

MURSHID AL-QARI'
A READER'S GUIDE TO CLASSICAL MUSLIM RELIGIOUS
LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

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*A Reader's Guide to Classical Muslim
Religious Literature in English*

Qur'an and Tafsir

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Qur'an and Tafsir

This book details the most important Muslim religious literature currently available in English, with a special concentration on translations of classical texts, which I have striven to cover comprehensively throughout. Muslim religious literature consists of all those texts which Muslims currently rely on for religious guidance. Thus, it includes translations of scriptural texts as well as others written over the centuries for religious instruction and moral edification. Most works included herein are ones whose meaning has been translated from an original language, mainly from Arabic, although quite a number have been translated from Urdu, the preeminent modern language of Pakistan and India, Persian, the classical and modern language of much of the eastern part of the Muslim world, and other languages of Muslims.¹ There are also a number of works written originally in English by Muslim writers. While all of the originals of the works included herein are by Muslims, the translations may be by either Muslims or non-Muslims. In general, Muslim religious literature, while it may be advisory or exhortative, is also prescriptive, in the sense of defining the religion for Muslims and establishing ways of practicing it and of living a Muslim life.

In specific, the intent of the guide is to include all classical Muslim religious literature that has been translated into English, as well as modern Muslim literature, that fits into the genres of Qur'ān, *tafsir* (exegesis or explanations of the meaning of the Qur'ān), and *usul al-tafsir* (principles followed in explaining the meaning of the Qur'ān). While my intention is to be as comprehensive as possible, quite a number of writings might have escaped my attention.

One of the first things one may notice is that the contents of this guide are very extensive, that already, despite the relative fewness of books on Islam written or translated by Muslims in English so far, there are nevertheless enough works to occupy oneself with for more than a lifetime of study. Thus, if someone were carefully to study as many as possible of these English works, that person would become a kind of scholar of Islam.

However, the knowledge of a scholar trained only in English would not cover even a small part of the knowledge that is available in the Arabic language, the primary vehicle of classical Islam and its religious literature. For nearly every category listed below, hundreds of books exist in Arabic. Indeed, in some categories, thousands of Arabic books exist. Furthermore, none of the really long works in Arabic, of which there are many, has yet been translated completely into English, although some efforts are now underway to translate a few of these.

Thus, for anyone to become a first-rate scholar of Islam, a knowledge of Arabic is essential first of all. Indeed, it has been a rule throughout Muslim history that Muslim scholars always studied and even wrote in Arabic, no matter what their original mother tongue might have been. In fact, today only about one fifth of the Muslims in the world speak Arabic as a mother tongue, but it remains the necessary language of knowledge and scholarship among non-Arab Africans, South Asians, Malay-Indonesians, and Turco-Iranians, just as it does among the Arabic speakers

¹ These other languages include but are not limited to: Turkish, Malay-Indonesian, Bengali, Swahili, Gujarati, and French.

themselves. That is because God's own word to mankind, the Qur'ān, was revealed and is recited in Arabic; consequently, all of the other classical sources of Islam are also written in Arabic: the Prophet's ﷺ Sunnah recorded in the Ḥadīth, all the original commentaries on the Qur'ān and the Ḥadīth, the *fiqh* or Islamic law, theology, works of piety and spiritual exercise, the Prophet's ﷺ biography, biographies of the scholars, histories, poetry, etc. Arabic has been and yet remains the language of Muslim civilization in the first degree, and all Muslims still are certainly encouraged to learn as much Arabic as possible. Moreover, all Muslims are individually required to learn at least enough of the Qur'ān to be able to perform their *salat* or ritual worship in Arabic. One might note as well that, as far as the United States is concerned, at least some knowledge of Arabic is the one qualification that is completely agreed upon for the office of imam.

Realistically, however, most non-Arabic-speaking Muslims will probably never reach a level of Arabic adequate for reading and understanding classical texts, as such second-language ability requires a long cultivation to attain. Therefore, they will rather be consulting religious texts in languages they can read fluently. With regard to Muslims using English, first of all, the total number of Muslims for whom English is their mother tongue in the world is not so large, perhaps not more than half the very small percentage of Muslims in English-speaking countries. If so, this would produce a total in the range of four million Muslims who are native speakers of English.² But Muslim religious literature in English is actually far more widely read and influential than this small number of English-mother-tongue readers would suggest, because, owing to the role of English as the international lingua franca and preferred second language in the world, the number of readers fluent in English even though they are not native speakers is huge. Indeed, for many Muslims the world over who do not know Arabic, English may be the main means of access to Muslim religious literature. Even if such English use only involves a minority in each country, the widespreadness of English as a world language as well as the better educational level of its second-language users in general guarantees that Muslim religious literature in English will continue to play an increasingly important role among Muslims everywhere.

Yet the role of that literature remains somewhat paradoxical and problematic. For centuries, English has been primarily the vehicle of a Christian, not a Muslim, culture. Thus, one can expect translation of religious works to be influenced by Christian concepts and a non-Muslim milieu. Thus, much religious translation, especially in the past but to some extent even now, labors under the illusion that Muslim religious literature in English must imitate the style and terminology of Christian literature, even King Jamesian English found in many, if not most, translations of the Qur'ān. There are also many other problems with translation.

² This would reflect half of the following percentages of Muslim inhabitants roughly estimated for English-speaking countries: USA 1%, UK 3%, Canada 2%, Australia 2%, South Africa 1.5%. It would also include the total Muslim populations of other, non-immigration Muslim countries: Guyana 9%, Trinidad & Tobago 6%. The total gathered under this method is considerably less than four million, but allowance should be made for Muslim mother-tongue English speakers in other countries, including India and Pakistan.