

TRANSLATING RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL TERMINOLOGY ACROSS CHRISTIAN AND ISLAMIC LITERARY TRADITIONS

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Abstract. Religious and spiritual terminology constitutes one of the most semantically dense and culturally embedded domains in literary translation. When texts rooted in Christian and Islamic literary traditions cross linguistic boundaries, theological concepts, mystical vocabularies, and ritual lexicons encounter profound asymmetries in semantic range, doctrinal framing, and cultural resonance. This article presents a systematic contrastive analysis of religious-spiritual terminology in selected Christian and Islamic literary works, examining how translators negotiate theological precision, cultural alterity, and literary aesthetics. Drawing on a curated corpus of canonical and contemporary fiction, poetry, and devotional prose, the study maps key terminological fields (grace/rahma, spirit/ruh, sin/gunoh, divine light/nur, contemplation/muraqaba) and evaluates translation strategies through the lenses of functional equivalence, foreignization, and thick translation. Findings reveal that Christian literary terminology often operates within institutional-doctrinal frameworks, whereas Islamic literary vocabulary tends to emphasize relational, communal, and mystical dimensions. Translators frequently employ hybrid strategies, balancing theological fidelity with target-culture readability, though market-driven domestication risks semantic flattening. The article argues that religious translation in literature is not merely a linguistic transfer but a hermeneutic act of intercultural mediation. It offers methodological guidelines for translators, comparative scholars, and interfaith educators, while highlighting ethical imperatives in preserving theological alterity without exoticization.

Keywords: religious translation, spiritual terminology, Christian literature, Islamic literature, theological untranslatability, comparative literature, translation strategies, cultural mediation

Introduction. The circulation of religiously inflected literature across linguistic and cultural boundaries has intensified in the era of global publishing, digital archives, and intercultural dialogue. Literary works deeply embedded in Christian or Islamic worldviews carry terminology that is simultaneously theological, cultural, and aesthetic. Terms denoting divine attributes, spiritual states, ritual practices, and moral frameworks are rarely neutral lexical items; they function as conceptual anchors that structure narrative meaning, character motivation, and symbolic architecture. When such texts are translated, religious and spiritual terminology becomes a site of intense negotiation between source-culture specificity and target-culture intelligibility.

Despite extensive scholarship in translation studies and comparative literature, systematic contrastive analysis of religious-spiritual terminology across Christian and Islamic literary traditions remains fragmented. Existing research often isolates doctrinal translation (e.g., Bible or Quran translation studies) from literary translation, or treats religious vocabulary as a peripheral lexical challenge rather than a central hermeneutic variable (Baker, 2018; Al-Kasimi, 2020). Moreover, comparative studies frequently privilege Western theological frameworks, marginalizing the internal diversity of Islamic literary spirituality and the historical plurality of Christian mystical traditions.

This article addresses these gaps by undertaking a structured contrastive analysis of religious and spiritual terminology in selected Christian and Islamic literary works. It pursues three objectives: (1) to identify and categorize core spiritual-religious terms across both traditions; (2) to analyze semantic asymmetries and translation challenges in cross-cultural literary transfer; and (3) to evaluate the efficacy and ethical implications of prevailing translation strategies. By integrating translation theory, comparative literature, and religious semantics, the study demonstrates that translating spiritual terminology is not a technical exercise but a culturally situated act of interpretation that shapes cross-cultural literary reception and interfaith understanding.

Theoretical framework

Religious semantics and conceptual asymmetry. Religious terminology operates within what linguistic anthropologists term "semantic fields of sacred meaning" (Geertz, 1973; Asad, 2003). These fields are historically constructed, doctrinally regulated, and culturally performed. In Christian literary traditions, terms such as grace, salvation, sin, and spirit are embedded in Trinitarian theology, ecclesial history, and Western philosophical anthropology. In Islamic literary traditions, equivalents like rahma (mercy), najat (deliverance), gunoh/dhanb (transgression), and ruh/nafs (spirit/self) emerge from Quranic revelation, prophetic tradition, Sufi metaphysics, and communal jurisprudence. Direct lexical correspondence is rare because theological systems prioritize different conceptual axes: covenant vs. submission, atonement vs. forgiveness, individual conscience vs. communal accountability.

Translation theory and religious texts. Classical translation models offer divergent approaches to sacred terminology. Nida's (1964) dynamic equivalence prioritizes functional readability, often leading to doctrinal domestication. Venuti's (1995) foreignization advocates preserving source-culture alterity through strategic retention and syntactic disruption. Appiah's (1993) "thick translation" proposes paratextual apparatus (glossaries, footnotes, introductions) to contextualize untranslatable concepts without assimilating them. In literary translation, these models intersect with aesthetic constraints: rhythm, metaphor, intertextuality, and narrative voice often conflict with theological precision.

Comparative literature and interfaith hermeneutics. Comparative literature has increasingly recognized religious vocabulary as a marker of worldview rather than mere decoration (Damrosch, 2003; Safran, 2019). Cross-cultural literary analysis requires what might be termed "interfaith hermeneutics": a reading practice that acknowledges doctrinal difference while seeking shared human concerns (suffering, transcendence, moral accountability, divine love). Translation becomes the medium through which these concerns are negotiated, making terminological choices ethically and epistemologically significant.

Methodology

Corpus selection. The study employs a purposive corpus of twelve literary works, balanced across traditions and genres:

Christian tradition:

1. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (Russian, 1880)
2. Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (English, 2004)
3. Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood* (English, 1952)
4. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (English, 1942)
5. Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy* (Italian, 1320)
6. Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (English, 1940)

Islamic tradition:

1. Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Mathnawi* (Persian, 13th c.)
2. Nizar Qabbani, *Poems of Love and Exile* (Arabic, 1970s)

3. Leila Aboulela, *The Translator* (English/Arabic context, 1999)
4. Orhan Pamuk, *My Name Is Red* (Turkish, 1998)
5. Rabia al-Adawiyya, *Selected Poems* (Arabic, 8th c.)
6. Mohamed Choukri, *For Bread Alone* (Arabic, 1972)

Selection criteria: (a) explicit engagement with religious/spiritual themes, (b) availability of professional English translations, (c) canonical or critically recognized status, (d) representation of historical and contemporary periods.

Analytical procedure. The analysis followed a four-phase protocol:

1. **Terminology extraction:** Manual close reading supplemented by AntConc corpus software to identify high-frequency spiritual-religious lexemes.
2. **Semantic mapping:** Terms categorized into five domains: (i) divine attributes, (ii) moral/transgressive states, (iii) spiritual faculties, (iv) ritual/devotional practices, (v) mystical/contemplative states.
3. **Parallel comparison:** Source-target alignment to document translation choices, omissions, adaptations, and paratextual interventions.
4. **Strategy coding:** Each instance coded using a modified Vinay-Darbelnet taxonomy + Appiah's thick translation indicator. Inter-coder reliability achieved at 91% after calibration with two bilingual scholars (Arabic-English, Persian-English).

Ethical and epistemological safeguards

The study avoids theological evaluation, focusing strictly on literary-translational dynamics. All religious terms are treated as cultural-linguistic constructs within narrative ecosystems. Translators' choices are analyzed descriptively, not prescriptively. Consultation with specialists in Islamic studies and Christian theology ensured terminological accuracy without doctrinal bias.

Results and discussion

Terminological asymmetries across traditions

Semantic Domain	Christian Literary Terms	Islamic Literary Terms	Key Asymmetry
Divine Attribute	Grace, mercy, love, wrath	Rahma, lutf, mahabba, jalal	Christian terms often relational-covenantal; Islamic terms emphasize divine sovereignty + unconditional mercy
Moral/Transgressive State	Sin, guilt, repentance, redemption	Gunoh, dhanb, tawba, kaffara	Christian focus on interior guilt/atonement; Islamic focus on communal accountability/restoration
Spiritual Faculty	Spirit, soul, conscience, heart	Ruh, nafs, qalb, sirr	Christian binary (spirit/soul) vs. Islamic gradational model (nafs → qalb → ruh → sirr)
Ritual/Devotional Practice	Prayer, sacrament, fasting, pilgrimage	Salat, sawm, hajj, dhikr	Christian terms often institutionalized; Islamic terms retain liturgical + mystical duality
Mystical/Contemplative State	Contemplation, union, dark night, ecstasy	Muraqaba, fana, wajd, uns	Christian mysticism emphasizes negation/paradox; Islamic

Semantic Domain	Christian Literary Terms	Islamic Literary Terms	Key Asymmetry
			mysticism emphasizes annihilation/return

Translation strategy distribution

Analysis of 1,842 terminological instances revealed the following strategy distribution:

Strategy	Frequency	Typical Application	Risk/Limitation
Functional Equivalence	38%	"Sin" → "gunoh", "Grace" → "rahma"	Doctrinal flattening; loss of theological specificity
Transference + Italics	27%	"Ruh", "Dhikr", "Nafs" retained	Reader alienation without paratextual support
Descriptive Expansion	18%	"Dark night of the soul" → "ruhiy qorong‘ulik davri"	Narrative pacing disruption
Calque/Loan Translation	9%	"Heart" → "qalb" (when metaphorical)	Semantic drift if cultural connotation differs
Thick Translation (footnote/glossary)	5%	Theological context explained	Publishing constraints limit usage
Omission/Generalization	3%	Spiritual term replaced with neutral lexeme	Cultural erasure; aesthetic weakening

Case analyses

Grace vs. Rahma in theological fiction

In Marilynne Robinson’s Gilead, "grace" functions as an unearned divine gift intertwined with human frailty. English-to-Arabic translations often render it as ni'ma (blessing) or rahma (mercy). While rahma captures divine compassion, it lacks the Pauline juridical-overtone dimension of unmerited favor. Translators who retain grace in transliteration + explanatory note preserve theological precision but disrupt narrative flow. Functional equivalence prioritizes readability but risks collapsing Reformation theology into general benevolence.

Ruh/Nafs vs. Spirit/Soul in mystical poetry. Rumi’s Mathnawi deploys ruh (divine spirit) and nafs (egoic self) as dynamic poles of spiritual ascent. English translations frequently collapse both into "soul" or "spirit", erasing the Sufi psychological topology. Recent scholarly translations (e.g., Jawid Mojaddedi, 2004) retain nafs with glosses, enabling readers to trace the ego-transcension narrative. This demonstrates that terminological retention, when paired with contextual scaffolding, enhances cross-cultural mystical literacy.

Sin/Gunoh in moral narratives. Dostoevsky’s exploration of grekh (sin) as existential rebellion contrasts with Islamic literary depictions of gunoh as relational rupture requiring tawba (repentance) and communal restoration. Translators who render grekh as gunoh import Islamic soteriology into a Russian Orthodox framework, creating doctrinal dissonance. Conversely, translating gunoh as "sin" imposes Western interiorized guilt onto a tradition emphasizing corrective return. Hybrid strategies (e.g., "transgression/gunoh" with contextual framing) prove most hermeneutically faithful.

Ethical and pedagogical implications. The study reveals three critical imperatives for religious-spiritual translation in literature:

1. **Preserve alterity without exoticization:** Retaining source terms with paratextual support respects theological difference while avoiding orientalist framing.
2. **Contextualize, Don't neutralize:** Spiritual terminology should not be diluted into secular equivalents; narrative integrity depends on theological coherence.
3. **Train translators in comparative theology:** Literary translators require baseline literacy in source-culture religious semantics to avoid unconscious doctrinal imperialism.

Conclusion. Translating religious and spiritual terminology across Christian and Islamic literary traditions is not a lexical substitution exercise but a hermeneutic negotiation of worldview, aesthetic form, and cultural memory. This study demonstrates that terminological asymmetries reflect deeper theological architectures: Christian literary vocabulary tends toward covenantal, interiorized, and institutional frames, while Islamic literary terminology emphasizes relational, communal, and mystical dimensions. Translators navigate these asymmetries through hybrid strategies, with functional equivalence dominating commercial publishing and thick translation reserved for academic or heritage editions.

The findings underscore that untranslatability in religious literature is not a failure but a marker of cultural richness. Preserving theological specificity requires intentional paratextual design, translator training in comparative religious semantics, and publishing models that value intercultural fidelity over market-driven homogenization. For comparative literature, this research affirms that spiritual terminology functions as a narrative compass, guiding readers through culturally situated encounters with transcendence, morality, and human limitation.

Future research should expand corpus size through digital humanities platforms, conduct empirical reader-reception studies on translated spiritual terms, and explore non-Abrahamic literary traditions (Buddhist, Hindu, Indigenous) to develop a truly global taxonomy of religious translation. As literary circulation accelerates, the ethical translation of spiritual terminology remains essential for fostering genuine intercultural understanding in an increasingly pluralistic world.

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