Translations of verbal expressions of faith as the prophetic dimension of missionary work

by Wojciech Kluj

1 Example as an introduction

When I was a young seminarian I met once an older priest, who told me that when he prays breviary in Polish it is not the same that when he prays in English. At that time I did not understand what he talked about. Later on, after I was ordained, I was sent to live and study for four years in Canada. After some years of work back in Poland, I was send to Madagascar. Over there I worked in French and in Malgache language (as much as I have learned it). Again, praying the texts of liturgy of hours I felt differently. Three years later I was send with the summer help to my confreres in Turkmenistan, former Soviet Union republic, now an independent country. Over there we prayed in Russian. It was generally the same experience of discovering some new inside and content in the texts known before in other languages.

Beside some differences (e. g. other hymnals, intercession prayers, prayers after psalms), the different pronunciation of other sounds (tones, voices) makes special connotations. But there is something more than that. In every language the words have different meaning in its context. In English one usually say the title of Mary, as »Our Lady from … Lourdes, Fatima, Czestochowa« (similarly in French »Notre-Dame«, or Italian »Madonna«), in Polish or Russian it is usually »Mother of God from … Lourdes, Fatima, Czestochowa«. It is the same Person of Mary we are referring to, but when we call Her »Lady« it is not the same as »Mother«. When praying »Hail Mary« we start usually with greeting, but again it is quite different. English »Hail Mary« underlines more greeting, French »Je vous salue« more praying subject, and the Polish version »Zdrowas Maryjo« ancient greeting form, not used in current language anymore. But among European languages the major difference I discovered in Russian. Over there, the first words mean »Rejoice Mary«. This is also a correct translation of Greek expression »Haire kecharitomene«, although not much commonly interpreted in other languages. This praying in different languages has some prophetic dimension because it helps to discover some new richness of the Divine mystery, which is shared already by some Christians.

Similar could be said about some titles. To give just one: The Russian title for the feast we call »Assumption« of Mary in Russian means »Falling into sleep [of Mary]«. Praying in Turkmenistan, I discovered that what we traditionally celebrate during this solemnity is only one part (»heavenly« side) of the mystery, which from our standpoint meant for Mary leaving this earthly life. Not to call this feast as of Her »death« it was named as Her »falling asleep«.

From my experience and from many other experiences as well as from many serious studies of the issue it is obvious that the attempt to present the issues of our faith in other languages, especially in the missionary context it is a real prophetic challenge.

In this short essay I would like to highlight four dimensions of this issue. Firstly, I will present some general perspectives of »cultural adaptivity« of our faith. Secondly, I would like to recall some issues arising within the context of Biblical translations. This is already not a new issue. Thirdly, I will present similar but not really the same question concerning liturgical translations. From the Roman Catholic perspective, it is relatively new issue. We have this only after Vatican II. Finally, I will present some issues linked with translations of various elementary theological concepts. In the missionary context it was especially developed in the elaboration of first catechisms in local languages.

2 The problem of »cultural adaptivity« of faith

The cultural adaptivity or lack of adaptivity of given ideas and phrases is a frequent theme of missiological discussions. Recently, the cultural adaptivity of Christianity has garnered increasing attention in Protestant missiology – especially the adaptivity of the Bible to local languages with which those involved in evangelization are familiar. There is no need to present here such names as Nida[1], Walls[2], Sanneh[3], or Bediako[4]. They developed this theme already in very significant way.

Faith in Jesus Christ required the translation of the verbal expressions of the saving Gospel into other languages. From the earliest years this need was visible – especially in the community at Antioch, where the truths of the faith had to be translated from their Aramaic and Hebrew origins into other languages and cultures. The Greek culture was the first to receive this translation.

That procedure involved on one hand an explanation of the Judaic roots of the faith and on the other an acceptance of a positive approach to new cultures that were to become a natural milieu for the development of faith in Jesus Christ. This was, of course, a difficult and sometimes dangerous pursuit but was adopted as both a natural and challenging process requiring communal awareness and cleansing. We see this in such terms as »Messiah« (which Jesus was referred to as most frequently in Jerusalem) and »Lord – *Kyrios*« (favoured by the community at Antioch and other communities rooted in Greek culture). Both terms, while true and correct, are not synonymous with one another. In addition, *Kyrios* had a double meaning that could lead to errors and misunderstanding: the Jews used this term in the Septuagint to describe the One God, while for the Greeks the word referred to pagan deities. As such, the term *Kyrios* was problematic. Despite this, early Christians did not shy away from using it – it was the most frequently used christological term in the letters of St. Paul.

1 As a very well known author in the area of theory of translations he needs no special recommendation. For this subject it seems especially valuable: Eugene A. NIDA, *Message and Mission*. The Communication of the Christian Faith, South Passadena 1960; *Religion across Cultures*. A Study in the Communication of Christian Faith, New York 1968 and Eugene A. NIDA/William D. REYBURN, *Meaning across cultures*, Maryknoll 1981.

2 Andrew F. WALLS, The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture, in: *Missionalia* 10 (1982), 3, 93-105.
3 Lamin SANNEH, *Translating the Message*. The Missionary Impact on Culture, Maryknoll 1989.
4 Kwame BEDIAKO, Translatability and the Cultural Incarnations of the Faith, in: James A. SCHERER / Stephen B. BEVANS (Ed.), *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization*, [vol.] 3 – Faith and Culture, Maryknoll 1999, 146-158.

5 Andrew F. WALLS, The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture, in: *Missionalia* 10 (1982), 3, 93-105.
6 Andrew F. WALLS, Christian Tradition in Today's World, in: Frank D. WHALING (Ed.), *Religion in Today's World*, Edinburgh 1987, 76-109.
7 Paul AUVRAY/Pierre POULAIN/ Albert BLAISE, *Sacred Languages*, New York 1960.
8 Kwame BEDIAKO, *Translatability and the Cultural Incarnations of the Faith*, in: SCHERER/BEVANS (Ed.), *New Directions* (wie Anm. 4), 146-147.

Language was not the only issue. St. Paul the Apostle spoke about the truths of the faith in terms derived from Greek terminology and thought. The Christians of the New Testament employed a speculative-philosophical style which was linked to the culture they encountered and which differed from the use of parables – the style in which Jesus communicated. In some ways, the topic, too, changed: from God's Kingdom (what Jesus taught) to the teachings of Jesus and the community of the faithful, or the Church.

This prophetic process continued in other cultures as well. In the early centuries, biblical texts and the Gospel were translated into Syrian, Armenian, Coptic, Georgian, and Ethiopian. In some of these cases, the formation of new alphabets was necessary – and this presented its own challenges. Some of the misunderstandings dealing with theological concepts discussed during the earliest universal Church councils had to do with the inability to translate Greek concepts into other languages (e. g. Syrian, Armenian or larger the whole problem of »pre-Chalcedonian« Churches). Some of the concepts in question were already Greek translations of the original Gospel message. The latest fruits of ecumenical dialogue with the Eastern Assyrian Church (erroneously termed the »Nestorian« church) show that what was previously thought to be an insurmountable doctrinal difference was in fact nothing more than different understandings rooted in culture and language: our core beliefs in fact do not differ.

Well known mission historian Andrew Walls believed that the Christian faith is *culturally indifinitely translatable.*[5] This means that we can look at the various stages of development of missionary Christianity as distinct cultural manifestations or incarnations of the faith: each one differed from the rest, but in the end each held fast to the core elements such as: worshipping the Triune God who first revealed Himself to the people of Israel; a recognition of the primacy of the person of Jesus Christ; an awareness of belonging to God's people that goes beyond just the local reality and in which there is an acknowledgment of God's action, collective reading of Scripture and the sacramental use of wine and water.[6]

According to Bediako, translatability is another means of the catholicity of the Church – therefore the translatability of Christianity entails the adaptability of the faith to people in all cultures into which it has been transmitted and assimilated. This is best seen in the Christian understanding of Holy Scripture. Unlike in Islam, where words of God are effectively understood via the Arabic language, Christian doctrine rejects the use of a dedicated holy tongue for its Scriptures and instead understands God as speaking via every local language, so that each person might have the chance to hear of His great works (cf. Acts 2:8). Although there also existed in Christianity a concept of »holy languages«, this was never understood in the same manner as in Islam.[7] Therefore the Bible, when translated into any language at all, remains essentially the same entity it was in its original form: The Word of God.[8]

But in addition to the Christian belief in the effective equality of the Bible regardless of language, there is even deeper truth of the Incarnation, through which God's most complete revelation to humanity transcended cultural and language forms and took on human form. »The Word became flesh and dwelt among us« (John 1:14). God took on not only human language but human form as well, and therefore translatability was written into the very nature of Christian faith. In this light it is worthwhile to take a look at the reverence for the name of God in the Old Testament – a reverence that even entailed refraining from calling God by name. Asking about the name of the Angel of God, Jacob heard, »Why are you asking my name?« (Genesis 32:30) and Moses asked, »when I go to the Israelites and say to them, ›The God of your fathers has sent me to you,‹ if they ask me, ›What is his name?‹ what am I to tell them?« (Exodus 3:13). God's Holy Name revealed to us is the

Sacred Tetragrammaton YHWH. But in fact in our languages we use other words.[9] Is this not already a commonly accepted kind of prophetic invention? It is better understood when we compare our position with Muslims.

It would appear that from the Catholic perspective there is not much theoretical interest in this question, but in practice – especially from the missionary perspective – there is a lot of interesting examples. Unlike Evangelical Christian efforts, Catholic missionary works in the past were based not so much on Biblical translations but on catecheses and popularized biblical accounts. After Vatican II, the great efforts to translate liturgical texts into various languages were noted. Although generally the Catholic Church does not have its own theory in this area, in practice there are already some norms associated with these »hermeneutics« surrounding the Catholic understanding of translatability.

In creating a structure for a future in-depth study, three major areas were chosen: biblical translations, liturgical translations and theological interpretations used in catecheses and popular songs.

3   Biblical translations

As for biblical translations, ancient history already provides an interesting study. Although the majority of Old Testament texts remained written in Aramaic, following the migration of the Israelites (to Babylon) it was realized that there would be a need to translate the sacred texts into a language better understood by a large number of people: Greek. The history of the Septuagint is well known, but what is especially worth underlining is the fact that the Israelites, finding themselves in contact with another culture, saw no problems in translating the Word of God into other languages – especially when said languages became for many the languages or daily discourse within their own faith community and in their relations with other peoples.

The Greek text of the Septuagint was quite widely used. The young Christian community adopted into its liturgy this Greek translation and not the original. Later, this became one of the reasons for their break with the Judaic community, since the latter limited its canon

9   There is great literature of this question. I would suggest here the work of Hellmut ROSIN, *The Lord is God*: the translation of the divine names and the missionary calling of the Church, Amsterdam 1956.
10   Nikolaus KOWALSKY, Die Sacra Congregatio ›de Propaganda Fide‹ und die Übersetzung des Hl. Schrift, in: Johannes BECKMANN (Ed.), *Die Heilige Schrift in den katholischen Missionen*, Schöneck-Beckenried 1966, 29-33.
11   Joseph J. SMITH, Liturgiam Authenticam: The Authority of the Vulgate and the Neo-Vulgate, in: *Landas. Journal of Loyola School of Theology* (Quezon City - Philippines) 16 (2002) 124-133.
12   Hagith SIVAN, Ulfila's Own Conversion, in: *Harvard Theological Review* 89 (1996) 373-386.

13   In the large litterature about life and work of holly brothers it is worth to mention an encyclical letter of John Paul II *Slavorum Apostoli*. It is the only encyclical of John Paul II consecrated to a human person (beside Mary). Even St. Joseph received »only« an exhortation.
14   Harold K. MOULTON, Translation Work, in: Stephen NEILL [and others] (Ed.), *A Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission*, New York 1970, 604. See also Glen G. SCORGIE/Mark L. STRAUSS/Steven M. VOTH (Ed.), *The Challenge of Bible Translation*. Communicating God's Word to the World, Grand Rapids 2003.
15   According to SIL it exists in about 680 languages of Africa, 590 of Asia, 420 of Oceania, 420 of Latin America and the Caribbean, 210 of Europe, and 75 of North America.
16   Schöneck-Beckenried 1966 (370 pp.), cf. Anm. 10.

17   As a good example of some cases there are some books about Madagascar: Françoise RAISON-JOURDE, *Bible et pouvoir à Madagascar au XIXᵉ siècle*. Invention d'une identité chrétienne et construction de l'État (1780-1880), Paris 1991; Josef METZLER, Madagassische Bibelübersetzungen, in: *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswischenschaft – Nouvelle Revue de science missionnaire* 17 (1961) 135-139; Matti PELTOLA, An Outline of the History of the Translation of the New Testament into Swahili, in: *Studia Missiologica Fennica* 1 (1957) 18-38.

of sacred texts to a narrower version. It is interesting that for many centuries in the Eastern Church, liturgical translation of psalms was based on the Septuagint version and not the original. Why was this so?

The other question of interest is: why did the first Christians write down the Gospel and New Testament texts in Greek, when Jesus in fact used Aramaic? It is true that Christians in the Roman Empire used Greek together with the majority of the society at the time, but eastern Christians (i. e. the Eastern Assyrian Church) used four Gospels in Aramaic. They translated »back« the Gospel message of Jesus into original language. In the east, Syrian and its dialects became the dominant language. The best known biblical version is *Peszitta*. There were also translations into Coptic, Ethiopian, Armenian, Georgian and Arabic.

Later, it was Africa and not Europe that began accepting Latin translations of the Bible (starting with *Vetus Latina*), not only in Christian communities but Judaic ones as well (parts of the Old Testament). Later, when the language became used throughout the empire, the Latin translation of the Bible became most prominent – this can be seen (up to today) in many Latin biblical quotations presented in some theological works. Among the various biblical translations, the Vulgata was often taken as authoritative. A similar rule was employed when it came to missionary translations into new languages. According to the Roman missionary guidelines, translations were supposed to be done on the basis of the Vulgata rather than the original texts.[10] Why this practice was continued for so long?[11]

In Western Europe for many centuries there were no problems translating texts into local languages. The translations into Gothic made by Wulfilas[12] are known, as are the translations into Celtic, and the translations into Slavonic by Cyril and Methodius,[13] but the majority of cases the question of national unity among Western Christians was of greater importance than pressing the local languages into liturgical use – and for this reason the number of translations remained small. There are, rather limited, attempts at translations (e. g. into Polish: Queen Zofia's Psalter).

A new wave of translations began around the time of the Reformation. Earlier, out of concern for preventing errors, access to biblical texts was limited – instead, biblical stories were popularized: these were easier to convey and put into everyday language.

Since the 19th century we see a renewed effort at translation into local languages, especially into local and, in particular, tribal dialects. Protestant institutions have done much work in this regard – *Summer Institute of Linguistics* and *Wycliffe Bible Translations*[14] being examples – but also in the Catholic Church we see efforts in this direction. Before there used to be great concern about access to sacred texts by people unqualified for their interpretation, today with the large amount of translations that Catholics are undertaking there exists somewhat of a new trend, perhaps even a renewed awareness about the translatability of the Gospels.

Most probably the Bible is the most translated book ever in the history. Approximately at least one biblical book exists in about 2500 languages.[15] That means the Bible is available at least in part to about 98 per cent of the population of the world. Wycliffe Bible Translators in their »Vision 2025« wants to begin by this year translation in every remaining language, wherever there is such a need.

For wider study in the Catholic perspective, a very good book on missionary biblical translations would be the compendium comprising numerous articles released by Johannes Beckmann under the title, *Die Heilige Schrift in den katholischen Missionen*.[16] A mere description of this volume would make for interesting material.[17]

4 Liturgical translations

Liturgical translations are an often discussed and active subject, especially in light of Vatican II and the emphasis on liturgy in the vernacular. For centuries, the language of our liturgy was Latin. However, it was not the tradition of all Christians, since from the earliest centuries the liturgies of the Eastern Churches were also conducted in other languages. Slowly, however, this belief in the »canonical« nature of Latin form ended, and the bishops participating in Vatican II decided to change that.

The goal of this article is not to be a comparison of all the Catholic liturgical translations that have ever been made in all languages. What does appear worthy of a deeper look, however, is the question of how the adoption of liturgical translations matured during and after the Council and in what way they were put into practice. Michael Joseph King examined this on the basis of archival documents from the Council. His doctoral thesis is available in book form.[18] It would be interesting to see how the norms were put into practice based on selected translations (the criteria of translation could either be a language or translation of prayers for given days, e. g. Easter, Christmas, etc.[19]). Even a comparison of so fundamental texts as The Lord's Prayer or »Hail Mary« – similarities and differences in translations – makes for an interesting study.

Interest in the translatability of liturgical texts grew noticeably after Vatican II, though it has not been exhaustively examined yet. Comparing even familiar Mass texts shows some important differences among them.

Version	Beginning of the profession of faith	Number
Latin	Credo	Sing.
English[20]	We believe	Pl.
Polish	Wierzę	Sing.
French	Je crois	Sing.
Italian	Credo	Sing.
German	Wir glauben	Pl.
Spanish	Creo	Sing.
Portuguese	Creio	Sing.
Russian	Верую	Sing.

Version	Proclamation during preparation of gifts	Number
Latin	Orate, *fratres ut meum ac vestrum* sacrificium acceptabile fiat apud *Deum Patrem* omnipotentem	A, A, A
English	Pray, *brethren*, that *our* sacrifice may be acceptable to *God, the almighty Father*	A, B, A
Polish	Módlcie się, aby *moją i waszą* ofiarę przyjął *Bóg, Ojciec* wszechmogący	B, A, A
French	*Prions ensemble,* au moment d'offrir le sacrifice *de toute l'Eglise*	B, B, B
Italian	Pregate, *fratelli*, perche il *mio e vostro* sacrificio sia gradito a *Dio, Padre* onnipotente	A, A, A
German	Betet, *Brüder und Schwestern*, dass *mein und euer* Opfer *Gott, dem allmächtigen Vater*, gefalle	B, A, A
Spanish	Orad, *hermanos*, para que este sacrificio, *mio y vuestro*, sea agradable a *Dios, Padre* todopoderoso	A, A, A
Portuguese	Orai, *irmãos*, para que o *meu e vosso* sacrificio seja aceito por *Deus Pai* todo-podoroso	A, A, A
Russian	Молитесь, *браться и сёстры*, чтобы *моё и ваше* жертвоприношение было угодно перед *Богом Отцом* Всемогущим	B, A, A

Version	From the consecration of the Blood of Christ	Number
Latin	Qui pro vobis et *pro multis* effundetur	Version A
English	For you and *for all*	Version B
Polish	Za was i *za wielu* będzie wylana	Version A
French	Pour vous et *pour la multitutude*	Version A
Italian	Per voi e *per tutti*	Version B
German	Für euch und *für alle*	Version B
Spanish	Por vosotros y *por todos*	Version B
Portuguese	Por vos e *por todos*	Version B
Russian	За вас и *за многих*	Version A

It would seem that especially the differences in the third column are a significant theological and missionary challenge. It requires really prophetic audacity to find correct word for the prayer life of so many people.

In other examples one can notice the translation of the word »rore« (dew) as »by the power« in the majority of cases[21]: »Spiritus Tui *rore* sanctifica«, which means »bless these gifts *by the power* of Your Spirit« (2nd Eucharistic prayer, 1st epiclesis). In the first Eucharistic prayer, in the Polish version, the name of the Holy Spirit is mentioned in the first epiclesis – this is absent in the Latin text. In addition, in the Polish translation of the second anaphora, the holy name is given whereas in the original text it is absent. Similarly, the acclamation concluding the Eucharistic prayer in its Polish version does not have »through Him, with Him and in Him«, but »through Christ, with Christ and in Christ«.

It may seem that these are not huge changes – but taking into account how many small changes of this nature exist, and the vast number of languages involved, it becomes clear that we are praying with slightly differing texts. Because the texts themselves shape prayer, they are very important and sensitive sources of formation of Catholic faith all over the world.

Another area of interest worth studying are the »hermeneutic norms« concerning Catholic translations of liturgical texts given in the fifth directive regarding the correct application in practice of the Constitution of the holy liturgy, *Liturgiam authenticam* of March 28, 2001[22]. Can we read them as a guide to prophecy?

This directive reminds us that the »catholicity« of the Roman liturgy is characterized by its receptiveness to local texts, songs, gestures and practices. It allows us to transcend the original criteria, such that local prayers and symbols become prayers of Christians in all places and times.

Among the open-ended questions remains the choice of languages into which liturgical texts are to be translated. The languages in question cannot have too few speakers. There is also a need to distinguish between proper languages and dialects.

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18 Michael Joseph KING, *The Competence of the Conference of Bishops Relative to Vernacular Translations of Liturgical Books*, Romae 1987.
19 Anthony Oliver UWREH ECHIEGU, *Translating the Collects of the Sollemnitates Domini of the Missale Romanum of Paul VI in the Language of the African*, Münster 1984; Cesare GIRAUDO, Prière eucharistique et inculturation. Jalons pour le Synod

d'Afrique et de Madagascar, in: *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 116 (1994) 71-200.
20 I am writing this text not having yet the new English Missal translation. There might be some changes in it.
21 In the Ukrainian version, however, the word »dew« remains unchanged.

22 Here I present only this last, fifth directive. One can also find interesting insides in the previous, especially in the fourth, which was concerned with inculturation: *The Roman Liturgy and Inculturation* by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments issued on January 25, 1994.

Translators, too, need to be selected from those who are educated and experienced in such pursuits; the adoption of specific language to liturgical use can decisively affect the development of a given language. Financial realities must also be taken in to account, as must technical requirements for doing the translations and later printing the liturgical texts.

According to the directive, the translation itself should above all be a truthful and exact rendering of the original texts. An exemplary Latin text must be used as the basis, and the translation must retain the dignity, beauty and complete doctrinal matter of the original. This is all the more important in the case of cultures that have only recently accepted faith in Christ. Care must be taken when using terminology from other faiths or other Christian denominations, so as not to lead the reader into misunderstandings or errors.

The document reminds that one must be especially careful when adopting impressions from other religious traditions.

Since liturgical texts must be treated more as the voice of the Church at prayer rather than the voice of individuals or even certain groups, the rendered texts should be free from excessive use of fashionable expressions.

Because liturgical translations also create a certain sacral style in each language, it may so happen that a certain style of speaking they contain differs from that of the everyday language. School texts cannot be used as material for liturgical translations. Therefore, sometimes it is worthwhile to consult the »classic« version in a given language.

Signs and images contained in the texts, as well as matters relating to practice, should speak for themselves – therefore no additional interpretations or clarifications should be given which do not exist in the original texts. The directive gives certain specific norms:

1   Where reference is made to God Almighty or individual persons of the Most Holy Trinity, truth of tradition should be retained and the practice of each language in terms of gender.

2   Special care should be taken to ensure that the compound phrase »Son of Man« be translated precisely and exactly. The great Christological and typological meaning of this phrase makes the retention of this compound throughout the entire translation crucially important – and a grammatical rule should be applied to ensure that this remains the case.

3   The term »fathers«, found in many places in the Bible and liturgical texts put together on the urging of Church authorities should be translated into the masculine form using the proper form in each language, dependent on context – where it applies to patriarchs or the kings of the chosen people in the Old Testament, or to the Church Fathers.

23 Here we see problem in Polish, because in Polish »Church« is of male grammatical gender.
24 Anscar J. CHUPUNGCO, Liturgiam Authenticam: Translation in the Service of Inculturation, in: *Landas. Journal of Loyola School of Theology* (Quezon City-Philippines) 16 (2002) 118-123.
25 Therefore, it is difficult to understand why now Christians in Indonesia are not allowed to use this word for their translations. Political and religious reasons are influencing this.

26 See for instance Kim SANGKEUN, *Strange names of God.* The missionary translation of the Divine Name and the Chinese responses to Mateo Ricci's ›Shangti‹ in late Ming China, 1583-1644, New York 2004.
27 For instance Bernard BOUBA, Notes sur la nomination de Dieu chez les Samba du Nord-Cameroun. Dieu est-il Venèb ou Yaama?, in: *Afrique et Parole* (1973) 39-40, 80-82; Samuel G. KIBIDO, The interaction of the traditional Kikuyu concept of God with the biblical concept, in: *Cahiers des Religions Africaines* 11 (1968) 223-237.
28 See Antonino ROMANO, *Percorsi della catechesi malgascia.* Un contributo alla riflessione teologico-

catechetica, Messina 2003; Manuel Alberto CARVALHO VICENTE, *Un essai de catéchèse inculturée dans le diocèse de Mananjary (Madagascar).* Analyse et évaluation critique du Livre »Kristy Zanaka«, Porto 1999; Kari MASON, The Christian share in Malagasy Literature, in: *The International Review of Missions* 42 (1953) 178-183; Marc R. SPINDLER, Theological Developments in Madagascar, in: *Exchange* 12 (1983), 35, 1-43.
29 Pamela M. BINYON, *The Concepts of ›Spirit‹ and ›Demon‹.* A Study in the Use of different Languages describing the same Phenomena, Frankfurt a. M. 1977.

4 If possible, and where applicable, the word for »Church« should retain its feminine gender instead of the neutral, in each language into which translations are made.23

5 Phrases denoting familial relations or others such as »brother«, »sister«, etc. which, depending on the context are clearly either of the masculine or feminine gender, should be retained as such in the translations.

6 The gender of angels, demons, pagan gods and goddesses should, in so far as possible, be retained in the new language as they were in the original.

In addition, all vague phrases should be avoided. The translations should present the eternal treasure of prayers in a wording that can be understood in the »cultural context« for which they are intended. For this reason, true liturgical prayer is not only shaped by the spirit of the culture, but lends itself to the creation of culture. The law of prayer (*lex orandi*) should always be in agreement with the law of faith (*lex credendi*) and strengthen the faith of Christians. In this sense I am convinced that the work of translator is really a ministry of the prophet, who will give the rule of prayer for so many Christians of a given language.

These rules would seem to give a clear picture of current rendering practices – but calls are growing for a change in approach to the first translations made after Vatican II. At that time, certain norms were presented differently.[24]

5 Translations of elementary theological concepts

The last section of this essay concerns elementary theological concepts used in extra-Biblical and extra-liturgical texts – e. g. basic prayers, catechisms and popular religious songs. This is such a huge field that I will not develop it here, but only highlight few basic insides.

The first question is how to translate the concept of »God« in a Christian understanding, into new languages. From practice it is known that usually the most available word is taken directly from the culture at hand: at times directly from the language, but at other times borrowed and somehow modified. Christian Arabs, before the time of Mohamed (and even until today) use the word »Allah« to denote the God of their faith.[25] Perhaps the best known historical conflict in this area was that of which word to use in Chinese – right from the times of the Jesuit missions.[26]

To summarily present this topic it would be necessary to examine many translations.[27] Here I will only mention one example relating to finding the correct word in the Malagasy language. The oldest catechisms used the term *Zanahary* (a word similar in meaning to »Creator«). However, the experience of Malagasy Christians and the inexact correlation of this term with the concept of a personal God resulted in the later acceptance of the word *Andriamanitra* in the majority of examples.[28] Interesting as well is the problem of translating concepts surrounding spirits.[29]

Beyond the word and explanation of the concept of »God«, the search for adequate translations of terms such as »Church«, »redemption« and »sacraments« would also make for interesting study. Unlike »God«, which basically exists in all languages and cultures (although not necessarily in the sense of personal God revealed in Jesus Christ), these concepts did not exist prior to the arrival of the Gospel in many lands and cultures. These terms had to be created by missionaries and first Christians involved in the work of translation. In many African languages, for example, the words used were formed based on local adaptations from English or French words. Certain languages were open to such borrowings and neologisms; others resisted them.

There are many works on African languages. No less interesting, although less known example might be Native Canadian languages. Here I would like to mention only many interesting catechetical translations into languages of First Nations in Canada undertaken in the 19th and early 20th centuries.[30] But the continent of Asia might be especially interesting field of research because most often there existed languages before the arrival of the first missionaries[31]. This is very interesting field of interaction of these two linguistic »worlds« with their worldviews and philosophies.

6 Conculsion

As can be seen even in this short essay, in speaking about translatability of the Gospel we not only have in mind correct translation from a linguistic perspective. The Gospel is the Good News about the salvation offered to us through Jesus Christ. This truth must be specifically expressed in concepts that may be foreign to the cultures of evangelizing missionaries.[32] As we saw in the biblical example, the term »Messiah« is not the same as »Kyrios« – the term which the Christian community at Antioch used to refer to Jesus. Both terms, however, are correct and accurate. The translatability of the Gospel is more than language exercise; it is also a question of the translatability of faith. The active subject in it is not so much one gifted missionary/linguist but rather the believing community, i. e. local Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we need not only linguistic but also theological criteria for this discernment.

To elaborate a theology of translation of the Gospel Message would be really a prophetic challenge. An introductory examination of this question shows that it would make for an interesting topic to study in-depth.

30 Gaston CARRIÈRE, Contribution des missionnaires à la sauvegarde de la culture indienne, in: *Études Oblates* 31 (1972) 164-204; Victor Egon HANZELI, *Missionary Linguistics in New France*. A Study of Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Descriptions of American Indian Languages, The Hague 1969; Osvaldo F. PARDO, *The Origins of Mexican Catholicism*. Nahua Rituals and Christian Sacraments in Sixteenth-Century Mexico, Ann Arbor 2004.
31 See for instance Peter C. PHAN, *Mission and Catechesis*. Alexandre de Rhodes and Inculturation in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam, Maryknoll 2005.

32 See Kenneth R. ROSS, Vernacular Translation in Christian Mission. The case of David Clement Scott and the Blantyre Mission, 1888-1898, in: *Missionalia* 21 (1993), 1, 5-18; Venance SEENGA, *The Contribution of the Swahili Language to Evangelization in North-East Tanzania 1858-1885*. Reference is made mainly to the Holy Ghost Fathers' work, Romae 1982; Jules GRITTI, *L'expression de la foi dans les cultures humaines*, Paris 1975; Pascal LAHADY, Pour une réinterpretation du christianisme dans les jeunes Églises, in: *Telema* 1 (1978) 39-52; Günter RENCK, *Contextualization of Christianity and Christianization of Language*. A Case Study from the Highlands of Papua-Neuguinea, Erlangen 1990; Francis ANEKWE OBORI, Towards African Model and New Language of Mission, in: *AFER* 43 (2001), 3, 111-133.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag beschäftigt sich mit der Übersetzbarkeit der Bibel in indigene Sprachen. Hierbei handelt es sich um eine wahrhaft prophetische Dimension missionarischer Aktivität, weil die neue Sprache nicht nur die Botschaft zu übersetzen hat, sondern auch neue Konzepte schaffen muss. Einige Wörter, wie etwa *Gott*, existieren in der Mehrzahl der Sprachen, wenngleich auch nicht immer im Sinne eines persönlichen Gotts, der sich in Christus offenbart. Konzepte aber wie Kirche, Gnade oder Sakramente müssen erst erarbeitet werden. Diese Themen wurden mehr und mehr offensichtlich, als man die ersten einheimischen Katechismen und Gebete sowie Lieder schuf, und auch die Übersetzungen der Bibel, sowie neuerdings – nach dem II. Vatikanum – Übersetzungen in Bezug auf die liturgische Praxis.

Abstract

This paper addresses the issue of the translatability of the Bible into indigenous languages. This is truly a prophetic dimension of missionary activity because the new language must not only translate the message, but also create new concepts. Some words such as God exist in the majority of languages, though not always in the sense of a personal God who reveals Himself in Christ. Concepts such as Church, grace, or sacraments, however, still have to be developed. These issues became ever more apparent when one composed the first native catechisms and prayers along with songs and also the translations of the Bible, as well as recently – after the Second Vatican Council – when translations relating to liturgical practice had to be prepared.