained it; his life helped make it intelligible.

The same responsibility belongs collectively to Muslims. They cannot control every representation imposed upon them, but they can refuse to let misrepresentation have the last word. They can explain, teach, and live beautifully beneath the Name.

The Name Allah does not need protection from English; English-speaking Muslims need protection from the fear that they must conceal it. Hostile speech, however widely circulated, cannot diminish the Majesty of the One named, and prejudice must never be allowed to decide how the servant calls upon his Lord.

The Name the Heart Remembers

The argument has moved through language, revelation, history, translation, and public misrepresentation, but none of these reaches the deepest place in which the Name lives: the heart.

A word may be defended philologically, translated accurately, explained theologically, and naturalized culturally, yet still remain outside the human being. Sacred language is not complete when the mind has understood it; it must descend into remembrance. The question of Allah and "God" cannot therefore be settled by dictionaries alone, for the heart does not remember by etymology.

It remembers through repetition, worship, longing, gratitude, fear, hope, repentance, and love. It remembers through words heard at the threshold of consciousness and repeated across a lifetime: what the mother whispered, what the father recited, what rose from the minaret, what was uttered over food, in illness and danger, at birth, beside the dying, and when the grave closed over one who was loved.

For a Muslim, Allah is woven into the very rhythm of existence:

Bismi-llāh before beginning.

Al-ḥamdu li-llāh after receiving.

In shāʾ Allāh when looking toward what has not yet come.

Mā shāʾ Allāh before beauty and blessing.

Astaghfiru Llāh after transgression.

Ḥasbunā Llāh in fear.

Innā li-llāhi wa innā ilayhi rājiʿūn in loss.

Allāhu akbar in prayer, wonder, grief, courage, surrender, and joy.

The Name is not inserted into these expressions as a replaceable lexical unit. It is the living center around which they turn.

The distinction becomes especially clear in *dhikr*. When the servant says Allah, Allah, Allah, he is not making a sequence of theological propositions, defining the Divine, or rehearsing an argument for His existence. The Name gathers attention, strips away dispersion, and draws the heart toward the One named.

Here Chittick's observations become especially important. He begins his discussion of the Divine Names with *dhikr Allāh*, explaining that *dhikr* means both remembrance and mention, and that the Names exercise effects upon the souls of those who remember them. Different Names disclose different aspects of Divine perfection; the all-comprehensive Name gathers them all. The verbal form uttered in remembrance cannot therefore be wholly indifferent. To say *al-Raḥmān* is to turn toward Allah under the disclosure of mercy; to say *al-Ghafūr* is to turn toward Him as the One whose forgiveness is abundant; to say *al-Laṭīf* is to remember the hidden gentleness by which He reaches His servants; and to say Allah is to invoke the One who is not confined to any single aspect of His self-disclosure—the One whose mercy, majesty, beauty, power, wisdom, nearness, transcendence, forgiveness, and judgment are gathered without division.

A word may therefore be adequate in reference and yet not equivalent in remembrance.

This does not deny that an English-speaking worshipper may say “God” with sincerity, presence, longing, and love. Hearts are known to Allah alone, and His generosity is not confined by language. A person may have learned to turn toward the Creator through that word long before hearing the Qurʾānic Name; it may carry childhood prayer, tears, repentance, gratitude, and the first awakening of faith.

Such a history deserves reverence, but it does not establish that all sacred designations act identically within every heart. The question remains what each word has been made to carry.

“God” may carry profound devotion. It may also carry inherited Christian imagery, philosophical abstraction, cultural vagueness, habitual exclamation, or even irony and disbelief. The same sound moves through church, academy, philosophy, literature, politics, entertainment, anger, and casual speech. Its semantic field is broad because its history is broad.

Allah too may be uttered heedlessly; no sound mechanically guarantees presence. Yet within Muslim formation the Name is bound more directly to the Qur’ān, the *shahāda*, prayer, the call to prayer, supplication, remembrance, and the language of surrender. It has been kept near the acts through which the servant stands before his Lord. The distinction arises from history, revelation, liturgy, and spiritual formation, not from any magical property of sound.

A child who hears Allah in prayer does not first encounter the Name in a theological dictionary. The Name enters through bowing and prostration. It is heard while bodies stand in rows, foreheads touch the earth, the Qur’ān is recited, hands are raised in supplication, and the dying are reminded of the testimony through which they entered Islam. Meaning is formed through such acts: the body teaches the tongue, the tongue teaches the heart, and the heart slowly learns what the word bears.

A name may therefore remain semantically alive even when the worshipper cannot articulate its full theology. An elderly woman who has never studied the debates over derivation, the Name of the Essence, or the all-comprehensive Name may nevertheless say Allah with a knowledge deeper than definition. Years of prayer, affliction, gratitude, and dependence have taught her what the word means.

The Need and the Needy

Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya (d. 185/801) is remembered in the devotional tradition as giving this life of remembrance its most intimate utterance: hope in Allah was the heart’s rarest treasure, His Name the sweetest word upon the tongue, and the choicest hours those spent with Him. Life in this world became inconceivable without His remembrance.

Whatever form the utterance took in its earliest transmission, the devotional memory gathered around her preserves its truth. The Name is not merely something the believer says; it is that without which the believer no longer knows how to live.

The meaning present in the heart cannot therefore be reduced to lexical content. It includes memory, trust, vulnerability, and lived relation. When the heart has learned the rhythm Allah, Allah, Allah, what arises belongs to a history of revelation, worship, and love that no dictionary equivalence can reproduce.

The danger here is spiritual flattening. Translation may tell the reader that Allah means “God,” but it cannot thereby reproduce what Allah has become within a heart formed by the Qur’ān and *dhikr*. At most, it identifies the intended Referent and opens a path toward understanding; the rest must be received through teaching, worship, and life.

The same is true of many words central to faith. One may translate *ṣalāt* as “prayer,” but the translation does not contain the standing, bowing, prostration, recitation, appointed times, purity, orientation, and Prophetic form that make *ṣalāt* what it is. One may translate *tawba* as “repentance,” but the English word does not by itself contain the servant’s return to Allah, His joy at that return, or the opening of the door before death reaches the throat. Translation points toward these realities; practice discloses their lived form. The Divine Name belongs to this same order of meaning.

The insistence upon replacing Allah with “God” may therefore attend too closely to the word’s immediate public intelligibility and not closely enough to its inward work. What an unfamiliar reader understands at first sight matters, but so does what a lifetime of remembrance has placed within the Name for the believer. The two concerns do not carry the same weight: public intelligibility concerns communication between persons; *dhikr* concerns the life of the heart before Allah and cannot be sacrificed to the former.

A Muslim language must therefore do more than explain sacred terms to outsiders. It must preserve the words through which believers themselves are formed. It must serve the child learning to remember, the sinner returning, the grieving seeking patience, the dying preparing to meet his Lord, and the lover whose heart has

found its rhythm in the Name. At this level, the Name is nourishment for the life of the heart.

The Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, linked the mention of Allah to life itself: “A house in which Allah is mentioned, compared to one in which He is not mentioned, is like the living compared to the dead.” The contrast is between a dwelling quickened by remembrance and one deprived of that life. Remembrance animates, giving life to the heart and, through the heart, to the house.

Prophetic teaching extends still farther. The mention of Allah is bound not only to the life of the individual and household, but to the continued life of the world: “The Hour will not come so long as even a single person on earth calls out, ‘Allah! Allah!’” (Muslim, *Īmān*, *dhahāb al-īmān ākhir al-zamān*; al-Tirmidhī, *Fitān*, *mā jā’ fī ash-rā’ al-sā’[‘]a*).

The continued utterance of the Name becomes, in Prophetic speech, a sign that the world has not yet reached its appointed end. So long as one tongue still says Allah, so long as one heart still turns toward Him through the Name, the final unraveling has not begun. The world survives beneath the sound of remembrance. The One remembered is not a concept produced by language, nor a being contained within a name. He is as He has described Himself:

*No sight can perceive Him, while He encompasses all sights;
He is the Subtle, the All-Aware (Q 6:103).*

Indeed, I am Allah; there is no divinity save Me (Q 20:14).

*He is the Lord of the East and the West; there is no divinity
but Him (Q 73:9).*

Exalted is Allah, the True King (Q 20:114).

*Allah, the Eternally Self-Sufficient; He begets not, nor is He
begotten, and none is comparable unto Him (Q 112:2–4).*

Between Allah Most High and all else lies an incommensurable distinction. No word contains Him, no conception encompasses Him, and no translation exhausts Him. Yet He has taught His servants His Name and made remembrance of that Name life for hearts and homes and—so long as it continues upon the earth—a sign that the world itself still lives.

The heart does not merely remember a word. Through the Name, it turns toward the One who is being named—the Real. And so long as even one servant still calls out, Allah! Allah!—the world has not yet fallen silent.

