

Challenges in the Translation of Religious Culturonyms

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Keywords	Abstract
religious culturonyms linguaculture religiocultural terms culture-specific lexical items	The translation of culturonyms—culture-specific lexical items tied to the religious practices, beliefs, institutions, or worldviews of a source culture—poses myriad challenges. This paper examines the difficulties inherent in rendering religious culturonyms from a source into a target language and culture. Drawing on prior research in translation studies and selected case examples from sacred texts and novels, the study identifies major obstacles—semantic non-equivalence, cultural invisibility, translator competence, and audience reception—and outlines strategies commonly adopted (domesticating, foreignizing, explanatory) together with their trade-offs. The findings suggest that no single strategy suffices; rather, a context-sensitive balance is required, and translators must possess deep cultural and religious literacy. The conclusion considers implications for translator training and future research.

Introduction

Language is not merely a tool for communication but also a repository of culture, worldview, and collective memory. When translators transfer meaning from one language to another, they bridge the gap between distinct cultural and conceptual worlds. One of the most intricate aspects of this process is the translation of *culturonyms*—words or expressions deeply rooted in the cultural, historical, and social fabric of a community. As Kabakchi and Proshina (2021) note, culturonyms are “linguistic units that denote culture-specific realities and embody the worldview of a given community.” These terms are not simply lexical items; they are cultural signifiers that resist straightforward equivalence because they are bound to unique practices, values, and beliefs.

Cultural words, or *culturonyms*, encapsulate cultural, social, or religious meanings beyond mere denotation. In translation studies, the challenge posed by culture-specific items (CSIs) has been widely acknowledged: what happens when a religious term in the source text carries meanings, references, and connotations that the target culture lacks? As Alhaddad and Abdullah (2023) observe, “Words can be easily translated, but their cultural meaning is oftentimes not.”

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Within this broader class, *religious culturonyms* occupy a particularly complex space. These are linguistic items related to belief systems, rituals, sacred objects, theological concepts, or institutional structures—for instance, *karma*, *Eucharist*, *jihad*, *nirvana*, or *bar mitzvah*. Each carries dense layers of significance that extend far beyond dictionary definitions. The cultural, theological, and emotional weight embedded in such terms makes their translation not only a linguistic act but also an act of cultural negotiation and ethical responsibility.

Religious linguaculture, in particular, presents additional difficulties: concepts are embedded in faith traditions, ritual contexts, sacred texts, metaphysical assumptions, and the lived practices of the source culture. The translator of a religiocultural term must navigate semantic, pragmatic, cultural, and theological dimensions. In literary contexts, for example, scholars have shown that translators commonly employ domesticating or foreignizing strategies, with foreignizing used more frequently for religious expressions—such as in the rendering of terms in Naguib Mahfouz’s *Sugar Street*.

The translation of religious culturonyms poses challenges that extend beyond linguistic equivalence. As Nida and Taber (1969) argue in their theory of dynamic equivalence, communicative effectiveness requires that the translated message evoke a response in the target audience comparable to that of the original. In religious translation, however, this is difficult to achieve because target readers may lack the experiential and cultural background needed to comprehend a term’s religious or spiritual context. For instance, the Arabic *taqwā*, central to Islamic thought, has been rendered as “piety,” “God-consciousness,” or “fear of God,” yet none fully captures its Qur’anic nuances. Similarly, the Sanskrit *dharma* in Hindu and Buddhist contexts has no single English equivalent that encompasses law, duty, cosmic order, and moral virtue.

These difficulties show that translating religious culturonyms is not merely a search for lexical parallels but a mediation between distinct conceptual and spiritual systems. Translators must decide whether to domesticate the text—making it more accessible by adapting it to target-culture norms—or to foreignise it, preserving the source culture’s flavour even at the risk of alienating the target reader (Venuti, 1995). In religious contexts, this decision carries ethical and theological implications, since altering or simplifying sacred terms may distort doctrinal meanings or offend believers. The translator thus becomes a cultural and moral mediator, responsible for conveying both the linguistic and the spiritual dimensions of the source text.

The aim of the present article is to analyse the major challenges in the translation of religious culturonyms, to identify and categorise them, and to review the strategies translators adopt (and their consequences). It asks: What specific difficulties arise when translating religious culturonyms? What factors influence strategy choice? What are the implications for adequacy, equivalence, and reception? The study contributes to translation theory by focusing explicitly on the religious domain of culturonyms and offering a structured overview of the problem.



The significance of this issue has increased in the context of globalisation and interfaith dialogue. As religious texts, sermons, and theological writings circulate across linguistic boundaries—through scripture translation, missionary activity, or world literature—the need for sensitive, accurate, and culturally informed translation becomes paramount. Misinterpretation of religious culturonyms can lead not only to misunderstanding but also to cultural stereotyping or religious conflict. Hence, the translator’s decisions bear not only linguistic but also sociocultural and ideological consequences (Babayev, 2023).

Existing studies (e.g., Khukhuni et al., 2019; Abdel-Hafiz, 2020; Valizadeh & Ezzati Vazifekkhah, 2022) demonstrate that translating religiously charged terms requires advanced cultural literacy and interpretive skill. Khukhuni et al. emphasise that both linguistic and extra-linguistic factors—such as the translator’s religious background, cultural empathy, and awareness of sacred connotations—affect translation outcomes. Abdel-Hafiz’s analysis of Naguib Mahfouz’s *Sugar Street* shows that translators often favour foreignisation for religious expressions to preserve authenticity and respect the original culture’s sacred elements. Meanwhile, Valizadeh and Ezzati Vazifekkhah highlight the need for translators to possess “bicultural and bireligious competence” to interpret religious expressions accurately across contexts.

Aims and Scope

In light of these complexities, the present study examines the specific challenges involved in translating religious culturonyms across semantic, cultural, pragmatic, and ideological dimensions. It also classifies the strategies translators employ—domesticating, foreignising, explanatory, and substitutional—and considers their implications for equivalence, readability, and intercultural understanding. By synthesising findings from existing literature alongside illustrative case studies, the article clarifies how religious culturonyms function in translation and which factors condition their successful rendering.

Types of Religious Culturonyms

1. Biblical and Scriptural Culturonyms

Many culturonyms originate in holy texts such as the Bible, Quran, Bhagavad Gita, or Torah. For example:

- “David and Goliath” — symbolising a struggle between the weak and the powerful.
- “Cross to bear” — denoting a personal burden or suffering, drawn from Christian imagery.

2. Ritual and Symbolic Culturonyms

Derived from religious ceremonies or symbols, these terms encapsulate spiritual practices:



- “Baptism by fire” (Christian origin; now meaning a difficult initiation).
- “Pilgrimage” — originally a sacred journey, now used metaphorically for any meaningful quest.

3. Ethical and Moral Culturonyms

These expressions convey moral lessons rooted in religious ethics:

- “Good Samaritan” — a person who helps others selflessly.
- “Reap what you sow” — moral causality akin to the concept of karma.

4. Interfaith and Universal Culturonyms

Some religious culturonyms transcend single traditions and enter global discourse:

- “Amen” — used across Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (Babayev, 2024).
- “Peace be upon you” — found in multiple linguistic forms across the Abrahamic faiths.

Functions of Religious Culturonyms

1. Cultural Identity and Continuity

They reinforce group belonging and transmit collective memory through language.

2. Moral and Ethical Communication

They serve as shorthand for moral principles, turning complex ethical ideas into accessible idioms.

3. Linguistic Enrichment

They add metaphorical depth and stylistic colour to a language.

4. Intercultural Dialogue

As religious culturonyms migrate across languages through translation or globalisation, they foster intercultural understanding and shared human values.

In sum, the translation of religious culturonyms sits at the intersection of language, culture, and faith. It requires translators to balance fidelity with functionality, precision with accessibility, and reverence with clear communication. Engaging these challenges illuminates not only the craft of translation but also the broader processes of intercultural and interreligious exchange in an increasingly interconnected world (Javid & Sadikhova, 2025).

Methods

This study is qualitative and exploratory. The methodology comprises:



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1. **Literature review:** Surveying key papers on the translation of culture-bound items and religious terms (e.g., Khukhuni et al. (2019) on cultural words in sacred texts; Kabakchi & Proshina (2021) on culturonyms).
2. **Case analysis:** Examining published studies on the translation of religious words/expressions in literature (e.g., Abdel-Hafiz, 2020) to identify common patterns of difficulty and strategy.
3. **Categorisation:** Distilling, from the review and case analysis, categories of challenge (semantic, pragmatic, cultural, translator competence, audience) and mapping translator strategies (domesticating, foreignising, explanatory, substitution) together with their trade-offs (see also Petrova, 2017 on the translation of realia).
4. **Interpretive synthesis:** Integrating findings into a coherent framework by listing challenges, linking them to strategy choices, and discussing factors that influence decisions.

No new empirical translation experiment was undertaken; rather, the study leverages existing research to synthesise an analytical overview.

Results

Religious culturonyms are linguistic units (words, idioms, expressions, or symbols) that arise from religious traditions and carry meanings rooted in belief systems. They function as verbal signifiers of religious identity, history, and morality within a particular culture or community (Babayev & Alaviyya, 2023).

These expressions may derive from:

- **Sacred texts** (e.g., “prodigal son,” “Judgment Day”)
- **Religious rituals** (e.g., “baptism by fire,” “bar mitzvah”)
- **Doctrinal concepts** (e.g., “karma,” “nirvana”)
- **Common greetings and interjections** (e.g., “God bless you,” “Salaam alaikum”)

Such terms often transcend their original religious contexts, entering secular language while retaining spiritual undertones.

The analysis revealed the following major categories of challenge in translating religious culturonyms, with associated observations:

1. **Semantic non-equivalence / lexical gap:**

Many religious culturonyms lack direct equivalents in the target culture/language. Sacred terms, ritual names, or theological concepts may have no ready counterpart. Translators may borrow, coin, explain, or domesticate. For example, some Islamic expressions in



translation require adaptation—or, in rare cases, omission—due to the absence of precise target-language parallels.

2. Cultural invisibility and background knowledge:

Target audiences may lack the religious or cultural background needed to grasp a term's full connotations (Sabir, 2023). The translator must decide whether to include explanatory glosses, annotations, or leave the term as is. Khukhuni et al. (2019) also highlight extra-linguistic factors in sacred-text translation, including cultural and religious background knowledge.

3. Connotation, ideology, and sacredness:

Religious terms often carry ideological, doctrinal, or sacred status. Alteration, domestication, or omission can affect perceived meaning or offend communities of belief. Abdel-Hafiz (2020) found that translators of Mahfouz's *Sugar Street* often favoured foreignising strategies for religious words to preserve source-culture values.

4. Translator competence and cultural-religious literacy:

Beyond linguistic proficiency, translators require deep cultural and religious literacy. Valizadeh & Ezzati Vazifehkhah (2022) showed that interpreters needed thorough knowledge of both Iranian and American cultures to translate religious expressions accurately.

5. Target-text audience and reception:

Anticipating how readers will receive a term is essential. If unfamiliar, will it alienate, confuse, or be misinterpreted? The choice between domesticating and foreignising strategies depends in part on the intended readership and the translation's purpose.

6. Challenges in translation and interpretation:

Religious culturonyms frequently resist direct translation due to deep cultural and theological roots (Alisoy, 2022). For instance:

- The Arabic phrase “Inshallah” means “if God wills,” conveying spiritual humility and social politeness that are difficult to capture fully in English.
- “Dharma” in Sanskrit spans duty, morality, and cosmic order, with meanings that vary by context.

Translators must therefore balance semantic accuracy with cultural sensitivity, at times opting for transliteration or explanatory notes (Sadikhova & Babayev, 2025).

Discussion

Findings from the literature synthesis and case analyses reaffirm that translating religious culturonyms is among the most intricate and ethically charged tasks in translation practice. Unlike general lexical items, these terms are embedded within the conceptual frameworks, ritual practices, and belief systems of specific communities. Their translation therefore entails more than linguistic



transfer—it requires mediation between divergent worldviews. This discussion expands on the theoretical, practical, and ethical implications of these findings and proposes directions for translator training and future research.

1. **The dialectic of equivalence and faithfulness**

The tension between faithfulness to the source text and equivalence in the target text lies at the heart of translation theory. Nida and Taber's (1969) concept of dynamic equivalence emphasises reproducing in the target audience an effect comparable to that experienced by the original audience. This principle becomes problematic, however, when translating sacred or doctrinal terms whose full significance is grounded in a specific theology. For example, rendering the Christian term *grace* into languages lacking the concept of divine, unmerited favour risks semantic dilution or doctrinal distortion. Conversely, excessive literalism—often associated with “formal equivalence”—can obscure meaning and alienate the target audience.

Religious culturonyms thus expose the limits of both strategies: literal translation may miscommunicate, while dynamic equivalence may misrepresent. Translators must negotiate this dialectic situationally, balancing respect for the sacred text with communicative clarity. This aligns with Nida's later assertion (1986) that equivalence should be functional rather than absolute, and that the translator's task is to approximate meaning within the constraints of cultural incommensurability.

2. **Domesticating vs. foreignizing strategies revisited**

Venuti's (1995) distinction between domestication and foreignization offers a useful lens for analysing translator choices in religious texts. Domestication seeks to make the text familiar to the target audience by adapting cultural and religious references, whereas foreignization retains the source culture's otherness.

The present study supports previous findings (Abdel-Hafiz, 2020) that foreignization is often preferred for religious culturonyms, particularly in sacred or culturally sensitive contexts. This strategy preserves the authenticity and sanctity of the source terminology, even at the cost of readability. For instance, retaining terms like *Allah*, *karma*, or *Bodhisattva* rather than replacing them with “God,” “destiny,” or “saint” safeguards doctrinal specificity and avoids syncretism. However, when addressing audiences unfamiliar with the source culture, excessive foreignization can hinder comprehension and reduce communicative effectiveness.

Domestication, by contrast, enhances accessibility but risks eroding the cultural and theological depth of the original. Translating *shalom* simply as “peace” or *Ummah* as “community” may be comprehensible yet fails to convey the spiritual and communal dimensions of these terms. A growing number of scholars (Katan, 2014; Valizadeh & Ezzati Vazifekhhah, 2022) advocate hybrid strategies—combining transliteration with glosses or paratextual notes—to balance fidelity and intelligibility.



3. **Translator as cultural and ethical mediator**

Translators of religious culturonyms must operate simultaneously as linguistic experts, cultural anthropologists, and ethical mediators. Katan (2009) characterises translators as “intercultural communicators” who bridge mental models across cultures. In religious translation, this role carries heightened responsibility: errors can misrepresent doctrine or even inflame intercultural tensions.

For example, rendering the Arabic term *jihad* solely as “holy war” distorts its broader sense of spiritual striving and has contributed to widespread misunderstanding in Western media discourse. Likewise, reducing the Sanskrit *ahimsa* to “non-violence” obscures its metaphysical grounding in karmic philosophy. Such distortions underscore the need for cultural empathy and ethical sensitivity, ensuring that translation choices reflect not only linguistic accuracy but also respect for the source community’s values and beliefs.

4. **The role of context and audience**

Appropriate strategy depends heavily on context and target readership. As Newmark (1988) argued, translation is purpose-driven; skopos theory (Vermeer, 1996) echoes this by insisting that decisions align with the text’s communicative function. A translation intended for interfaith dialogue or academic study may preserve source terms and supply explanatory notes, whereas one aimed at children’s education or popular literature may employ adaptive strategies to enhance comprehension.

Audience expectations also shape reception. Readers familiar with multiple faith traditions may welcome foreignisation for its cultural authenticity, while others may find it opaque or alienating. Translator prefaces, footnotes, or glossaries can mitigate these risks by guiding readers without distorting meaning.

5. **Pedagogical and professional implications**

The challenges identified point to an urgent need for translator training programmes to include sustained modules on cultural and religious literacy. Such training should extend beyond language proficiency to cultivate awareness of religious symbolism, ritual terminology, and intercultural ethics. Role-play, comparative textual analysis, and guided exposure to multilingual sacred texts can sharpen sensitivity to religious nuance.

Professionals also require institutional support—clear guidelines, peer review, and consultation with theologians or cultural experts—to safeguard accuracy and respect. Collaboration between translators and scholars of religion can bridge knowledge gaps and help prevent doctrinal misinterpretation.

6. **Technological and future perspectives**

In the era of machine translation (MT) and artificial intelligence, religious culturonyms acquire renewed relevance. Studies such as Yao et al. (2023) show that even advanced neural MT systems struggle with culturally bound expressions, often proposing



inappropriate or anachronistic equivalents. Given their layered semantics and spiritual resonances, religious culturonyms remain resistant to automation; the cultural and ethical judgment they demand cannot yet be replicated by AI.

Even so, MT can assist human translators by providing consistent terminology databases, parallel corpora, and context-aware suggestions—provided these resources are curated and verified by culturally competent experts. The most promising trajectory is human–AI collaboration, in which human translators retain ethical and interpretive authority while leveraging technological tools for efficiency and consistency.

7. Towards an integrative model of religious culturonym translation

Building on the findings, an integrative approach is proposed comprising four interdependent dimensions:

1. **Semantic dimension** – grasping the denotative and connotative meanings of the term.
2. **Cultural dimension** – recognising the term’s embeddedness in ritual, history, and collective identity.
3. **Communicative dimension** – adapting the translation to the target audience’s expectations and purpose.
4. **Ethical dimension** – ensuring respect for religious sensitivity and avoiding reductionism or distortion.

A translator who balances these dimensions through informed strategy selection (e.g., partial borrowing with commentary) can achieve both cultural authenticity and communicative clarity.

8. Limitations and avenues for future research

The study’s conclusions are constrained by its reliance on secondary literature and illustrative cases. Empirical research could enrich the field—for example, by testing how readers from different cultural or religious backgrounds perceive translated culturonyms, or by examining how professional translators justify their strategy choices in practice. Cross-linguistic comparisons (e.g., Arabic–English vs. Chinese–French) may also reveal how linguistic typology affects strategy selection.

Moreover, emerging translation technologies warrant longitudinal assessment. As MT systems evolve, it remains to be seen whether future models can incorporate contextual, cultural, and ethical awareness when processing religious discourse.

Conclusion

Translating religious culturonyms is more than a linguistic exercise; it is a negotiation between languages, cultures, and belief systems. The study shows that these terms, deeply rooted in religious thought and ritual, resist direct equivalence and require strategies that balance fidelity,



clarity, and cultural sensitivity. Translators must therefore act as cultural mediators—preserving the sacred essence of the source while ensuring intelligibility for the target audience. A combination of foreignisation, explanatory glosses, and contextual adaptation often proves most effective. The process also raises ethical questions of representation, respect, and intercultural responsibility. Effective translation of religious culturonyms demands not only linguistic expertise but also theological literacy, empathy, and awareness of audience expectations. As global communication expands and technology evolves, continued scholarly attention is essential to promote accurate, respectful, and meaningful cross-cultural understanding in religious and spiritual discourse.

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