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Introduction:
Women translators of religious texts

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At the present moment, concerns with women's rights and violations thereof, as well as with humanity's faulty track record with respect to equality (a term which is often vehiculated but insufficiently conceptualised) are frequently present in the public sphere, including in academia. Thus, our decision to invite contributions specifically on women translators of sacred and other religious writings appears to find a natural place in the chorus of voices currently speaking out against real or perceived injustices. It is true that one of the reasons which motivated us to embark on the project was the factual observation that little is known about contributions by women to the transmission, via translation, of holy and other religious texts. We therefore set out to study the phenomenon, with the help of scholars – mostly women, but also men – who could shed light on women's participation. However, while we do seek to give more visibility to women's endeavours and to contribute to the writing of a more complete history of religious translation in which men and women both have a role to play, our take is that the right to translate is, above all, a responsibility. Translating religious writings and, especially, holy texts, is no easy task. Greater numbers of women around the world are now in a position to undertake it, and more men as well. After all, although the hierarchies of institutionalised religions have traditionally been occupied by men, these men are a small minority and any generalisations suggesting that most or even all men have had rights, privilege and power, while women – construed as a homogeneous group, which clearly they are not – were all of them oppressed, are unhelpful as well as misleading.

A distinction is in order between 'religious' text and 'sacred' or 'holy' text. We use 'religious' in the sense of "relating to or pertaining to a given religion". The terms 'holy' or 'sacred', on the other hand, refer to the status of an entity (concept, object, process, phenomenon, and even human or, in some religions, non-human being) within the value hierarchy of the given religion. Where this entity happens to be a written text – and we do not mean 'happens' in the sense of random occurrence –, the text is extremely valuable in the eyes of those who adhere to the religion within which it emerged and which the text itself has contributed to shape, as is the case for instance with the Abrahamic religions, i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. What is more, it may be seen as inspired or even authored by the Divine. In light of this, translating such writings is not only challenging because of difficulties pertaining to linguistic and cultural transfer or to stylistic considerations, but it becomes perilous in view of the fact that the translators are deemed to be meddling with the word of God. Even if they are trustworthy and competent, can the endeavour be successful, and who decides whether it is or not?

The translation of religious texts has a long history and it undoubtedly contributed to the transmission and introduction of ideas, values and norms into new communities, societies, and entire nations; some of these then crystallised into traditions. It is therefore not surprising that religious text translation and, especially, the translation of holy writings have received the attention of scholarly books covering a variety of topics and research areas. For instance, in *Translating Buddhism: Historical and Contextual Perspectives* (2021), the contributors, who are all translators, explore the challenges faced by the translators of South Asian Buddhist texts in

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different historical periods and examine how cultural and social norms impact the publication and reception of religious texts. Also looking at the historical context, *Translators through History* (Delisle & Woodsworth, [1995] 2012) gives an account of translators' experiences in different parts of the world and how they contributed to enriching language, literature, and human knowledge. While Delisle & Woodsworth's volume is not specifically on religious translation, one of the exceptional translators who are mentioned is Xuanzang, a Chinese monk who, in 629 CE, travelled to India in search for sacred texts and returned to China with a twenty-horse caravan bearing Buddhist treasures. He then spent twenty years translating the Sanskrit manuscripts into Chinese, with the help of other translators. Revisiting the past and attempting to recreate the historical context of how religious translations are produced is also the focus of Roland H. Worth's *Bible Translations: A History through Source Documents* (1992). Worth used documents created by the translators and studied numerous versions of Bible renderings into several European languages, including English. A similar historical approach has been applied to the translation of the Qur'an: in *The Koran in English: A Biography* (2020), Bruce Lawrence revisits various English translations of the holy text and discusses them within their historical and social contexts.

However, if academics have written extensively on religious text translation, its challenges, and methodology, its history, impact and development, they have generally overlooked women translators and the role they played. Indeed, most of the translators of religious texts we are informed about and who have gained a measure of visibility are men. This gap has not gone unnoticed by feminist translation scholars. In the last two decades, the names and works of women translators of religious texts have started to emerge, thanks to the efforts of a new generation of scholars. For instance, in *Gender in Translation. Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission* (1996), Sherry Simon brings attention to women translators of the Bible by retracing their stories and analysing their translations. Similarly, in her article "Women, Bibles, Ideologies", Luise von Flotow (2000) discusses women translators of the Bible and their feminist contribution, while Rim Hassen's work (e.g., 2011, 2012) has focused on women's contribution in the translation of the Qur'an and the strategies they use to translate the Muslim sacred text. Christopher Shackle (2005) revealed that the first translation by a woman of the sacred book of Sikhism, *Ādi Granth* ("Original Book", or "First Book"), was attempted in 1995: Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh's volume was published under the title *The Name of My Beloved*. *Verses of the Sikh Gurus*". In 2011, Lynne Long's contribution "Women Translators of Sacred Texts" appeared in Oriana Palusci's *Traduttrici. Female Voices across Languages*, where she gives an insight into women's involvement in translating sacred texts in various religious traditions. Through such efforts, it became gradually obvious that women have in fact translated religious and even sacred texts, and that it makes sense to want to find out more about them and their work.

While truth may not always be in numbers, historically there has been a gap between the number of books authored, published and translated by women and men. The phenomenon is complex and we do not wish to reduce it to considerations of power, even though power (not least of the kind exerted by women on other women) is part of the mix. But there has indeed also been a gap between men and women's access to education and production of knowledge; in certain parts of the world it persists to this day. Depending on where and when women lived, there have been social, cultural, economic, and religious reasons for this. One of the key issues that come to mind is women's literacy, which is in turn determined by cultural ideals, social norms, and even by legal and institutional constraints. Going back in time, it appears that in England, in 1500, as much as 99 percent of women may have been illiterate (by comparison with 70 percent of men), and girls of all social backgrounds were the object of purposeful effort to restrict their access to full literacy (Brayman Hackel & Kelly, 2008, p. 1). This improved

for both men and women as time went by but, even when many more women gained access to reading and writing, their male family members had more and better access. Women were also prevented from learning certain skills and acquiring knowledge in various subjects, which placed them at a marked disadvantage. Throughout history, various institutions – of which organised religion is an important example, alongside school – structured women's learning and competed to determine what they could read and what was appropriate for them to aim for. In particular, they could not aspire to occupy a role in the religious hierarchy, teach other people within a religious setting, or even speak out in public. It is therefore not entirely surprising that, as several of the contributors to this special issue point out (e.g., **Felicia Dumas**, **Anne O'Connor**, **Sema Üstün-Külünk**, **Jenny Wong**), it still seems inappropriate or even unacceptable that women should want to translate, especially if the project they embark on is a retranslation of the holy text.

Nevertheless, women in different parts of the world and historical periods have contributed to and participated in the translation of sacred texts. Sometimes they used their real names, or used a pseudonym (see **Üstün-Külünk**'s article), or published under a man's name. Like other women working in different areas and disciplines, women translators brought a range of experiences, skills, concerns, and perspectives to their reading and interpretations of religious texts. They are not a homogeneous group and, as **Richard Pleijel** reveals in his study of Swedish translator Viveka Heyman, some of them were most clearly not feminists. Furthermore, as **Anna Maslenova** contends, nor is invisibility always imposed on a (female) translator; in her opinion, a translator – in this case, Natalie Duddington – may voluntarily choose to relinquish her voice in the process of carrying out translation-based mediation, in the pursuit of higher purposes.

Do women translate differently from men? To what extent is gender a motivation or a constraint in their translations of holy and other religious texts? In other words, is gender the dominant factor shaping women's (re)translations of religious writings, by comparison with translations or retranslations by men? This also leads to a different set of questions relating to how readers (men and women) perceive women's translations. To what extent is the readers' understanding of the act of translation gendered, and how does that affect and influence their reception of religious translations by women? Expectations, norms, and stereotypes (including, but not restricted, to gender) in each society, culture, or historical period play an important role in shaping approaches to translation. In *Faithful Translators: Authorship, Gender, and Religion in Early Modern England* (2014), Goodrich gives the example of women translating religious texts in Early Modern England and points to the "critical dichotomy" that developed because, in his opinion, "men showed creative liberty by translating freely", while "women complied with patriarchal expectations by translating faithfully" (2014, p. 5). This state of affairs persisted even though women were mainly translating religious texts while men translated the classics, as Mary Ellen Lamb points out:

> The translations by Renaissance women are different from the translations of Renaissance men in being exceedingly literal. Absent are the magnificent and occasionally quirky expansions of Harington's Orlando Furioso and Chapman's Homer; instead, we find line-by-line transliteration. The explanation of the difference lies to some extent in the nature of the task itself... Many religious texts had by their very nature to be translated literally. (in Goodrich, 2014, p. 5)

The "dichotomy" may have gradually dissipated as more and more women became involved in translating religious texts. However, this is a useful reminder of the constraints, expectations and norms concerning faithfulness, accuracy, and transparency — all of which require the

(male or female) translator to remain invisible (or as invisible as possible), and posit that the translated text is, by definition, inferior to the original (a different conceptualisation could be, for instance, that the translation is the continuation, the progeny, the afterlife or renewed life of the original). This has at the same time made translation somehow compatible with women, while also giving women translators an additional challenge where they need to conform to social expectations of femininity (modesty, virtue, invisibility), to take into consideration rules set by religious institutions (in order to avoid censorship), and comply with market expectations. To face the challenges and cross these obstacles, women translators of religious texts and, especially, of holy writings, have adopted various translation strategies (some of which are outlined in this special issue) and, in recent years, used new platforms to market and publicise their work (Hassen and Şerban, in press).

To ensure that their renditions are accepted by the target readers, translators and publishers need to think strategically about each step they take in the publication process. Thus, they must decide how to package and present the translation, and what title to choose. Does the translation need approval, permission, and endorsement from religious institutions, scholars, or other authorities? In this special issue, paratexts and approbations make the object of **O'Connor**'s study of two of the most successful women translators of religious texts in the Anglophone world in the nineteenth century, Mary Anne Sadlier and Mary Austin Teresa Carroll.

Paratextual elements such as book covers, titles, prefaces, introductions, and marginal notes play a key role in the packaging, marketing, and publication process. In his book *Seuils* (1987), published in English under the title *Paratexts*: *Thresholds of Interpretation*, Gérard Genette studied the paratexts in print books and viewed them as liminal devices that mediate reception and perception. However, more recently, the term 'paratexts' has started being understood in a broader sense and now refers not only to books but also to digital media, e-books, and their translations. At the time of writing, paratextual elements also comprise online sources, audio and visual advertising materials, publishers' and translators' websites, and more. The challenge for women translators of religious and, especially, of holy texts, is how to present, package, and market their translations, in view of the fact that, in certain contexts, gender bias still impacts readers' choice (including that of other women). Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the translation of religious texts is also a business venture; consequently, commissioners and publishers select translations that can sell well and turn a profit, which obviously only happens if they meet readers' and buyers' expectations. Such practical aspects form part of the complex and heterogeneous set of considerations that determine why women translators of religious texts have taken different approaches: while some chose to highlight their position as women translators, others opted for anonymity and resorted to pseudonyms or to male names. On the whole, their translations still need to attract a wider audience if they are to become profitable for publishers. Indeed, translations by women are mostly issued by small publishing houses or are self-sponsored, which limits their distribution.

How to best prepare for and respond to criticism, and avoid censorship and attacks (including, in extreme cases, threats to personal safety, or that of one's family)? Naturally, taking these decisions is a complex process which always involves selectivity and exclusion, where some aspects of the translation are highlighted and emphasised while others are downplayed or suppressed. The criteria for these selections or exclusions are often determined by personal, social, political, financial, and theological considerations, which in turn have an impact on the publication and reception of women's translations of religious texts. As **Julie Van Parys-Rotondi** reveals in this special issue, even a powerful woman such as Queen Katherine Parr, King Henry VIII's sixth and last wife who was a humanist and a devout first-generation

Evangelical as well as the first woman to publish a book under her own name in England, was not entirely free to do what she wanted, within the context of her time (women were particularly restricted in the expression of religious opinions) and facing her own husband's hostility towards Protestantism.

The fifteen contributions in this special issue cover aspects of translation by women in Western and Eastern Christianity, Sikhism, Hinduism, and Islam. We regret not having been able to attract studies of women's contribution within a broader range of religions including, for instance, Judaism and Buddhism, and hope to address this shortcoming in a future project. Some of the studies included here discuss retranslations of the holy texts of Islam, Sikhism, and Christianity, especially those by **Sema Üstün-Külünk**, **Yazid Haroun**, **Maria Puri**, **Maria Puri & Monika Browarczyk**, **Jenny Wong**, **Richard Pleijel**, **Felicia Dumas** – including, in the case of **Mary Phil Korsak** whose contribution concludes the volume, reflections on her own translation of the Gospel of Mark. Translations of religious texts such as prayer books, religious philosophy, commentaries, devotional writings (including poetry), or accounts of mystical visions, are studied in this special issue by **Agnieszka Gicala**, **Vasumathi Bandrinathan**, **Anne O'Connor**, **Anna Maslenova**, **Julie Van Parys-Rotondi**, and **Ewa Dębicka-Borek & Zofia Ziemann**. Where **Gicala** presents the case study of Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth-century English mystic and anchoress, and focuses on Julian's metaphor of God's maternity, **Bandrinathan** discusses translations into English and French of the *Tiruppavai* and the *Nachiyar Tirumoli*, which are books of devotional poetry written by Andal, the only woman among the twelve Alvars of Tamil Nadu. The question of the body and of female sexuality appears to be central in these texts, and translating the spiritual and cultural content while also adequately representing the mystic's poetic style is no easy task. India is present again in the volume through **Dębicka-Borek & Ziemann**'s study of Wanda Dynowska's life and activity, in particular her translation into Polish of a twentieth-century narrative of bhakti devotionalism.

The translators' religious, spiritual, and mystical experiences are rarely addressed explicitly in translations or the accompanying paratexts. But the phenomenon of mysticism, in its philosophical, psychological, and emotional dimensions, is present in various religions around the world, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In her article "Mystical and literary texts: Meeting the other, and each other, at the borders of language", Cristina Mazzoni (2007) highlights the challenges of translating mystical texts in their various forms (prayers, poetry, letters, biographies, and journals). How can translators convey mystical experiences and meanings is another thread running through the volume – see, for instance, **Gicala** and **Bandrinathan**. The relationship between mysticism, truth, and language is very complex and, in **Maria Puri**'s words, translating is a "spiritual journey in search of the self". In fact, as **Gicala** points out, translators may find themselves attempting to translate someone else's rendition of God's message, which she contends is precisely what happens when contemporary (women) translators tackle Julian of Norwich's *Shewings.*

Some of the women translators whose work is discussed within this volume are lay women, while others are consecrated, as is the case with the Orthodox Christian nun who translated the Psalms into French at the end of the twentieth century (see **Dumas**' contribution). At least one of them is extremely powerful in terms of her position in the world: Katherine Parr, the wife of a king. But it is perhaps plausible to suggest that, in her own way, each of the women is unconventional, as **Dębicka-Borek & Ziemann** demonstrate with respect to Wanda Dynowska (also known under the Indian name Umadevi). The stories of many remarkable women who translated sacred or other religious texts may not have been told yet, but we would like to mention here Fatma-Zaïda, a nineteenth-century Muslim slave maid or *djaria* who enjoyed the status of wife of a Turkish dignitary. She was the first woman to translate the Qur'an into

French. Her translation is not widely known, but the fact remains that Fatma-Zaïda used her translation to defend women's rights and to mediate between cultures (Hassen, 2018, p. 211).

Translation is increasingly viewed as a cultural and social activity and not merely a form of linguistic transmission. It is a complex process of reading, understanding, writing, and conducting exchanges between commissioners, translators, editors, and reviewers. As mediators between two (or several) cultures and two (or more) languages and traditions, and beyond simplistic injunctions to deliver fidelity, accuracy, and faithfulness to the original, translators are writers and rewriters of a new text that carries the cultural, linguistic, and social elements of the source and target environments. The concept of 'translation as rewriting' was highlighted by André Lefevere in *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, where he stated that translation is "a rewriting of an original text" (2004, p. vii). In other words, translation is not a transparent, straightforward linguistic transfer, but a process that can introduce new ideas, concepts, and perspectives to the target language and culture. In her contribution to this special issue, **Arunima Dey** engages with translation as rewriting and takes as a case in point Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) which, she argues, is a feminist translation of the original Hindu epic *Mahabharata*. Female sexuality and the topic of the body are among the issues discussed here which tie in with themes in other articles included here, such as for instance with **Bandrinathan**'s paper on the poetess Andal.

We would like to finish with a few words on collaboration. Translation in general involves different types and levels of collaboration between translators, authors, reviewers, publishers, and commissioners. Christiane Nord, who teamed up with her husband to translate the Bible into German, highlights the collaborative aspects in the translation process, which may involve two or more participants (see Nord, 1997). Throughout history there are numerous examples of translators working together on holy texts. Sometimes they are family members – a situation which appears to have occurred repeatedly where Qur'an translation with the collaboration of women is concerned: *The Glorious Quran: Text and Translation* (1991) completed by husband and wife Ahmad Abdul Munim Zidan and Dina Al Zahraa Zidan, *The Koran, Complete Dictionary and Literal Translation* (1994) by father and daughter Muhamed Ahmed and Samira Ahmed, *The Holy Qur'an: Arabic Text and English Translation* (1997) by husband and wife Abdul Mannan Omar and Amatul Rahman Omar, *The Noble Quran: A New Rendering of Its Meaning in English* (1999), by husband and wife team Hajj Abdalhaqq Bewley and Aisha Bewley. Contemporary translations of the Bible increasingly involve women. Thus, *The Contemporary English Bible* (1995) had 120 translators, twenty among them women; *The New International Version* (2011) had a committee of fifteen members, thirteen men and two women. *The New Revised Standard Version* (2021) translation committee included four women. Collaboration between women and men to translate the Muslim holy text is the key theme of **Haroun**'s contribution; it is also present in **Bandrinathan**'s study, and is mentioned by **Van Parys-Rotondi**. If we may conclude on a personal note, we would like to express our conviction that collaboration is the way to go.

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