

Theology in Translation¹

by Dr Derek Suchard

As we sit here today, there are approximately 18 major global conflicts going on around the world.² More than half – eleven – have a religious component.³

When one-time general and later President of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower published his memoir of the Second World War under the title “Crusade in Europe”, nobody got upset. There were no marches in the street, no flaming editorials about his choice of title, no arson and no murders. The same was true even when the book was translated with ‘Crusade’ in the title, such as in France⁴ and Germany⁵ and published in the countries that had been on the receiving end of Eisenhower’s crusade.

If he were publishing today, though...would a savvy editor or publisher perhaps suggest that perhaps another title might be more appropriate?

Nothing wrong with the word ‘crusade’, of course. It has a long and venerable record of service in the modern world. We have a crusade against cancer, we have had a crusade against drink, the British Heart Foundation even now has a Crusade against potato chips, and the New York Times reports on one man's crusade against boredom. Anti-globalist author Naomi Klein supports a crusade against industrial farming.

And, of course, we have the Campus Crusade for Christ.

None of these official, semi-official or completely unofficial crusades stirs up any anger, or resentment in any large segment of the population, of course. They are all Good Things, with caps. But in some quarters, primarily the military-political quarters of the Western World, ‘crusade’ has more or less been banished from the lexicon.

When outgoing U.S. President George W. Bush spoke to the press at the White House in the week following the terrorist bombings in September 2001, he used the word ‘crusade’ almost as a throwaway comment:

“This crusade,” he said, “this war on terrorism, is gonna take a while. And the American people must be patient.”⁶

He had preceded that remark by stating, perhaps just a little prematurely, as it turned out: that “My administration has a job to do and we’re going to do it. We will rid the world of the evil-doers.”⁷

The U.S. media, followed by the international press, picked up on that hubris-filled statement, but, initially at least, few took note of the use of the word ‘crusade’. In most reports, it was buried deep in the story.

¹ A slightly different version of this paper was presented at the Univer-cities: translation, languages and internationalization conference at the University of Alicante (Spain), 6-8 November 2008. Paper presented in English with simultaneous interpretation into Spanish.

² “Significant Ongoing Armed Conflicts, 2008”, www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0904550.html, Information Please® Database, Pearson Education, Inc.

³ These numbers are not hard and fast as different criteria are used to determine what constitutes a religious conflict.

⁴ Eisenhower, Dwight D., Paule de Beaumont & Lt-Cel. Goussault (trans), *Croisade en Europe: Mémoires sur la deuxième guerre mondiale*, 1949.

⁵ Eisenhower, Dwight D., Werner Preusser (trans), *Kreuzzug in Europa*, (Bermann-Fischer Verlag, Amsterdam) 1948.

⁶ Perez-Rivas, Manuel, “Bush vows to rid the world of ‘evil-doers’” (CNN, 16 September 2001) (<http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/16/gen.bush.terrorism/>)

⁷ Idem

Nor did it make it into a moving speech that President Bush delivered to a Joint Session of Congress on 20 September, for by that time, only four days from the first mention, it had already come back to haunt him.

Osama bin-Laden, the alleged mastermind behind the attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. had equal access to the world's media, and while I have no personal knowledge of what newspapers he was reading or broadcasters he was watching or listening to, he had heard the President had said that this was a crusade, and he had released a statement saying that he would defeat it.

Curiously, though, no-one had gotten upset when the world was first used, at least a full year before, in exactly the same context. When the U.S. and Russia joined together in a crusade specifically against Bin-Laden and the Taliban rules of Afghanistan.⁸ But somehow things had changed, probably because of the very public nature of the President's statement and the sheer scale of the 9/11 attacks.

After 16 September, things had changed in parts of the world which has a long historical memory, however flawed, of a different set of crusades as knights from Europe, responding to a call from Pope Urban II in 1095, descended on a small coastal province in the middle of a collection of Muslim states and conquered some rather small parts of it and setting up the Kingdom of Jerusalem and some lesser fiefdoms about the place. The hold of the newcomers was tenuous at best and the adventure ended in 1291, having survived with increasingly smaller holdings almost from 1144, when the Seljuk Turks retook Edessa.

In terms of our subject today, it is worth noting that, regardless how the medieval crusades started or were conducted or ended, even though I will mention as an aside that I think the dominant reading in Europe and North America is seriously flawed in terms of interpretation if not in historical fact⁹, the word crusade has undergone a shift in meaning over the centuries, and now has a quite different, non-theological meaning. Or had...because over the past seven years, the older meaning has come back, with a vengeance, one might say.¹⁰

This rather extended introduction on a single word is intended to illustrate a problem that translators dealing with texts dealing with military and political subjects have found themselves thrust into in the relatively recent past.

A speech or an academic article that not too many years ago would have been translated solely for the purpose of communicating with, for example, the politically active elites in politics and universities, now finds itself broadcast over the daily news, eliciting violent, though not spontaneous, all protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, protest, sometimes leading to loss of life.

Translation, were it every otherwise, has become a matter of life and death.

And not only, as in the oft-cited case of a supposed mistranslation by a journalist of a Japanese no-comment just before the first nuclear bomb was dropped in 1945, because the political leadership of the opponent may misconstrue it, but also because the new, freelance warriors in our so-called Clash of Civilizations, are consciously looking for texts that they can use, preferably without too much massaging which may have to be explained later, to mobilize their own operatives and supporters to achieve their own tactical and strategic objectives.

It's not all one-sided, of course. Interpreters in the West are equally culpable. The example of the Muslim 'Shaitan' is the most obvious.

⁸ Margolis, Eric, "US-Russian Crusade Against Osama Bin Laden", 4 December 2000, Toronto Sun, Toronto, Canada

⁹ With the occasional exception, such as Prof. Thomas F. Madden; See, Madden, Thomas F., "The Real History of the Crusades" in The website of the Association for Renaissance Martial Arts.

¹⁰ In fact, the adventures in what is now Israel, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria were not called Crusades at the time, nor its participants crusaders. The word was first coined in Spain in the thirteenth century (*cruzada*). It's first recorded use in English is actually in French, as *croissade* ca. 1575 and then anglicized as *crusade* in the early 18th century. Cf. Wheatcroft, Andrew, *Infidels: A History of the Conflict between Christendom and Islam*, (New York: Random House) 2004.

Shortly after the Islamic Revolution took place in Iran, which was as much about deposing a cruel dictator as it was about implementing an Islamic theocracy, the new leadership began referring to the United States as the 'shaitan e bozurg'. That was translated by journalists and widely propagated as the "Great Satan", which, not surprisingly, offended a great many Americans, and especially the deeply religiously fundamentalist Christians who, perhaps in a parallel development, quickly thereafter began to dominate the U.S. political spectrum, but I digress. The translation was sloppy, if not entirely inaccurate, for 'shaitan e bozurg' doesn't mean 'Great Satan' as a very big Devil or Evil, which is how most people in the U.S., who had a rather low level of familiarity with the details of Muslim theology, but 'the more distinguished among the devilish'. Nor does Shaitan, in the finer points of Islamic theology, do the kinds of things that Christian theology attributes to Satan. The Shaitan, is a whisperer, who can urge you to commit sin. But any strong believer is stronger than he is. In Christianity, however, in the Book of Revelations, Satan and his minions, the Anti-Christ and the Beast, bring the world to destruction in a lot of very unpleasant ways. Of course, theologians trained in the Christian texts will tell you that Satan does not appear in the Book of Revelations. But most people hearing themselves called Shaitan e bozurg are not aware of that, and think that that is what they are being accused of. Now I am also willing to grant that not everyone on the Teheran streets shouting that out was as cognizant of the finer points as the ayatollahs, but *nobody* on the Manhattan streets listening to it was. Would it have made a difference? Perhaps. At least they were being called distinguished...and being 'more distinguished' acknowledged their leadership. If every article, speech and comment in response had noted the honorific, how might that have affected relations when the Iranians actually elected a moderate some years later, only to find themselves linked in the axis of evil in a very unfortunate speech by President Bush.

Other terms are equally prone to manipulation in this way.

How should one translate Jihad, however. When I talk to Muslims about Jihad, I am told that they are primarily concerned with the Great Jihad, the struggle to overcome their sins and temptations and to become good Muslims. The term also has a less benevolent meaning though, often referred to as the lesser Jihad, which pits Muslims in armed conflict against the House of War, which comprises all countries that are not truly Muslim *countries*, and that country bit is often lost in the shuffle, as well. Those who elect the meaning of armed holy war, whether they are Muslims or Western commentators, only need to point to the names of some of the armed groups, such as Islamic Jihad, to support their position that that is the jihad that matters.

The others, Muslim and otherwise, claim that the puritans have hijacked Islam and perverted it. How are most people to know. And does it matter?

For a translator, whether that's all they do or it's a peripheral activity to something else, such as journalism, it should matter.

If possible, when writing about jihad, they should not simply put the word down, but put it in context. There are Muslims who claim that it's the fault of the West that we don't get that Islam is a peaceful religion. But when the messages that are coming out, and being translated verbatim, are of death, destruction and conquest, it is unreasonable for the average listener or reader even to take the time to search for the nuance.

But is it, one may reasonably ask, the task of the translator, and I'm thinking here now of my fellow professional translators, to massage the data in this way? If the President of the U.S. says we're on a crusade, shouldn't the English-Arabic translator simply translate 'crusade' and be done.

In one respect, with concepts like 'crusade', the answer is quite simply, yes. There are two words that cover the concepts of crusade in Arabic. They are *al-hurub as-selibiya*¹¹ (the wars of the cross) which refers to the wars of the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries in the Middle East, and *!#\$!#!*, which refers to the bundling of good will, strength and resources to do good. An honourable translator should make the appropriate choice, depending on the subject.

¹¹ Chamberlin V, John M., *Imagining Defeat: An Arabic Historiography of the Crusades*, Thesis, March 2007, p. 7 (<http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a467268.pdf>; accessed 11/05/2014)

For terms like Jihad, however, the answer to that question has to be quite simply no. At the moment, they're not translating it all, for a start. Everyone just writes about jihad. So they have to specify. Unless they have their own agenda, of course, and who of us doesn't, regardless of whether we are conscious of it. I, for example, being torn between my theological hat and my chair at the Netherlands Ministry of Defence, am quite conscious of the need for clarity on this point. Others may be inclined to prefer the lesser jihad and still others the greater jihad. If one has access to the author of the text, one should ask. If one does not, and that happens a lot, simply because the author is not available, then one should provide context.

I would like to close with a brief mention of how I, if Arab were in my language pairs, would have dealt with President Bush's use of 'crusade'.

My initial inclination would be to use *al-hurub as-selibiya*, which my journalist background recognizes as catchier and a more powerful term. I would probably then correct myself and use *!#\$!#* because, having been raised in North America and having been surrounded by a large number of crusades against drugs, crime, cancer, old age, etc, etc., I would have internalised the meaning shift that crusade had gone through.

At the final check, though, as the job went out the door, I would have reconsidered the strongly Christian fundamentalist beliefs of President Bush, and his tendency to put things into a black-and-white world of good and evil, his reliance on religious language in his speeches, and gone back to *al-hurub as-selibiya*.

Would that have been right? Unless I could get uncontrolled access to ask him, I'll never know. So I had to make an educated guess. Which could have serious consequences. Because translation has become a serious business.