“Deaf” in the Qur’an and in the Muslim Community

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January, 2012

(http://www.globaldeafmuslim.org/)

In preparation to speak at the 2012 Global Deaf Muslim conference ...

I tried to read the Qur’an through the perspective of the parent of a deaf child. I do not have a deaf child, but I knew it would be complete hubris to imagine I could put myself in the position of a deaf person. On the other hand, there are many hearing parents of deaf children, and I felt I could at least imagine what it would be like to be one of them.

I began my research by comparing various English translations of the Qur’an. What I found is that in about twenty places, the Qur’an mentions “deaf,” often alongside “blind” or “mute”. In all these cases, the Qur’an is referring to those who are “deaf” to the Divine message. In no case does the Qur’an refer to those who have the physical inability to hear. Rather, the “deaf” are those individuals who deliberately turn away from guidance or a moral imperative to follow their own desires. Here is a typical verse, translated by Muhammad Asad:

“And so the parable of those who are bent on denying the truth is that of the beast which hears the shepherd’s cry, and hears in it nothing but the sound of a voice and a call. Deaf they are, and dumb, and blind: for they do not use their reason.” (5:71)

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Elsewhere, a parenthetical clarification (probably by Asad, although I cannot confirm that) follows the term “deaf”:

“Say [unto all men]: ‘I but warn you on the strength of divine revelation!’ But the deaf [of heart] will not hearken to this call, however often they are warned.” (21:45)

This verse clearly indicates that the deafness is willful, for the people “will not hearken to this call”. In this case, the addition of the words “of heart” in the translation adds a further clarification that the Qur’an is not speaking about a physical condition of deafness, but of a spiritual state of turning away from revelation. In this respect, “deafness” is a manifestation of *kufr*, often translated as “unbelief” or “disbelief”, but is translated by Asad in the first verse above as “bent on denying the truth.” In this translation, Asad is keen to stress the willfulness of the act of *kufr* whose root signifies “concealment”. Unbelief or disbelief is not a passive state of not knowing, but an active choice to cover up the truth.

Asad does not add the clarifying words “of heart” in most of the verses where “deaf” is mentioned. Most of the other English translators do not put any clarification along these lines at all. Imagining myself as the parent of a deaf child, I felt uncomfortable reading these translations. It is true that the physical condition of deafness has no stigma in the Qur’an, yet it is also true that “deafness” in these translations is only and always used to signify a morally and spiritually blameworthy state. This is mostly true with “blind” as well, but this is offset by the vindication of “the blind man” in Sura 80 (‘Abasa).

Any translation needs to balance form and meaning. An overly precise or explicit translation can be unreadable, and this is especially true when it comes to translating the Qur’an, which is both poetic and concise in the original Arabic. At the same time, given that the
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The Qur'an identifies itself as a book of guidance and clarity, it is evident that precision of meaning in translation has to take priority.

There are two Qur'anic phrases or terms that are commonly translated as "deafness". The first is the phrase, or a version of the phrase, *fi adhânihim wâqar*. This is often translated as "in their ears is deafness" but could also be translated as "there is heaviness in their ears", or, "their ears do not hear". We should give preference to one of these translations as they are accurate, meaningful and avoid associating deafness with a spiritual deficiency. The second word used in the Qur'an that is translated as "deafness" presents more of a challenge, for the term *summ* can indeed signify the deafness of a person, although it and variations of this term have many more metaphorical uses in classical Arabic. (We should note, however, that the term *atrasb* which signifies only a person with the physical condition of deafness is nowhere to be found in the Qur'an. In some dialects and usages, this term is considered a more derogatory term for a deaf person, while *asamm* in and of itself, is not.)

My suggestion is that we take the example of translations of *kafir* as our precedent. Few translate the term literally as "one who conceals something" for the term has an additional technical meaning that is usually translated as "unbeliever" or, "disbeliever". However, more recent translations tend to follow Asad’s lead in emphasizing the willfulness of unbelief by saying something like "one who denies faith". (Asad’s more ambiguous but theologically accurate "one who is bent on denying the truth" strays a little too far from the specificity of religious truth for some who wish to stress, perhaps, the specific beliefs of the Muslim community).

For the sake of clarity and to avoid having readers unconsciously associate the state of being deaf with a having a spiritual deficiency, I suggest we henceforth abandon "deaf" in translations of the Qur’an and use the term "unhearing". Similarly, except in the case where "the blind man" is mentioned, we replace "blind" with "unseeing".

The word *bukm* which is translated as "dumb" or "mute" presents something of a dilemma. It is not acceptable to call someone who cannot vocalize words "dumb" due to the fact that the word can be a synonym for "stupid". Most deaf people do not like being called "mute" either, as this suggests an inability to speak, while deaf people do communicate either with sign language or through other mediums. Deaf people identify themselves simply as "deaf", not "deaf and mute". As long as we adhere to this usage, using the term "mute" for *bukm* might not be a problem. Given the historical usage of applying these terms to deaf people, perhaps "speechless" is a better translation.

If we take up these suggestions, instead of verse 8:22 being translated in the following manner (according to Asad):

Verily, the vilest of all creatures in the sight of God are those deaf, those dumb ones who do not use their reason.

It could be translated along these lines:

Surely the vilest of creatures in the sight of God are the unhearing speechless ones who do not reason.

Verse 10:42 is translated by Ali as:
Among them are some who (pretend to) listen to thee: But canst thou make the deaf to hear-even though they are without understanding?

We would instead translate 10:42 as:

Among them are some who (pretend to) listen to you; but can you make the unhearing listen when they will not use their reason?

Replacing older translations with newer ones is never easy. This is especially true if our translation seems less lyrical and more literal. Some people still object to translating the Qur’anic word nās as “humanity” instead of “man”. There are those (most of them men, in my experience) who argue that “humanity” makes for a less fluid translation and that using “man” to signify men and women is common usage and well-understood. We respond with the argument that language is a historical and social phenomenon, and we cannot separate the reality of the diminishment of women’s value from the preference to resort to male-gendered terms. It is also true that we usually quickly adjust to new terminology which soon sounds natural. Given the historical stigma attached to deafness, I believe it is worth making an effort to change our terminology for the sake of our deaf brothers and sisters, our deaf daughters and sons.

Let me emphasize that this is a possible solution for translations of the Qur’an only. What remains is the ethical challenge posed by the Arabic Qur’an, which all Muslims consider to be the word of God. We cannot remove the word sumn from revelation, so as long as it is used in any Arabic vernacular to also signify a deaf person, then a special effort needs to be made to rid those who understand this language of any negative feelings towards the deaf. Imams, preachers and scholars need to educate the community that deafness has no relationship to an intellectual or spiritual deficiency and that deaf Muslims have the same right to religious education and community as others.

Mosque leadership should look for resources to provide some accommodations for deaf Muslims, including sign language interpretation for sermons. If an interpreter is unavailable, preachers and lecturers can provide the deaf with texts or outlines of their sermons and speeches. There are also simple and inexpensive accommodations for other activities. For example, the call to prayer can be signaled visually with lights; this way, deaf Muslims know along with everyone else when it is time to pray. Teachers, Imams, community leaders and speakers must help educate the Muslim community about our responsibility to include deaf Muslims in our activities. Of course, we cannot know all that needs to be done without the help of deaf Muslims who are forgiving enough to educate those of us who have often neglected their needs.

Of course, deaf Muslims are only one segment of our community which has barriers to full participation in our worship and activities. In this, as in all things, we need to implement practices for assessing the needs and interests of our community members, and make changes based on that feedback. In the end, it is pretty simple: we just have to care enough to know the people who make up our communities and find out who is not showing up at services because their needs are being ignored.