

# The Word in West Africa:

An investigation into the relationship between vernacular  
Scriptures and the contextualisation of the gospel in West  
Africa.



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# THE WORD IN WEST AFRICA

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This ebook was originally written as part of the requirements of an MA in Aspects of Biblical Interpretation at London School of Theology. It is presented in this fashion in the hope that it will be of use to others working in the field of Bible translation and Scripture Engagement.

## **Abstract**

The church's mission throughout its history has involved it in constantly bringing the gospel into new situations. The early church struggled with the issue of whether non-Jews must adopt Jewish culture in order to be followers of Jesus, and today the worldwide church faces similar issues in relating Christian faith to a particular cultural context.

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate the relationship between vernacular Scriptures and the contextualisation of the gospel in West Africa. It will begin with an examination of the inherent tension between the universality and the particularity of the gospel as experienced by the early church. It will go on to consider the nature of contextualisation and the translatability of the gospel.

Chapter 2 will explore the West African context, looking at the effects of a colonial hermeneutic of African indigenous cultures on contextualisation alongside the impact of vernacular Scriptures. It will be argued that the transmission of the gospel and the reading of Scripture according to an African rather than a Western frame of reference are more likely to result in successful contextualisation.

In Chapter 3 the role of vernacular Scriptures in preserving the identity of the gospel will be considered and the potential for the Bible translation process to facilitate or to hinder contextualisation will then be addressed. In particular the choice of terms in the translation to represent biblical concepts will be discussed as well as how these relate to traditional African beliefs. Finally the question of who makes the decisions regarding translation and contextualisation will be briefly explored.

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## Introduction

In his article ‘The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture’<sup>1</sup> Professor Andrew Walls describes the fictitious scenario of a ‘long-living, scholarly space visitor’ from another planet making a series of trips to Earth in order to study the earth-religion, Christianity. His first visit is to the original Jerusalem Christians, where he observes that they are all Jews, meeting in the Temple. They circumcise their male children, follow a succession of rituals and love to read old law books. In fact they seem to be one of the ‘denominations’ of Judaism, being distinguished from the other groups by the fact that they identify the figures of Messiah and Son of Man in their law books with the recent prophet-teacher Jesus of Nazareth.

The visitor’s next trip to earth takes place in 325 CE. On this occasion he attends a meeting of Christian leaders from all over the Mediterranean world of which hardly any are Jews. They do not practice circumcision but they read the same law books that the Jerusalem Christians used, in translation. They give equal value to another set of writings which were not yet composed when the Jerusalem Christians met and they tend to use titles such as ‘Son of God’ or ‘Lord’ to refer to Jesus rather than Messiah. Their current theological debate seems to be regarding a different set of words about Jesus, and in what way he as Son is related to the Father.

Three centuries later finds our visitor from space on the coast of Ireland, with a group of monks standing in ice-cold water, reciting the psalms. Another group are setting off in a small boat with a box of beautiful manuscripts to go to various islands where they will try to persuade the inhabitants to give up their worship of nature divinities and find joy in a heavenly kingdom. He discovers that the manuscripts include versions of the same writings that the Mediterranean Christians used. The date they celebrate their main festival, Easter, is important to them, as is their frugal lifestyle and their desire for holiness.

Our space visitor does not return to Earth again until the 1840s, this time he is in London at a meeting about promoting Christianity, commerce and civilization in Africa. There are also speeches about persuading the government to end the slave trade. The meeting began with a reading from the same book (in English translation) and many of the speakers also quote from it. These men also speak about holiness, but look very well fed compared to the Irish monks. They seem very involved in politics and in society in general.

His final visit to Earth is to Lagos, Nigeria, in 1980. A group of people in white robes are dancing through the streets on the way to church, inviting people to come along and experience the power of God. They read from the same book as the other groups and are somewhat vague about what they believe about the relationship between Son and Spirit, but they are joyful and focussed on God’s power to heal.

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<sup>1</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 3–15.

So what is Walls' space traveller to conclude from what he has observed in the different groups he has visited? Could each group be apparently so different to one another and yet still be a part of the phenomenon known as 'Christianity'? Each group seems to have such different concerns to the other groups; their ideas of holiness are expressed in such diverse ways; perhaps it is hard to see any cohesion at all between them. Yet there are signs of continuity: a theme which is visible among each group of Christians is that the person of Jesus Christ has ultimate significance. Other common features are that they all have the same sacred writings and they all use water as well as bread and wine in a special way. Each group also thinks of itself in continuity with the others, despite their differences.<sup>2</sup>

It is hoped that this summary of Walls' rather lengthy illustration will set the scene for the introduction of our topic, bringing a flavour of the issues involved when the gospel enters new contexts. The Christian faith today manifests itself in diverse ways in different cultural and social contexts around the world and yet somehow remains the same faith.

This dissertation will seek to examine the relationship between vernacular Scriptures and the contextualisation of the gospel in West Africa. Beginning with the early church and its reluctance to break out of its Jewish origins, we will go on to consider the inherent tension between the tendency of the church to make the gospel 'feel at home' in a particular context and the equal tendency for the gospel to put Christians at odds with their society and make them aware of their relationship with Christians in other contexts, as fellow members of the family of faith. The relationship between gospel and culture as well as the nature of the Christian faith as 'infinitely translatable' will then be considered.

Chapter 2 will explore the West African context, focussing on the effects of a colonial hermeneutic of African indigenous cultures and languages on contextualisation. The transmission of the gospel according to Western and African frames of reference will be contrasted and the importance of vernacular Scriptures in the setting-up of African Independent Churches will be examined.

The nature of translation and the process of Bible translation will be addressed in Chapter 3 along with the role of vernacular Scriptures. The relationship between African traditional religion and the Christian faith will be discussed, in particular with regard to the translation of biblical terms and the effects of translation choices and the translation process on contextualisation. The role of expatriates and Africans in Bible translation and as agents of contextualisation will also be discussed.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 5–7.

## Chapter 1 The gospel in new cultural contexts

### 1.1 Cross-cultural transmission: from Jews to Gentiles

We will begin our first chapter by looking back at how the first Christians reacted to the gospel entering different cultural contexts, as recounted by Luke<sup>3</sup> in the book of Acts. The first Christian believers in Jerusalem are of course Jewish, continuing to meet in the Temple, to observe the Sabbath and to circumcise their male children. They understand Jesus in terms of Jewish history, presenting him to other Jews as Yahweh's promised Messiah.<sup>4</sup> Although on the day of Pentecost the good news about Jesus is preached to people from many different nations (Acts 2:7–12) it is essentially addressed to Jews and converts to Judaism (2:11, 22, 36). The apostles' focus is on praising God as a community of believers, spreading the word about Jesus and explaining that Jesus is indeed Israel's long-awaited saviour, in fulfilment of the Jewish Scriptures (Acts 4).

As Luke's drama unfolds, and the action moves outwards from Jerusalem, his readers are introduced to Cornelius, a centurion in the Roman city of Caesarea (10:1–11;18). Cornelius and his household are described as 'religious and God-fearing' (10:1), though Cornelius is probably not a proselyte.<sup>5</sup> Whilst he is praying, God speaks to him through an angel in a vision, telling him to send for the apostle Peter at Joppa. Obediently, Cornelius sends off two servants and a devout soldier from his household.

Meanwhile in Joppa the Holy Spirit is speaking to Peter in a vision, preparing him for what is about to happen. The dramatic nature of the vision, and the fact that it is repeated three times, apparently convinces Peter that the traditional view of what is clean and unclean he had grown up with is no longer adequate for the new age, because when the men sent by Cornelius arrive at the house, in obedience to the Holy Spirit, he invites them in to be his guests—a gesture which was later to shock the Jerusalem community.

The next day Peter sets out with the three messengers to go and see Cornelius, who is waiting together with his friends and relatives, eager to hear what Peter has to say. Cornelius explains how God has been speaking to him, and Peter announces to everyone assembled 'the good news of peace through Jesus Christ' (10:36). It is clear that Peter has understood the significance of his vision, since he explains that even though he had been taught that it was not proper for Jews to associate with Gentiles<sup>6</sup>, God has clearly shown him that he should not call anyone impure or unclean. He is even happy to accept Cornelius' hospitality.<sup>7</sup> From our 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective,

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<sup>3</sup> The predominant view of NT scholars is that the author of the 3<sup>rd</sup> gospel is also the author of the book of Acts. We will use Luke as a shorthand to refer to the author of Acts.

<sup>4</sup> Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process*, 67.

<sup>5</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 23; Marshall, *Acts*, n.p.

<sup>6</sup> This teaching was not in OT law, but became part of Jewish tradition since the return from exile.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce, *Acts*, n.p. Bruce points out that for a Jew, entering a Gentile house is far more of a risk than receiving Gentiles in one's home: 'That Peter should provide them with bed and board was in itself a liberal gesture toward Gentiles, though it did not involve the same risk of ceremonial pollution as his acceptance of hospitality from a Gentile would involve.'

knowing the history of how the church was to develop, we find it hard to put ourselves in Peter's place and appreciate the enormity of the shift in thinking regarding Gentiles that he was being asked to make! Ogden describes Peter's confession in Acts 10:34–35 as 'a remarkable statement of God's universal concerns that cut across the narrow nationalistic views of the early Jewish Christian believers.'<sup>8</sup>

What happens next is even more extraordinary! As Peter is speaking to those assembled at Cornelius's house, the Holy Spirit comes on all those listening, to the great surprise of the Jewish believers who had accompanied Peter (10:44–45). This leaves Peter in no doubt that Cornelius and his household should be baptised as believers. If God has shown his approval of these believers by sending his Spirit, even though they are Gentiles, then who is he to argue? So Peter goes ahead and baptises them in the name of Jesus Christ and then stays with Cornelius for a few days.

Luke's view of the conversion of Cornelius as a pivotal event is obvious in the way he records it, devoting all of chapter 10 and two thirds of chapter 11 to telling the story in great detail, repeating it again in shortened form in chapter 15.<sup>9</sup> Yet immediately afterwards, he goes on to recount an incident in Antioch, capital of the Roman province of Syria, which was to become even more far-reaching, described by Walls as 'the first real encounter of the Christian faith with the pagan world' and as 'one of the most critical events in Christian history.'<sup>10</sup> Some of the Hellenistic Jewish believers who had left Jerusalem because of persecution after Stephen's death had scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Luke now tells us (11:19) that some had gone as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. Although they had been preaching only to Jews, some of the men from Cyprus and Cyrene started preaching to Gentiles in Antioch. What is striking here, following on from the Cornelius episode, is not just that the gospel is being preached to Gentiles, but that Jesus is being presented as Lord rather than Messiah in this context, using Greek patterns of thought rather than Jewish ones, as Walls explains:

In all previous proclamations, Jesus had been presented as the Messiah, the Saviour of Israel. In this new, Hellenistic-pagan context, he is given the title *Kyrios*, the title Hellenistic pagans gave to their cult divinities. One may have expected (did any of their more cautious contemporaries predict?) that the result would be the recognition of the Lord Jesus as one more cult divinity alongside the Lord Serapis or the Lord Osiris. The major reason this did not happen was undoubtedly that those pagans who responded were brought into a community where the Septuagint was constantly read, and the biblical associations of *Kyrios* penetrated their minds and attached themselves to the cult divinity title. But in the first encounter, the loading of *Kyrios* with the cult divinity idea was vital. It is doubtful whether unacculturated pagans in the Antiochene world could have understood the significance of Jesus in any other way.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ogden, "Translation as a Theologising Task," 310.

<sup>9</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 52.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 34–35.

In other words, this was a radical move: presenting the gospel in terms that moved beyond Judaism, terms which would be more culturally familiar to Gentiles in Antioch. Bevans and Schroeder also comment on the significance of this shift, seeing it as a sign that the believers had seen Jesus' salvific role as one that went far beyond Judaism and was valid for all.<sup>12</sup>

It seems, too, that this development at Antioch is when the community of believers first become conscious of their identity as 'church'<sup>13</sup>; being also the place where disciples are called Christians for the first time (11:26). The community grows rapidly and is remarkable in that it is neither Jewish nor traditionally Gentile, but constitutes a third entity comprised of Jews and Gentiles associating with one another and eating together.<sup>14</sup> From this point onwards the gospel begins to be preached intentionally to Gentiles, and we see it start to break out of its Jewish milieu; or do we? As the news spreads to the apostles and other believers in Jerusalem that Gentiles are receiving the word of God, Peter is criticised for eating with Gentiles (11:2–3) and required to explain himself. Barnabas is sent to Antioch to check what is happening there. There is rejoicing among the Jewish believers that Gentiles are responding to the gospel, yet at the same time concern about the implications. As a result of this new development the early church is confronted with a difficult issue: the fundamental question of whether Gentiles should adopt Jewish customs when they become believers.

Now the Jewish believers are familiar with the established procedure whereby Gentiles who acknowledged God could be adopted into Israel as proselytes, being circumcised as a mark of the covenant and also baptised.<sup>15</sup> It is not surprising therefore that we find Jewish believers insisting that Gentile converts need to adopt Jewish cultural norms when they come to faith in Christ. The apostle James sends men from Jerusalem to investigate the situation in the Antioch church and report back. (Galatians 2:12f). They demand that the Gentile believers be circumcised (Acts 15:1), refusing to eat with them unless they agree to this. Even Peter, who, following his vision, had until then been sharing fully with the Gentile believers, is intimidated by the brothers from Jerusalem so that he also withdraws from the Gentile Christians. Paul and Barnabas on the other hand completely disagree that the Gentile believers should be circumcised.

The crisis threatens to split the church and so it is decided that Paul and Barnabas should be sent to Jerusalem, accompanied by some of the local believers, in an attempt to resolve the matter. We read in Acts 15 that after much discussion during what would become known as the 'Apostolic Council'<sup>16</sup> it is finally agreed that the Gentiles should not be required to be circumcised or observe the torah. James concludes that since God has called a people<sup>17</sup> out for himself from among the

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<sup>12</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, 26.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>14</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 43–44.

<sup>15</sup> Walls, "Old Athens and New Jerusalem," 147.

<sup>16</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, 28–29.

<sup>17</sup> Bevans and Schroeder note James' use of Greek *laos*, generally used to translate the Hebrew 'am, referring to Israel's identity as God's chosen people. 29.

Gentiles, as he promised, and that they are saved through the Lord Jesus just as Jews are, then the Jewish believers ‘should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.’ (15:19).

This landmark decision of the Apostolic Council to abandon the proselyte model in favour of conversion demonstrates a realisation that the gospel can cross cultures. This must have seemed like a drastic change of paradigm to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem, who were reluctant to accept that it was possible to separate Jewish culture and Christian faith. It is not surprising, as Ogden remarks, that not everyone was completely at ease about the implications of the Council’s decision.<sup>18</sup> It would presumably have been less of a problem for the diaspora Jews who were already accustomed to associating with people from other cultures. From now on, therefore, it would no longer be acceptable for one group of believers to impose their culture on another. Indeed, the apostle Paul is adamant that forcing Gentile believers to become Jewish when they come to faith in Christ would actually be a distortion of the gospel, and in his letter to the Galatians he uses the strongest of language to condemn this approach (5:12). The Galatian Christians should be allowed to express their faith according to their own, non-Jewish context.

Yet whenever the gospel is communicated cross-culturally, there is always the possibility that the message will be misunderstood, and this is what we see happening with Paul and Barnabas in Lystra in Acts 14. Paul tries to get his message across, but when he heals a man who has been crippled from birth the people immediately conclude that he and Barnabas must be the Greek gods Hermes and Zeus! The confusion is probably partly due to language issues, (presumably Paul is speaking Greek and the people Laodicean) but also because people are trying to make sense of Paul’s preaching and actions in the only way they can: in terms of what they already know. It is inevitable that people will interpret events in the light of the presuppositions of their worldview. Of course when Paul realises what is happening, he re-presents his case in terms his audience can more easily understand, seeking to correct their faulty presuppositions. In other words, when the message is not expressed appropriately for a particular context, this can result in a distortion of the gospel.

In Athens, however, (Acts 17) Paul is more sensitive to the context in how he explains the Good News. This time he starts with what is already known to his audience, that is the altars where they worship various gods, and goes on to incorporate the altar ‘to an Unknown God’ in his presentation of Jesus Christ, using this as a bridge to the new information he wants them to understand.

## **1.2 Contextualisation**

The crisis experienced by the early church with regard to Jews and Gentiles is an example of the tension between two opposing tendencies of the gospel which Walls describes as the ‘indigenizing principle’ and the ‘pilgrim principle’. It is the essence of the gospel that, in Christ, God accepts people where they are, as members of a particular family, group and society. As they learn to live as Christians in their own social and cultural setting, there is the desire to identify their faith with the particulars

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<sup>18</sup> Ogden, 310

of their culture, to make the church ‘a place to feel at home.’ This is the ‘indigenizing principle’.<sup>19</sup> In order to respond to the demands of the gospel in particular contexts the church needs to be ‘continually “reinventing” itself as it struggles with and approaches new situations, new peoples, new cultures and new questions.’<sup>20</sup> It would seem that the very existence of Christianity is linked to its ability to cross generational and cultural boundaries.<sup>21</sup>

But throughout the history of the church there has been another force at work, in tension with the ‘indigenizing principle’, which is the ‘pilgrim principle’. This principle brings the realisation that being faithful to Christ will put Christians out of step with their own culture, because God in Christ wants to transform not only them, but also their culture and their society. It is also this principle which makes Christians aware of their association with believers from different cultures as members of the family of faith along with believers from different times who all share an adoptive past, including not only the history of the Church but also the history of Israel.<sup>22</sup>

This is the challenge facing the church: how to make the gospel feel at home in its new context, but not to the extent that no one else can live there!<sup>23</sup> Although the term ‘contextualisation’ was not coined until 1972,<sup>24</sup> this is the process we see happening in the early church as the gospel crosses cultures and the church seeks to resolve the tension between the particularity and universality of the gospel.

Bevans and Schroeder argue that a balance is maintained by the church holding onto the ‘constants’ of the faith whilst also recognizing that these constants will take on a different shape in different contexts (as they did in Walls’ illustration above). This envisages a process of contextualisation which involves the church in dialogue with the context about the meaning of the gospel in that context. This is a more radical process than indigenization (a simple re-clothing of the gospel in the traditional forms of another culture).<sup>25</sup>

Whiteman offers a helpful definition:

Contextualization attempts to communicate the Gospel in word and deed and to establish the church in ways that make sense to people within their local cultural context, presenting Christianity in such a way that it meets people's deepest needs and penetrates their worldview, thus allowing them to follow Christ and remain within their own culture.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, 31

<sup>21</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, 31; Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 8–9.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> The Lausanne Movement, “Willowbank Report.”

<sup>25</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, 397.

<sup>26</sup> Whiteman, “Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge.” 3.

A brief look at the relationship between gospel and culture will be useful in order to understand the nature of contextualisation more clearly. Vanhoozer says that the most common strategy for moving from the biblical text to the contemporary context is to isolate the timeless kernel of the gospel from behind the cultural husk. Then one can abstract the principle from Scripture and apply it to the new context. He goes on to point out various weaknesses with this method, not least of which is that those who use it assume that what is contextualised is a culture-free principle, whereas what is actually imported is a culturally conditioned understanding of a biblical principle.<sup>27</sup> We have shown that the gospel is not culture-bound, but this does not mean that it can be isolated from culture in some 'pure' form.<sup>28</sup>

The gospel is neither a-cultural nor supra-cultural, but is of transcultural significance. The Scriptures which bear witness to it are also transcultural, in that they address every culture, yet at the same time they are inculturated; if this were not the case we would not be able to understand them.<sup>29</sup> The Scriptures were written in a variety of cultural settings by people from different perspectives (giving us four rather than a single gospel account) over a long period of time.<sup>30</sup> God shows that he is prepared to accommodate himself by revealing himself in the terms of his hearers' culture in Old and New Testaments, as Enns observes:

To be understood, he condescends to the conventions and conditions of those to whom he is revealing himself. The word of God cannot be kept safe from the rough-and-tumble drama of human history. For the Bible to be the word of God implies the exact opposite.<sup>31</sup>

So although the gospel is not bound to any single culture, it is not a universal truth which can exist apart from cultural forms: it can only be exemplified in terms of one culture or another.<sup>32</sup> Contextualisation therefore is not an optional extra but a gospel imperative, involving a dialogue between biblical text and context.

### 1.3 Translatability

Whilst many of the first Jewish Christians struggled with the idea of Gentile believers not adopting Jewish customs, the same cannot be said about their attitude to language. Already in Jesus' day the Hebrew Old Testament was being used in translation in the form of the Septuagint. In Acts chapter 2 we read that, by a miracle, as the apostles explained the gospel, those listening heard the message in their own languages. This fact is so significant that it appears three times in the telling of the story. From the very beginning the apostles (who were already functioning in a multi-lingual environment) did not question the appropriateness of communicating the gospel in different languages, according to their audience. Indeed, when the New Testament

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<sup>27</sup> Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 315–316.

<sup>28</sup> Sanneh, "Gospel and Culture."

<sup>29</sup> Vanhoozer, 314.

<sup>30</sup> Kim, *Joining in with the Spirit*, 263.

<sup>31</sup> Enns, *Inspiration and incarnation*, 109.

<sup>32</sup> Vanhoozer, 323.

writers came to record the momentous events regarding the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, it is striking that they chose *koine* Greek as their medium, providing a record of Jesus' words, not in Aramaic as he would have spoken them, but already in translation! It is perhaps surprising that we have so few words of Jesus in Aramaic, yet the writers evidently did not think that important and saw their message as totally translatable.

Walls sees translation as the way God chooses to act in order to bring salvation to humanity:

Christian faith rests on a divine act of translation: "the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Any confidence we have in the translatability of the Bible rests on that prior act of translation. There is a history of translation of the Bible because there was a translation of the Word into flesh.<sup>33</sup>

The Incarnation involved the divine being translated into humanity; not just generalised humanity, but a person in a particular place and time: 'Christ is not an abstract principle, but comes fully embodied and enculturated as a first century Mediterranean Jewish male.'<sup>34</sup> It is a kind of translation of God's Word into the 'vernacular' context of human history, so we can say that the Incarnation itself is the ultimate paradigm for contextualisation.<sup>35</sup>

Bible translation can also be seen as a demonstration of the incarnation of the gospel into a culture. It is not an end in itself but a means of bringing into being communities worshipping God and living the message in their own cultural context:

Bible translation aims at releasing the Word about Christ so that it can reach all aspects of a specific linguistic and cultural context, so that Christ can live within that context, in the persons of his followers, as thoroughly at home as he once did in the culture of first-century Jewish Palestine.<sup>36</sup>

Having established the cross-cultural nature of the gospel and its translatability, the next chapter will move on to discuss the gospel in the context of West Africa.

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<sup>33</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 26.

<sup>34</sup> Yong, "Culture," 85.

<sup>35</sup> Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 322.

<sup>36</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 29.

## Chapter 2 The gospel and African indigenous cultures

### 2.1 A colonial hermeneutic of African language and culture

The Christian gospel first arrived in parts of North Africa soon after Pentecost<sup>37</sup> and within a few centuries the northern third of Africa as well as Ethiopia and much of Sudan became predominantly Christian.<sup>38</sup> By contrast, Christianity came much later to West Africa, the first missionary activity reaching there in the fifteenth century.<sup>39</sup> Whilst early Christian Africa had been evangelised initially from the eastern Mediterranean, modern Christian Africa is, according to Mbiti: ‘largely the child of evangelization (and sometimes colonization) from Europe and America.’<sup>40</sup> Therefore, in order to examine the relationship between vernacular Scriptures and the contextualisation of the gospel, the effects of a colonial hermeneutic on indigenous languages and cultures in West Africa will first be examined.

During much of the colonial period, European Christians were in no doubt that their faith was superior to those of other nations. This led to an assumption of cultural superiority which became particularly pronounced in the nineteenth century.<sup>41</sup> The Christian faith and European culture became so entwined that colonists and missionaries alike saw indigenous Africans as ‘uncivilized’ and in need of education as well as the gospel in order to become ‘civilized’.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the concept of ‘culture’ as a human universal only developed with the emergence of the discipline of anthropology towards the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>43</sup>

Both Catholic and Protestant missionaries often identified with the imperialistic goals of their national governments, believing Christianity was intended to become ‘territorial’,<sup>44</sup> so that colonisation and Christianisation went hand-in-hand.<sup>45</sup> According to Bosch, this was particularly the case in European countries where the church was ‘established’, making it difficult to differentiate between political, cultural and religious activities.<sup>46</sup> Since historically Western Christendom saw itself as the ‘normative cultural form of faith’, it was assumed that when Africans became Christians they would also become culturally European.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Acts 2 list includes people from ‘Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene’. Pobee and Ositelu, 14-15.

<sup>38</sup> Mbiti, *Bible and theology in African Christianity*, 1; Pobee and Ositelu, *African initiatives in Christianity*, 1.

<sup>39</sup> Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, 20–21.

<sup>40</sup> Mbiti, *idem*, 7

<sup>41</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 290–291.

<sup>42</sup> Yong, “Culture,” 83.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>44</sup> Guder, *The continuing conversion of the church*, 14.

<sup>45</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 234–235.

<sup>46</sup> Bosch, 275

<sup>47</sup> Guder, 14-15

Integral to the cultural imperialism which accompanied colonial rule in West Africa, was the imposition of European languages. Policies and practices were designed not only to promote the colonial language, but also to denigrate local African languages. Similar policies were subsequently adopted by national governments, in an effort to unify various ethnic groups into a national identity.<sup>48</sup> Hill describes one such practice which was frequently used in Francophone West Africa to punish and ridicule children at school if they spoke their mother tongue rather than French, the national language imposed by the colonial power. School children in Ivory Coast were forced to wear a humiliating necklace of snail shells if they were caught speaking their own language rather than French at school. They could pass the necklace on if they found a classmate speaking their mother tongue, and at the end of the day the child wearing the necklace was beaten. Thus ridicule and physical pain served to reinforce the message that their language was inferior and was to be loathed!<sup>49</sup>

It is perhaps not surprising that the effects of such policies were still evident in Ivory Coast in recent times. Hill observes that in a sociolinguistic survey she carried out in 1996 among university students in Abidjan,<sup>50</sup> when asked which languages they spoke many did not include their mother tongue or any African language in their response, not seeing them as real languages, citing only European ones. This was also the experience of the writer and her husband working among the Kouya people of Ivory Coast. Kouya people assured us that their language was not a 'proper' language like French or English, with rules and grammar. As research progressed, our co-workers and neighbours were delighted to find that their language could be written down, and that it did indeed have its own rich and complex grammar!<sup>51</sup>

These practices were not limited to Ivory Coast or to West Africa. Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o remembers a similar practice when he was at school.<sup>52</sup> Pupils found speaking Gikuyu rather than English in school suffered corporal punishment and were made to carry a metal plate around their neck with an inscription such as 'I am stupid' or 'I am a donkey'. This process is what he refers to as the 'cultural bomb':

The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest

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<sup>48</sup> Hill, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads*, 183.

<sup>49</sup> Hill, 184

<sup>50</sup> Ivory Coast's commercial capital.

<sup>51</sup> We worked in the Kouya Language Project in central Ivory Coast, as members of the team involved in language analysis, literacy and translation of the New Testament. (1988–2000).

<sup>52</sup> He was being educated in his native, Gikuyu, but then after the declaration of the state of emergency in Kenya in 1952, those schools run by the 'patriotic nationalists' were taken over by the colonial regime and from then onwards, English was imposed as the medium of education. *Decolonising the mind*, 11.

removed from themselves; for instance, with other peoples' languages rather than their own.<sup>53</sup>

This colonial hermeneutic which presupposed the superiority of European cultures and languages resulted in a devaluing of African indigenous cultures and languages.<sup>54</sup>

Hiebert observes that from approximately 1800 to 1950 was an era of non-contextualisation of the gospel by most Protestant missionaries. They rejected the beliefs and practices of the people they served, labelling them as 'pagan'. Many missionaries implemented this doctrine of the *tabula rasa*: that is they believed there was nothing good about the traditional culture which could provide a foundation on which to build the Christian faith, therefore it needed to be 'swept away' and replaced by Christianity.<sup>55</sup> Consequently many Africans saw Christianity as a foreign religion, because they were taught that becoming a Christian meant rejecting one's own traditional culture and accepting Western cultural values.<sup>56</sup> Ingleby points out the irony of the situation:

It is ironic that the missionaries believed that their Southern brothers and sisters were trapped in an alien culture and needed delivering from it. The truth so often was that it was the missionaries who were culture bound. They could not see that they had brought with them a Western worldview from which they found it very difficult to escape.<sup>57</sup>

Reinforcing the idea that non-Western cultures were dispensable was the emergence of the theory of cultural evolution in Europe. If other cultures could be labelled 'primitive' then they could be ignored in favour of 'more advanced' cultures. Hiebert suggests that non-contextualisation of the gospel in Africa made sense to people who believed that all cultures were evolving and hence were 'different stages of development of the same thing'.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, they reasoned, why investigate these cultures or attempt to contextualise the gospel in these so-called primitive cultures if they were in the process of dying out?

## 2.2 Importance of the mother tongue

Sadly colonisation and Christianity were closely linked.<sup>59</sup> But the story of cultural imperialism and 'mission as cultural diffusion'<sup>60</sup> is not the whole story. Indeed many nineteenth century missionaries greatly valued the Africans they had come to serve, as well as their language and culture, defending the rights of the indigenous peoples and speaking out against slavery for example. In fact a number found themselves at odds

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<sup>53</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the mind*, 3.

<sup>54</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 6–10. Bediako states that the 19<sup>th</sup> century European image of Africans being inherently inferior to Europeans did not originate with the missionary movement.

<sup>55</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, 48–49.

<sup>56</sup> Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization"; Pobee and Ositelu, *African initiatives in Christianity*, 9.

<sup>57</sup> Ingleby, *Beyond Empire*, 177.

<sup>58</sup> Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," 105.

<sup>59</sup> Dube, "Reading for Decolonization," 202–203. She cites Pringle, missionary in 1820: 'let us subdue Savage Africa (...) by Christian truth'.

<sup>60</sup> Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 174–175.

with the colonial powers regarding land and other issues, as Bevans and Schroeder point out:

So, while these missionaries were primarily shaped by their context, with their blind spots and superiority complexes, their general concern for indigenous peoples often provided a much-needed *prophetic* conscience to the colonial movement.<sup>61</sup>

This concern has clearly been demonstrated by many European missionaries in their attitude to indigenous languages and cultures. Recognising that seeking to communicate the gospel to West Africans in a foreign language was ineffective, they invested time and effort in mastering local languages and understanding African indigenous cultures, and many also committed themselves to vernacular Bible translation.<sup>62</sup>

Firstly, they discovered that the mother tongue was the most effective language for evangelism. This seems so obvious and yet it is vital: for someone to really understand a message, it needs to be in a language they understand well. Secondly it was recognised that a message as significant as the gospel needs to be expressed in the language which is most personal to the hearer, which is usually the mother tongue. Most Africans are at least bilingual and often multilingual, using different languages for school, home or in the market etc. Each language will have its domain, but the most significant remains the mother tongue. The veteran missionary, Edwin Smith, puts it like this:

To express the dear and intimate things which are the very breath and substance of life a man will fall back on the tongue he learnt not at school, but in the house—how, he remembers not. He may bargain in the other, or pass examinations in it, but he will pray in his home speech. If you wish to reach his heart you will address him in that language.<sup>63</sup>

Ghanaian theologian, Kwame Bediako believes that the mother tongue plays a vital role in a person's Christian experience. He argues that what happened at Pentecost gives an important biblical and theological warrant for taking vernacular languages seriously:

The ability to hear in one's own language and to express in one's own language one's response to the message which one receives, must lie at the heart of all authentic religious encounter with the divine realm. Language itself becomes, then, not merely a social or a psychological phenomenon, but a theological one as well. Though every human language has its limitations in this connection, yet it is through language, and for each person, through their mother tongue, that the Spirit of God speaks to convey divine communication at its deepest to the human community.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, 236.

<sup>62</sup> Mojola, "Bible Translation in Africa," 141.

<sup>63</sup> Smith, 1930, 8, cited by Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 108.

<sup>64</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 60.

It is striking that in the Acts 2 account 'in our own languages' is mentioned three times. For Bediako, it is highly significant that God speaks to men and women in their own language: 'Divine communication is never in a sacred, esoteric, hermetic language; rather it is such that "all of us hear (...) in our own languages (...) the wonders of God".'<sup>65</sup>

The Archbishop of Bamenda, Cameroon, expresses the importance of the mother tongue like this:

The mother tongue of any given people, no matter how small, is a personal possession of supreme importance for which they nourish the strongest and most deeply felt loyalty. The culture of any given community is embedded, so to speak, in the language or mother tongue of that community, for language is culture. The mother tongue constitutes the warp and woof of the mental life of a given people.<sup>66</sup>

In other words, the mother tongue plays a vital role in Christian experience, both for the individual believer and the community. Surely the message of the gospel can never be fully contextualised in a particular culture unless it is heard and received in the language spoken by that community, because language and culture are totally interconnected.<sup>67</sup>

### 2.3 Importance of vernacular Scriptures

Since the mother tongue is so important for Christian believers in enabling them to plant the gospel in the soil of their own culture, then it follows that they also need the Scriptures in that language. For those who speak another language into which the Bible has already been translated, there will be the possibility of learning via that medium. But until Christians have the Bible in their own language, their understanding and experience of their faith will inevitably be limited, and the churches will be hampered in their task of discipling as well as evangelism. Mbiti says this lack of mother tongue Scriptures can create a feeling among a group of Christians that they have only been given parts of the biblical truth and the rest has been hidden from them. Receiving vernacular Scriptures however, can bring about a profound change:

But then comes the translation of the Bible either in full or in part, and with it the doors swing open. People now feel that they are automatically initiated into the mysteries of the biblical truth. (...) They now have full access to the word of God. Now God speaks their language—and the Bible is now their Bible. (...) In this way, the Bible in the local language becomes the most directly influential single factor in shaping the life of the church in Africa.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>66</sup> The Archbishop of Bamenda, Cameroon, West Africa. (Quoted on the OneBook website: [www.onebook.ca](http://www.onebook.ca))

<sup>67</sup> Although language is an essential element of contextualisation it is no guarantee of successful contextualisation as we shall see below.

<sup>68</sup> Mbiti, 27–28.

When the Scriptures are translated into a particular language for the first time, the way is opened up for the speakers of that language to have direct access to God's word. In the Preface to the King James Version of the Bible, making the riches of the Bible accessible to people in a language they can understand is said to be like opening up Laban's well for people to drink (Genesis 29:10), or opening a sealed book (Isaiah 29:11.) It is translation, the Preface says, 'that openeth the window, to let in the light.'<sup>69</sup> For Christians and non-Christians alike, the Bible in their language is a significant milestone.

Vernacular Scriptures, then, are highly significant whether for the English in the seventeenth century or for Africans in more recent times. First of all we must not underestimate the psychological importance of a people having the Bible in their language;<sup>70</sup> this is particularly the case for those Africans who had been told by colonisers or missionaries that their language and culture was of no value.

The converse may well be experienced by those living in a context where there is no translation of the Bible in their language. If a language barrier has to be crossed in order to hear the gospel, this has implications for how people view God. In the case of West Africa, in areas where the Scriptures are only available to people via European languages (English, French or Portuguese) or possibly a trade language, then God may be seen as distant and Christianity perceived as a foreign religion of little or no relevance.<sup>71</sup>

However one of the distinctive features of Christianity is that it is 'infinitely translatable' as we have seen above. Followers of Islam are obliged to use Arabic whether they understand it or not, but the Christian faith is unique as 'the only world religion that is transmitted without the language or originating culture of its founder.'<sup>72</sup> Since Christianity has no holy language, no one language or culture is privileged, neither is any excluded so that 'the sacred message may legitimately be entrusted to the forms of everyday life.'<sup>73</sup> There need be no language barrier with regard to the God of the Bible, because he comes to us: first of all through the Incarnation, as God was translated into a human being, embodied in the Jewish culture, and subsequently as the message and presence of Jesus are translated into the diverse languages and cultures of the world.

## 2.4 Postcolonial criticism and Bible translation

In his book *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, Sugirtharajah asserts that throughout history, texts have been assigned meanings to legitimise different causes or theories, this being the case particularly with regard to ancient and sacred texts such as the Bible. He says the purpose of postcolonial criticism is to highlight

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<sup>69</sup> Preface to the King James Version, 1611.

<sup>70</sup> Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa*, 127. He says it is incalculable.

<sup>71</sup> This was our experience in Ivory Coast: many Kouya people referred to Christianity as the 'white man's religion' (-*tuabhuu gbv*, literally 'white man's affair'). In 1988 Kouya Christians numbered less than 100. Those who could read French used French Bibles.

<sup>72</sup> Sanneh, *Whose religion is Christianity?*, 98.

<sup>73</sup> Sanneh, "Christian Missions," 332.

and scrutinise the ideologies which texts embody as they relate to colonialism.<sup>74</sup> In Chapter 6, 'Blotting the Masters Copy: Locating Bible Translations', Sugirtharajah investigates the connection between colonialism and Bible translation. He sees biblical translation as 'implicated in diverse imperialist projects', acting as a 'mediating agency between conquest and conversion'.<sup>75</sup> Yet his attitude to missionary translators in the colonial period is ambivalent; he seems undecided whether to admire or ridicule their efforts. He concedes on the one hand that the translated Gikuyu Bible provided ammunition for Gikuyu women fighting female circumcision when they discovered from the translation that God had commanded Abraham to be circumcised but not Sarah. On the other hand he finds them guilty of:

(...) moulding the thinking of indigenous people to fit with Christian thought patterns and thus prescribing alien ways of conceptualizing language and displacing religious and linguistic conventions.<sup>76</sup>

He says they attempted to 'baptise indigenous languages into a *Christian sense*' because they saw them as 'sullied with pagan notions'.<sup>77</sup> This may be valid to some extent; we have already seen that the *tabula rasa* approach to African languages and cultures was not helpful in understanding how the Christian faith could be expressed in these languages. But Sugirtharajah's view of the effects of translation is also limited, portraying languages as static rather than dynamic and ignoring the capacity for people to adjust their language when incorporating new ideas into their worldview.<sup>78</sup>

Of course, Sugirtharajah has his own presuppositions about missionary motives and about the Bible as a text.<sup>79</sup> His view that missionaries were capable of manipulating indigenous languages for their own ends, though, tends to portray Africans as helpless and impotent and as mere recipients of Christianity, whereas the evidence shows that Africans were themselves agents of change.<sup>80</sup> It is interesting to note that a number of voices calling for a reinterpretation of the nineteenth century missionary period belong to non-Western scholars who themselves became Christians as a result of missionary activity.<sup>81</sup> One such scholar, Lamin Sanneh, from the Gambia, observes from his own experience that Western Christians seem to have developed a guilt complex about missions, becoming embarrassed when they meet converts from Asia

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<sup>74</sup> Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 79.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>78</sup> This will be explored in more detail in the next chapter when we discuss the translation of biblical concepts.

<sup>79</sup> Sugirtharajah, "Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation," 67; Dube, "Reading for Decolonization." Dube claims that the Bible was one of the Western texts used to legitimise imperialism (302-303). However it is not within the scope of this dissertation to examine whether or not the text of the Bible itself sanctions colonisation and subjugation but to examine the effects of a colonial hermeneutic on indigenous cultures and on the way vernacular Bible translation was carried out.

<sup>80</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, 237; Sanneh, *Whose religion is Christianity?* 10; Maxey, 35.

<sup>81</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, 237

or Africa, feeling guilty about the attitude of cultural superiority employed by some Western missionaries in the past.<sup>82</sup> Sanneh says we should not deny the positive contribution that the missionaries' culture made to other societies, many Africans for example benefiting hugely in terms of education and health care alongside hearing the gospel. But we must avoid seeing them as passive in this process: 'to view Africans as a victimised projection of Western ill will is to leave them with too little initiative to be arbiters of their destiny and meaningful players on the historical stage.'<sup>83</sup> Indeed, Africans were not 'passive recipients' but rather were active in the way they incorporated Christianity into their changing world.<sup>84</sup>

What Sugirtharajah fails to mention is that in many cases it was Africans themselves and not missionaries who were actually doing translation. As early as 1827 the Fourah Bay College<sup>85</sup> was set up in Sierra Leone by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) to provide further education and training for African Christian leaders. The Society's leaders were far-sighted enough to realise that Bible translation into African languages was key if the churches were to become independent, and that this would require African Christians to be trained in biblical languages so that they could become involved in translation.<sup>86</sup>

Sanneh argues that much of the Western scholarship on Christian missions seems, on the grounds of motive, to fault 'the entire missionary enterprise as being part of the machinery of Western cultural imperialism.'<sup>87</sup> He says critics argue on the one hand that when missionaries translate the Bible into African languages they manipulate those languages and the translated Bible becomes a colonial tool; on the other hand if they do not translate the Bible then they are imposing a colonial message via a colonial language. So, is it translation or non-translation which makes a religion colonial? Surely it cannot be both!<sup>88</sup>

Rather than scrutinise missionary motives, Sanneh prefers to examine the effects of translation, observing two major outcomes of vernacular Bible translation in West Africa. The first is the stimulus it provided to local languages, including the creation of the very first vernacular alphabet in many cases. Far from being destroyers of non-Western cultures (an accusation missionaries have repeatedly faced<sup>89</sup>) missionaries involved in vernacular Bible translation, working with local colleagues, have helped to preserve endangered languages through careful and systematic analysis and documentation. Unwritten languages have been reduced to writing, alphabets created

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<sup>82</sup> Sanneh, "Christian Missions."

<sup>83</sup> Sanneh, "The Yogi and the Commissar," 135.

<sup>84</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, 237–239.

<sup>85</sup> It eventually went on to offer the first university education in tropical Africa, awarding degrees from the University of Durham. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process*, 157.

<sup>86</sup> Henry Venn, who later became the leader of CMS championed the 'three-self principles' for African churches (self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating). Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process*, 162–163.

<sup>87</sup> Sanneh, "Christian Missions," 2.

<sup>88</sup> Sanneh, *Whose religion is Christianity?*, 107.

<sup>89</sup> Mentioned by Bevans and Schroeder, 237; Sanneh, "Christian missions", 7.

and literacy work established, as well as anthropological research undertaken.<sup>90</sup> This work often sparked local people's interest in recording accounts of local history, and in collecting and writing down indigenous stories and wisdom. These oral traditions, some of which were being lost, could now be preserved in written form, for, as the Malian writer Amadou Hampâté Bâ declared: 'En Afrique, quand un vieillard meurt, c'est une bibliothèque qui brûle.' ('Every time an old man dies in Africa, it is as if a library has burnt down.')

The second major outcome of vernacular translation described by Sanneh is probably a consequence which the missionaries had not anticipated:

Armed with a written vernacular Scripture, converts to Christianity invariably called into question the legitimacy of all schemes of foreign domination—cultural, political and religious. Here was an acute paradox: the vernacular Scriptures and the wider cultural and linguistic enterprise on which translation rested provided the means and occasion for arousing a sense of national pride, yet it was the missionaries—foreign agents—who were the creators of that entire process. I am convinced that this paradox decisively undercuts the alleged connection often drawn between missions and colonialism.<sup>92</sup>

Rather than Bible translation being a means of missionaries retaining control over their converts, with regard to how the Christian faith should be appropriated in their context, as Sugirtharajah implies, vernacular Scriptures actually provided African Christians with the opportunity to become *less* dependent on the missionary. Having direct access to Scripture meant they were now in a position to scrutinise missionary behaviour as well as criticise their colonial masters.<sup>93</sup>

Barrett also highlights the importance of vernacular Scriptures in this regard, noting the psychological importance of a people group having the Bible in their own language, as well as the increased independence which this afforded the speakers, in terms of biblical interpretation:

Up to this point the missions had had the same absolute control over the scriptures as they had exercised over the Church. They alone had access to the Hebrew and Greek sources; their interpretation was final. But with the publication of African translations, a momentous change took place: it now became possible to differentiate between missions and scriptures. Through these scriptures, God, Africans perceived, was addressing them in the vernacular in which was enshrined the soul of their people; (...). The vernacular scriptures therefore provided an independent standard of reference that African Christians were quick to seize on.<sup>94</sup>

Having access to vernacular Scriptures, he argues, enabled African Christians to come to their own conclusions about contentious issues which had been points of conflict

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<sup>90</sup> Sanneh, *ibid.*, 6. Eg J G Christaller, Swiss missionary to the Gold Coast during the 1870-80s. He was involved in producing a Bible translation, a dictionary and grammar of the Twi language, along with a compilation of 3,600 Twi proverbs. *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>91</sup> <http://www.ascleiden.nl/library/webdossiers/AmadouHampateBa.aspx>

<sup>92</sup> Sanneh, "Christian Missions," 4.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa*, 127.

between themselves and the missionaries. If they believed that their traditional customs were being unnecessarily attacked by missionary teaching, for example on the issue of polygamy, they now had the scriptural record themselves from which to put their case.<sup>95</sup>

Barrett documents a strong correlation between the availability of vernacular Scriptures and the emergence of African Independent Churches<sup>96</sup> in West Africa in the 1950s and 1960s. This correlation provides empirical evidence, but does not prove a causal relationship. Barrett however goes on to argue for the existence of a causal relationship, saying his statistics show that the probability of a group seeking independence increased the more vernacular Scriptures became available.<sup>97</sup> Barrett's interpretation may be valid;<sup>98</sup> although it is possible he is overstating the case. Certainly the availability of vernacular Scriptures was an important factor which enabled AIC's to come into existence: indeed, Hiebert believes it to be *the* most important factor.<sup>99</sup>

## 2.5 Western and African frames of reference

At this point we need to ask why it was that Africans were tending to leave the historic churches in order to set up independent churches, even in cases where vernacular Scriptures were being used. What was their source of dissatisfaction? Pobee and Ositelu write that the aim of these newer churches was to respond to the need for a more African expression of their search for God.<sup>100</sup> It was an attempt to recover their cultural identity, because conversion had tended to separate converts from their own culture.<sup>101</sup> There was also a feeling that the historic churches were not sufficiently addressing African issues. We have already alluded to the fact that there was disagreement between Africans and missionaries regarding the way the gospel should be contextualised concerning issues such as polygamy. Such differences of opinion would seem inevitable, particularly when the gospel has been preached by someone from outside the culture, even if it has been presented in the language of the hearers, because an evangelist or missionary is influenced, both in their understanding of the gospel and in its communication, by their own cultural frame of reference. When vernacular Scriptures are introduced into the situation this adds a new dynamic, creating what Newbigin describes as 'a three-cornered relationship (...) between the traditional culture, the "Christianity" of the missionary, and the Bible.'<sup>102</sup> As the Scriptures impact readers and hearers, this raises questions both about their own

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<sup>95</sup> Barrett looks at the disputes surrounding polygamy in East and West Africa in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, 127–129.

<sup>96</sup> Also known as African Initiated Churches; hereafter referred to as AICs.

<sup>97</sup> Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa*, 130–131.

<sup>98</sup> Mojola believes the founding of AICs to be a consequence of vernacular Scriptures. Mojola, "Bible Translation in Africa," 157.

<sup>99</sup> Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts*, 28.

<sup>100</sup> Pobee and Ositelu, *African initiatives in Christianity*, 2. They note that not all AIC's were formed as a result of a break away: some were 'pushed out' by the historic churches. (2–3)

<sup>101</sup> Newbigin, *The open secret*, 141.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

traditional culture and about the ‘Christianity’ that has been offered to them. So it would seem more likely that vernacular Scriptures were a catalyst than the cause of the move towards independence.

Bediako’s view is helpful here: he suggests that the underlying issue was that the historic churches were simply not addressing the spiritual and psychological needs of their members, even when they used local languages, due to their ‘failure to read the vernacular Scriptures from the standpoint of the traditional worldview and in the light of its realities.’<sup>103</sup> It was felt the churches were not addressing African issues satisfactorily, because even where translated Scriptures were used, the gospel message was not being applied appropriately to the African context:

Christ has been presented as the answer to the questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world view, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking what would he look like?<sup>104</sup>

Christ was being presented and the Scriptures were being read according to a Western rather than an African frame of reference, therefore African issues were not being satisfactorily addressed. One issue in particular was that of spiritual power. According to a traditional African worldview there is no separation between the physical and the spiritual, rather everything is interconnected. Therefore every part of life is bound up with religion and the spirit world, as Zogbo observes: ‘Religion is not *part* of life. It *is* life.’<sup>105</sup> The creator god is distant, but there are many spirits encountered in everyday life which must be placated.<sup>106</sup> So it is the preoccupation of many Africans to seek spiritual protection from people or spirits who would want to do them harm.<sup>107</sup> In his important paper, ‘The Flaw of the Excluded Middle’, Hiebert explains how missionaries trained in the West had grown up with a ‘two tiered worldview’, and thus tended to ignore the ‘middle level’ of spiritual beings and forces, largely as a result of dualism.<sup>108</sup> Since they denied the existence of the spirits which were troubling their African brothers and sisters, dismissing these beliefs as superstition, the problems were not addressed, other than churches prohibiting members from going to see a diviner, for example, when a child fell ill. But this is not a solution if no biblical alternative is offered.<sup>109</sup> This has often resulted in ‘split-level’ Christianity rather than a genuinely contextualised faith.<sup>110</sup> Believing that Christianity did not

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<sup>103</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 70.

<sup>104</sup> Taylor, *The Primal Vision—Christian presence amid African Religion*, (1963),16, cited by Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 20.

<sup>105</sup> Zogbo, “Religious World of the Godié,” 188. [Original emphasis.]

<sup>106</sup> Grebe and Fon, “African Traditional Religion,” 107.

<sup>107</sup> Frequent conversations with Bitra Tra Didier and other Kouya young men who were not yet believers, in the village of Gouabafla, Ivory Coast, 1989–1994, for whom seeking protection against illness, bush spirits and witchcraft, through diviners and fetishes, was a priority in their lives.

<sup>108</sup> Hiebert, “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle,” 44. See also Hill, 131–137.

<sup>109</sup> Grebe and Fon, 108

<sup>110</sup> Yung, “World-View,” 440.

address the problem of sickness or their fear of spirits or witchcraft, some Africans lived a double life, adopting Christian beliefs and behaviours in public, but privately resorting to diviners and fetishes for protection. Nigerian bishop, Emmanuel Egbunu, writes that in the early days of Christianity in Nigeria, African pastors seemed to have more faith in their charms and amulets than in Christ! He believes that sadly, this is still a troublesome issue today:

Christianity that provides answers to questions not being asked, rather than providing solutions to the daily tyranny of crushing needs and tantalising hopes, will remain a half-measure with multitudes of patronising, but half-hearted adherents who, in the time of crisis, will always resort elsewhere for “realistic” answers.<sup>111</sup>

Bediako also recognizes this problem in his book, *Jesus in Africa*. In the introduction to the book, his wife, Gillian, from England, recounts how Bediako was brought up in Accra, Ghana, in a nominally Presbyterian family. Before he left for his studies in France in 1969, his father went to a local shrine to ask for protection for his son. On his return to Ghana some years later, his father suggested they thank the shrine spirit for his safe return. Bediako explained that he was converted whilst in France and had come to realise that it was Jesus alone who protected him. His father replied, ‘If Christ protects you now, that’s fine. We do not need to go to the shrine.’ Bediako replied, ‘He protects you too, father. He is the wall surrounding us.’<sup>112</sup> Bediako explains that when Jesus is presented according to an African worldview, he can be seen as the *Christus victor*, supreme over every spiritual rule and authority and a sufficient solution to the believer’s fear.<sup>113</sup>

Failure to address the issues of witchcraft and spiritual power has led many West African Christians to join AICs, many of which are Pentecostal, where exorcism is central to teaching and practice.<sup>114</sup> Many also have sought answers in churches where ‘prosperity teaching’ is advocated.<sup>115</sup>

Another important factor in the expansion of the Christian faith in Africa has been the emergence of dynamic figures that had little or no direct contact with the mission churches. One of the most significant of these figures in West Africa is the Liberian prophet William Wadé Harris. In the early 1900s he set out along the coast of West Africa, in response to what he believed was the call of God, calling people to repentance and pointing them to the God of the Scriptures and encouraging them to abandon their African religious practices. He read the Scriptures differently to the missionaries, but in a way which made sense according to an African frame of reference, accompanying his ministry with prayer for healing and exorcism, baptising many thousands in Liberia, Ivory Coast and Ghana.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Egbunu, “To teach, baptise and nurture new believers,” 26–27.

<sup>112</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, vii–viii.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>114</sup> Pobee and Ositelu, 27.

<sup>115</sup> Ingleby, *Beyond Empire*, 186.

<sup>116</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 85–86; 98–99.

This is not to say that something is necessarily good just because it is indigenous. As Ingleby says, it is to be hoped that African Christians do not make the same mistake as Europeans did, in assuming something is right just because it was their culture: ‘Southern Christians (...) having rightly learnt to defend their culture against Western cultural imperialism, also need to learn the difficult lesson that *their* culture is not some sort of universal norm either.’<sup>117</sup> They need to recognise that the Christian gospel also challenges their culture.

If space permitted we could go on to discuss issues such as the African view of ancestors and of salvation.<sup>118</sup> However it is time to move on and to look more closely at the role of vernacular Scriptures and at the translation process itself.

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<sup>117</sup> Ingleby, *Beyond Empire*, 178.

<sup>118</sup> See for example: Nürnberger, “Ancestor Veneration in the Church of Christ?”.

## Chapter 3 Preserving the identity of the gospel in new contexts

### 3.1 The role of vernacular Scriptures

It is certainly the case, as was argued in the previous chapter, that vernacular Scriptures were an important factor in the ability of Africans to set up churches which were independent of mission organisations. However, the existence of vernacular Scriptures does not automatically guarantee contextualisation of the gospel in a particular community nor does their presence ensure that the community will engage with these Scriptures.<sup>119</sup>

In research carried out in northern Cameroon, Trudell investigates various social aspects surrounding the use of a Bible translation in the four denominations of the Nso area.<sup>120</sup> He concludes that educational and denominational backgrounds are important factors in how the various Christian communities engage with Scripture, whether in the vernacular, in Pidgin or in English. He also recognises that ‘a diversity of colonial powers and literacy’ in this context has resulted in ‘a multiplicity of expressions of Christianity’.<sup>121</sup> It would seem, therefore, that Sanneh’s notion of African converts ‘appropriating the gospel without running it through Western filters first’,<sup>122</sup> when they have access to Scriptures in the vernacular, is an oversimplification.<sup>123</sup> The complexity of many African contexts in terms of multilingualism, literacy levels and denominational influences means that the vernacular translation itself is not necessarily the primary determinant with regard to interpretation.

Among many language groups in West Africa, the use of indigenous music has helped Christians to engage with Scripture and has contributed to the message being contextualised. In the predominantly oral cultures of rural West Africa there is a long tradition of wisdom being passed on in song. This is the case where the tradition of *griot*<sup>124</sup> musicians is strong, for example in Mali, Niger and Senegal. When songs using vernacular Scripture are sung in the *griot* style accompanied by *kora*<sup>125</sup> playing, the gospel message is more likely to be respected because this is the traditional method of bringing a message to the community.

Scripture-based songs can be composed using indigenous genres which are linked with particular events, such as weddings, funerals, field work and house building. For example the parable of the sower can be set to music in the style of a field work song. Songs in the local style are easily memorised and passed on, enabling the message of

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<sup>119</sup> Maxey, *From Orality to Orality*, 56.

<sup>120</sup> Trudell, “Bible Translation and Social Literacies Among Four Nso Churches in Cameroon.”

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 202–204

<sup>122</sup> Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 177.

<sup>123</sup> Trudell, 189

<sup>124</sup> *Griots* traditionally have many functions including the singing of praise songs, histories and genealogies, as well as that of messenger.

<sup>125</sup> Traditional West African stringed instrument.

Scripture to be internalised and at the same time find its place in the community. Studying how local songs, poetry and proverbs in the language differ from the various biblical genres can also help in the translation process as translators look for ways of rendering these genres appropriately in the local language. Thus the study and use of local music genres can interact with the Bible translation process, each enriching the other.<sup>126</sup>

This interaction between the translation process and composition of songs has been experienced recently among the Nyarafolo in northern Ivory Coast, helping Christians to address issues of family relationships. Scripture songs about parental preferential treatment of children and about sibling conflicts, based on the Jacob and Esau narratives, composed during a Genesis translation workshop, have been immensely popular.<sup>127</sup> Local instruments such as the balafon, previously rejected for use in Christian worship because of its association with African traditional religion, have been re-appropriated, replacing traditional rituals used during construction with Christian prayer.<sup>128</sup>

This indigenous music is being used on local radio along with Scripture based plays and Scripture readings in local languages. Audio versions of Scripture are also being produced and used by listening groups, particularly in rural areas.<sup>129</sup>

Whilst the presence of vernacular Scriptures is no guarantee of an appropriate contextualisation of the gospel, their absence can result in a distortion of the message. In areas where Scriptures have not yet been translated, the church is often dependent upon spontaneous oral translation for the transmission of Scripture. We experienced this practice in Kouya churches, and it is not untypical of other areas of Ivory Coast.<sup>130</sup> One Sunday in church in the village of Gouabafla a sermon was preached on the baptism of Jesus from Mark's gospel. The Bible text was read in French followed by an oral translation into Kouya. The translator said that the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like army ants! He was not familiar with the French word *colombe* ('dove') and so he described how he thought the Spirit may have come down on Jesus. Of course being covered with army ants—an unpleasant and painful experience—is very different to the scenario described by Mark's gospel, and would convey a totally different impression of what the Holy Spirit is like to the biblical image. Sadly, when the church has no Scriptures in a language that people understand well, misunderstandings occur, and there is no standard against which Christians can compare the message which is preached or explained from the Scriptures in a foreign language. The canon of Scripture is the norm for measuring whether beliefs and behaviours are in accordance with the Christian faith, providing continuity with the historic message of Christianity. Therefore vernacular Scriptures are not only

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<sup>126</sup> Rob Baker, Ethnomusicologist based in Mali, personal communication, November 2011.

<sup>127</sup> Linnea Boese, personal communication, December 2011.

<sup>128</sup> Rob Baker, personal communication, November 2011.

<sup>129</sup> *Faith comes by hearing* ministry and others. (The issue of orality is a huge topic in itself which we were not able to address in any detail in this study.)

<sup>130</sup> Hill, 61-62.

important for evangelism and for developing mature disciples, they are also essential as a means of preserving the integrity of the gospel in a new context.<sup>131</sup>

Yet while Scripture provides a norm, it does not provide a blue-print for how the gospel should be fleshed out in a particular context. Wright argues that Scripture can only be seen as ‘authoritative’ because all authority lies with God, yet he chooses to exercise that authority through his people by the power of the Holy Spirit. Wright likens the role of the church to that of a group of actors producing a Shakespeare play; the play has five acts, but the fifth act has been lost. The actors are to stage the play; using the wealth of characterisation and plot from the first four acts, as well as their experience as Shakespearean actors, they are to ‘*work out a fifth act for themselves.*’<sup>132</sup>

The ‘authority’ of the first four acts<sup>133</sup> does not mean that the actors should repeat the earlier parts of the play over and over again; they have to move the unfinished drama forwards in a way which is faithful to the original four acts yet continues the story appropriately. In other words Scripture provides the guide, but the church is responsible for working out how the Christian faith is to be lived out in a particular context, in dialogue with the Scriptures. This means that the Kouya and the Nyarafolo Christians in Ivory Coast have to work out how they will do funerals in their context; the Supyire Christians in Mali have to decide on a Christian response to the cultural obligation of female circumcision and how they will contextualise Christian marriage where traditionally there is polygamy and the practice of levirate marriage.<sup>134</sup>

In his book *The Drama of Doctrine*, Vanhoozer picks up on Wright’s illustration, seeing Scripture as script and the church’s role as participating in God’s drama of redemption by ‘performing’ the script:<sup>135</sup>

The canon records the dialogical action, specifies the plot, identifies the *dramatis personae*, and prescribes our roles. In sum: the canon is the norm both for understanding the divine drama and for continuing participation in it.<sup>136</sup>

So, vernacular Scriptures provide the script and the church in West Africa has to decide how God’s drama is to be played out in each context, with both ‘innovation and consistency.’<sup>137</sup> It is now to the process of translation that we turn.

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<sup>131</sup> Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 141.

<sup>132</sup> Wright, “How Can the Bible be Authoritative?,” 11. [Original emphasis.]

<sup>133</sup> Developing his illustration further, Wright sees the acts of the play as representing: 1. Creation; 2. Fall; 3. Israel; 4. Jesus. ‘The New Testament would then form the first scene in the fifth act, giving hints as well (Romans 8; I Corinthians 15; parts of the Apocalypse) of how the play is supposed to end.’ Ibid, 11.

<sup>134</sup> Michael Jemphrey, Translation Consultant in Mali, personal communication, December 2011.

<sup>135</sup> Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 147, 152.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>137</sup> Wright, “How Can the Bible be Authoritative?,” 11.

### 3.2 The nature of translation

The well-known Italian proverb: ‘Traduttore, traditore’, which describes the translator as a traitor is apt because inevitably to translate is to betray. Whenever we translate from one language to another we lose something in the process as there is never a one for one correspondence across languages and cultures. Each culture has a particular way of viewing the world, and this is reflected in the way reality is described in terms of the language of that culture. This idea is captured succinctly in the French metaphor quoted on the title page of a Greek/French interlinear New Testament:

Une langue est un filet jeté sur la réalité des choses.  
Une autre langue est un autre filet  
Il est rare que les mailles coincident.<sup>138</sup>

Any English person who has attempted to describe the game of cricket to a friend in French or struggled to understand a joke in another language will be familiar with this phenomenon and will be aware of the potential for misunderstanding across languages. If this is the case for translation between closely related European languages in the present-day, how much greater the risk of miscommunication in Bible translation which involves the translation of ancient texts into languages which are more distantly related linguistically, geographically and over time! Bible translation is a risky business, but it is a risk which must be taken, because translation is God’s chosen method for communicating his message of salvation. His supreme act of translation was the Incarnation, when the divine was translated into human; and the process continues as the gospel is incarnated into other cultures and the Scriptures are translated into other languages.<sup>139</sup>

All translations can be plotted somewhere on a continuum between literal (interlinear) and free translation (such as *The Message*, a paraphrase). Towards the literal end of the spectrum is the ‘formal-equivalence’ or ‘word-for-word’ translation<sup>140</sup> which seeks to preserve the original syntax and sentence structure of the source text as far as possible. Towards the other end is the ‘dynamic equivalence’<sup>141</sup> (and later ‘functional equivalence’) translation which focuses on transferring the message of the original source texts into the host<sup>142</sup> language, using equivalent but not necessarily identical forms.<sup>143</sup> The majority of Bible translation in West Africa between the 1950s to the 1980s was done according to this meaning-based method, which was seen as particularly appropriate for groups where literacy was not yet developed and therefore background literature on the Bible was not available. However, as Noss comments, it

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<sup>138</sup> Carrez, *Nouveau Testament interlinéaire grec français*. ‘A language is like a fishing net cast over reality. Another language is like a different net. Rarely do two meshes really match.’ [My translation.]

<sup>139</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 26; Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 37.

<sup>140</sup> English examples: Revised Standard Version; English Standard Version.

<sup>141</sup> This theory of translation was developed by Eugene Nida and colleagues. (See for example Nida and Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, Leiden, Brill, 1969.)

<sup>142</sup> Terms representing the language/community where Bible translation is being done such as ‘target’ and ‘receptor’ (implying passivity) can be seen as pejorative. The term ‘host’, used by Maxey, is preferable.

<sup>143</sup> Noss, “Translators’ words and theological readings,” 158.

was a product of its time and had its limitations.<sup>144</sup> It aimed to produce the same effects in the readers of the translated text as those produced in the original audience of the source texts, although being able to discover the effects on the original audience would seem too bold a claim.

Both ‘formal equivalence’ and ‘dynamic equivalence’ translation methods<sup>145</sup> rely on a code model of language. In recent years, the development of communication theories such as Relevance Theory<sup>146</sup> have helped us to better understand the complexity of human communication and the importance of inference in communicating meaning, which the code model fails to recognise.<sup>147</sup> These have been applied to Bible translation,<sup>148</sup> enabling translators to be more aware of the role of inference in communication and of the contextual assumptions of their audience, allowing them to adjust their translation accordingly.<sup>149</sup> The style of translation chosen<sup>150</sup> will depend on the intended audience.

Of course linguistics and communication theory are essential elements in the task of translation, as is anthropology, but in focusing on these aspects we must not lose sight of the fact that Bible translation is very much a theological task.

### 3.3 Translation as a theological task

The majority of Christians in West Africa and throughout the world do not have the capacity to read the Scriptures in the original languages, and so they read (or hear) and interpret the Bible in translation. A good translation therefore is an indispensable tool for the hermeneutical task. We tend to think of the person reading the Bible as the one ‘doing theology’, but when we look behind the translated text to the process of Bible translation, we realise that the translation task itself inevitably involves the translators in theologising. Bible translation seeks to express the biblical message in a particular linguistic and cultural context, yet the dilemma facing many translators is that the terms needed to express certain biblical concepts may not yet exist in the language, especially if there is no church. Appropriate terms to translate concepts such as ‘priest’, ‘prophet’, ‘sin’ and ‘grace’ etc must be identified and therefore the very act of translation will have theological implications, whatever choices are made. Ogden even goes so far as to say that ‘translation sets the theological agenda’ by its

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>145</sup> The New Living Translation claims to combine these methods. See Introduction, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 2004.

<sup>146</sup> Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*.

<sup>147</sup> Gutt, *Relevance theory*, 18; Smith, “Translation as Secondary Communication.” Hill explains that although some of the meaning is encoded in the text, much of it is in the context. Audiences combine the decoded meaning of the text with the contextual assumptions evoked by the text to infer meaning. If people are not aware of the original biblical context and the contextual assumptions of the original audience, the biblical text alone will not be sufficient for successful communication. Hill, xiii.

<sup>148</sup> See for example Gutt’s discussion of ‘interpretive relevance’ (ibid); also Hill; Van Leeuwen.

<sup>149</sup> Hill, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads*. (Chapter 9). Hill’s data shows increased understanding when relevant contextual information is added in the form of footnotes or introductions to the text (not in the text itself).

<sup>150</sup> The above-mentioned list is not exhaustive; it is not our focus here to discuss translation theory in any detail. See below regarding choice of style.

choice of terms and the associations these terms have in the language,<sup>151</sup> and I would agree. It is also my argument that these translation decisions can greatly impact the degree to which the gospel is contextualised in the host community and some specific examples will be discussed below.

The search for expressions in a language which can be used to translate biblical concepts obviously requires a thorough knowledge of that language and culture as well as of the original biblical languages and cultures, but it also sets in motion a process of theologizing in the language. Ideally this process will involve not just the translators<sup>152</sup> themselves, but also church leaders and ordinary Christians, if there are already believers in the host community, as well as the community at large. It is to be hoped that from the outset the community will have already been in dialogue with the various partners involved in setting up the translation programme to decide which specific audience the translation should be aimed at and consequently which translation style is appropriate, because these issues will directly influence the choice of terms to be used in the translation.<sup>153</sup>

Of course, like many activities in the real world, Bible translation often takes place in situations which cannot be described as ‘ideal’. For example, at times, focus on the linguistic aspect of the translation task has resulted in the theological aspect of Bible translation being underestimated.<sup>154</sup> An overemphasis on the linguistic nature of the work has in some cases been a reason for West African churches not engaging with the translation process.<sup>155</sup> Kenmogne also comments on this danger:

Contrary to popular belief, Bible translation is not simply an academic exercise. If a project is run from this point of view, the translated Bible is likely to have no connection whatsoever with the church. It will be destined to remain in bookshops, to be left on one side on a bookshelf, or even to stay outside the church.<sup>156</sup>

This is regrettable, because the churches have a key role to play in the work of Bible translation and in the theologizing process in particular.

All translation, by its very nature, involves some level of interpretation, and it is no different for Bible translation. This will be at a much lower level than that of commentary or exposition,<sup>157</sup> but the further we move along the continuum from literal to free translation, the greater the level of interpretation involved. Nevertheless,

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<sup>151</sup> Ogden, “Translation as a Theologising Task,” 308.

<sup>152</sup> The vast majority of translation in West Africa is now done by highly qualified African mother tongue speakers. (See Zobgo, “The Field Today”.)

<sup>153</sup> Zogbo, “The Field Today,” 345.

<sup>154</sup> Ellingworth, “Theology and Translation,” 302–303. Ellingworth notes a lack of discussion of the role of theology in the literature on Bible translation theory and in journals between the 1960s and 1980s.

<sup>155</sup> Tioyé, “Bible Translation as Holistic Mission.” Tioyé argues Bible translation has sometimes been seen as a linguistic task to be carried out by para-church NGOs and therefore churches thought they were not needed in the task.

<sup>156</sup> Kenmogne, *La traduction de la Bible et l'Église*, 134. [My translation.]

<sup>157</sup> Miller, “The Translation Task,” 541.

translation is by its nature derivative: there is always an original to which each translation can be compared.

We also need to recognise that whatever style of translation is chosen in a particular context, all translators will be influenced by their theological presuppositions. A theologically neutral translation may be desirable, but it is naïve to assume that this is an achievable reality! A translation will inevitably reflect the translator(s)'s theological understanding of the text.<sup>158</sup> It is important, therefore, that translators be aware of their theological assumptions and aim for a translation which avoids any sectarian or theologically biased rendering, because a Bible translation needs to be acceptable to all of its intended audience.<sup>159</sup> This is why, wherever possible, a team of translators is far preferable to one person working alone. If the team is made up of Christians from different church backgrounds and contains women as well as men, so much the better. Such a team is far more likely to produce a translation which is sensitive to different groups and more widely acceptable.<sup>160</sup>

At times Bible translators are constrained by the nature of the language into which they are translating. For example, in many West African languages the passive form does not exist, therefore translators may be obliged to make the agent of the action explicit even when this is not stated in the original languages (eg Matthew 28:18). In such cases an informed theological decision must be made and the choice may have the potential to affect the way the gospel is understood and contextualised in the host community.

### 3.4 Translating biblical concepts

One of the greatest challenges facing translators is how to translate concepts in the Bible which are unknown in the host culture. This varies from one language to another, but biblical concepts which may not be too familiar to a Western audience may not present a problem to West Africans, as there are many cultural similarities between African societies and those of the Hebrew Scriptures in particular. One such example is the concept of the *goel* in the book of Ruth, translated 'kinsman redeemer' in the New International Version. In many West African cultures a system of levirate marriage is practiced, therefore people are familiar with the concept and an equivalent term in the language already exists.<sup>161</sup> There are many other striking similarities between the African context and those described in the Old Testament, such as a nomadic lifestyle, polygamy and sacrifice.<sup>162</sup> Whereas Christians in the West may struggle with the graphic images of blood sacrifice, the relevance is immediately obvious to Africans for whom the sacrificing of animals is a normal part of life. Nevertheless, we should sound a note of caution here: while cultural similarities may help understanding and provide suitable vocabulary for translation, it should not be

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<sup>158</sup> Ogden, "Translation as a Theologising Task," 313.

<sup>159</sup> It should be noted, however, that seeking to translate the text as impartially as possible itself represents a particular theological position, since it aims to place the text in a reader's or listener's domain for that person to interpret, under the direction of the Holy Spirit. (Ogden, 313)

<sup>160</sup> Wendland, "'Theologizing' in Bible Translation."

<sup>161</sup> The term *zva 'yli nyime* was used in Kouya.

<sup>162</sup> Jenkins, *The new faces of Christianity believing the Bible in the global south*, 69.

assumed that rites or beliefs similar to those described in the Old Testament have the same significance in the African context, nor that they are necessarily valid for Christians under the New Covenant.<sup>163</sup>

But what are the translators' options when biblical concepts are not known in the culture? Let us first of all consider an example of an unknown concept which is concrete. In the Kouya area of the rainforest of Ivory Coast there are very few water courses and no lakes, therefore the Kouya language is not rich in nautical vocabulary and the translation of 'anchor', which occurs a number of times in Acts 27, posed a problem! Although no specific word for 'anchor' existed in Kouya, it was possible to construct a new term based on a description of its function. Thus the word for 'anchor' in Kouya became: *'glvv yligbelinete* (literally: 'boat stopping-metal'). Being comprised of existing Kouya words, this new word was easily understood in context, and so proved to be a good solution.

However the decision to use a local term can be more complicated when the potential term has to do with traditional religious practices. We have seen the importance of presenting the gospel according to an African frame of reference, but now we need to consider how this applies with regard to the relationship between the African worldview and the Christian faith. It has been argued above that the *tabula rasa* approach, which presupposed a complete discontinuity between the beliefs of African traditional religion<sup>164</sup> and the gospel, was not helpful. African beliefs were thus demonised and demolished in the hope that the Christian faith would be constructed in their place. This approach has several implications for how the gospel message is appropriated. First of all, it implies that God is absent from the African context, but this is not the case. Newbigin maintains that missionaries should not imagine that they are 'taking God' to a foreign country or anywhere else, because surely God is there already! He has been at work before the missionary was there and will continue to be at work after they leave.<sup>165</sup>

When missionaries from Europe first went to West Africa they assumed that God was not known there and that they were going to proclaim him. It is ironic therefore, that in order to communicate this in the local language they were obliged to ask his name!<sup>166</sup> When they asked people whether they knew of a creator God, they found that the concept of a Supreme Being did exist in the African traditional worldview, even though he was seen as distant. This belief in a creator God who is far above the lesser divinities and ancestors of the African worldview can act as a bridge between the existing worldview and the message of the gospel. According to Walls it provides an element of continuity:

African Christianity is shaped by Africa's past. The continuity of African religious history, Christian and pre-Christian, with no sharp break in African understandings of relationships with a transcendent world, is cemented in most parts of Africa by

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<sup>163</sup> Kenmogne, *La traduction de la Bible et l'Église*, 124.

<sup>164</sup> Henceforth referred to as ATR.

<sup>165</sup> Newbigin, *The open secret*, 67.

<sup>166</sup> Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 158–159.

the fact that the Christian God has a vernacular name—a name in common speech, to indicate the God of Israel and of the Scriptures.<sup>167</sup>

Gnanaken compares the African situation to that which the apostle Paul faced in Athens (Acts 17:22–31). Seeing that the people were very religious and even had an altar inscribed ‘to an unknown god’, Paul uses this as a starting point for proclaiming the living God. He commends the people in their search for God, without condoning their idols, and goes on to explain what he is like. Gnanaken argues that similarly evangelists today should commend Africans’ desire to worship the true God, using existing beliefs as a point of contact, rather than demonising them.<sup>168</sup> Many translations in West Africa use the vernacular name for God. This provides continuity with the past (as did the use of Greek, *Theos*, in the New Testament); and also allows the local concept of God to be reshaped by the context of Scripture to more closely resemble the God of the Bible.<sup>169</sup>

The gospel needs to be communicated in a way which provides a connection with existing beliefs within the culture because people always seek to understand a new message in terms of what they already know. Therefore it is imperative for evangelists and translators<sup>170</sup> to study the existing cosmology of the people group in order to understand the context the Christian faith is entering. Then the process of researching potential terms in the language to represent the biblical concepts brings the religious world of the Bible into contact with that of the host community: ‘The religious-cultural worlds of the Bible meet the religious-cultural world of the receptors through the translators’ choice of vocabulary and expressions for key biblical terms.’<sup>171</sup> Choosing the appropriate terms for the translation is challenging, but the process of researching potential terms forces the translation team and the local church to theologise in the language as they negotiate meaning between the source texts and the local belief system, thereby ensuring that the translated message will be relevant to the hearers, penetrating to the very heart of the culture.<sup>172</sup>

Bible translation is currently in progress among the Nyarafolo in northern Ivory Coast. Exegetical advisor, Linnea Boese, describes how the team had been reluctant to use the word *nyakungenge* to translate the concept of ‘covenant’. This term in Nyarafolo refers to a contract which can be made between people, but is usually made by a person or family with a spirit that they want to have as their protector. The contract is sealed by a sacrifice and it carries with it obligations in terms of taboos and rites to be observed. Working on Genesis with a translation consultant, the team were trying to come to a decision on this and other terms in the translation. Moïse, one of the translators, explained that the reason they originally rejected *nyakungenge* as a translation for ‘covenant’ was that it is initiated by humans. He said: ‘God is too

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<sup>167</sup> Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process*, 120.

<sup>168</sup> Gnanakan, “To Proclaim the News of the Kingdom (i),” 8.

<sup>169</sup> Hill, 129–133. Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 158–159.

<sup>170</sup> This is necessary whether the translators are mother tongue speakers or from outside the context.

<sup>171</sup> Noss, 160.

<sup>172</sup> Pobe and Ositelu maintain that insufficient awareness of the need for the Christian faith to interact with an existing cosmology resulted in either an alien or a superficial Christianity, 10.

great; he would never bend down and humble himself by initiating such a contract with a person.’ As he spoke these words, tears filled his eyes as he suddenly realised that this was indeed what had happened: God *had* initiated the covenant and he *did* want relationship with Abraham! As a consequence of this discussion, the translation team changed their position and decided that it was of the utmost importance this word is used to translate ‘covenant’!<sup>173</sup>

This process of researching terms in the language to translate biblical concepts can have a profound effect on those involved. We can see in this case that as the Nyarafolo translators dug more deeply into the circumstances of covenants in their own culture, comparing and contrasting them with the Genesis covenants, their understanding of God and his relationship with Abraham gained a new dimension. For the Nyarafolo (who believe in a Creator who is distant and uninterested) to hear that God would humble himself to initiate a contract with a human being is a revelation; using the term *nyakungenge* really brings the message home. In this way the process of Bible translation itself can be seen as a means of contextualising the gospel. It is thus ‘a theological activity with the capacity to mutually shape and be shaped by a community’s expression of its faith in a contextually relevant way.’<sup>174</sup>

Now, if we recognise Bible translation’s capacity to shape the theological landscape of the host culture by its choice of terms, then we must also acknowledge its potential capacity for introducing error by an unwise choice. It would seem that the use of local terms, especially religious terms, can be risky. Sugirtharajah criticises missionary translators for ‘baptising’ languages into ‘Christian meanings’,<sup>175</sup> and it seems this may well have happened. Meyer, for example, researching into a missionary translation into the Ewe language of Ghana in the early 1900s, says that:

(...) the missionaries aspired to gain full control over the Ewe language and culture through linguistics and ethnography. Yet through vernacularisation, converts understood the missionary message in their own ways.<sup>176</sup>

She documents a mismatch between what the German ‘Pietist’<sup>177</sup> missionaries ‘wanted the local terms to mean’ and what local people actually understood.<sup>178</sup> This illustrates how key Bible translation can be in the way the gospel is understood and contextualised. Firstly, once the message is in the vernacular, it has its own dynamic:

Africans have responded to the gospel from where *they* were, not from where the missionaries were; they have responded to the Christian message as they heard it, not to the missionaries’ experience of the message.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> The expression *nyakungenge* is similar to the Hebrew idea of ‘cutting a covenant’, being a compound of the words ‘mouth-cut-give’. Linnea Boese, personal communication, December 2011.

<sup>174</sup> Maxey, 19.

<sup>175</sup> Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 157.

<sup>176</sup> Meyer, *Translating the Devil*, (xxvi).

<sup>177</sup> Meyer says that ‘Pietist Protestantism is part and parcel of colonialism.’ (xxi)

<sup>178</sup> Meyer, *Translating the Devil*, 80–82.

<sup>179</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 100–101.

Secondly, the choice of terms will have a huge influence (whether positively or negatively) on how the message is understood. An unwise choice will have an ongoing effect, in a vernacular translation, long after the missionaries leave.<sup>180</sup> This highlights the potential dangers of translation being done by those from outside the context,<sup>181</sup> as well as the importance of the translators working closely with church leaders and the wider community in discussing options for the translation of biblical concepts.

What Sugirtharajah's and Meyer's view of languages as static fails to recognise, however, is their ability to adapt to new situations and to incorporate new information. Hill argues, from her research among the Adiokrou of Ivory Coast, that when local terms are chosen to represent important biblical concepts, even when there is not a complete match at the outset, people's understanding has been shown to change over time:

The Adiokrou data shows that when local terms are used in translated Scripture, the categories are transformed over time, resulting both in a correct understanding of Scripture and a transformed worldview. (...) Rather than polluting Scripture, Scripture has purified the traditional categories and redeemed them.<sup>182</sup>

Language embodies a particular culture's worldview<sup>183</sup> therefore all terms carry a certain amount of cultural baggage. Yet languages are dynamic and people's use of language is constantly able to adapt to a changing world; a striking example is how languages have developed terms for new technologies. As translated scriptural terms are read and heard in their biblical context and teaching in the church about the cultural background of the Bible reinforces understanding, these terms, and the assumptions associated with them, are capable of being transformed over time.

Pobee and Ositelu remind us that from the beginning the Christian faith has borrowed from different cultures, citing the example of the author of the fourth gospel borrowing the term *logos* from the Platonists. He may have borrowed it from the Platonists, they say, but he did not use the term as they did: 'The point is the fourth gospel took over what already existed in the culture and thought forms of its addressees *but made something new of it*.'<sup>184</sup> Those bringing the gospel must start where people are, with the worldview they already have, and engage with their hopes and fears.<sup>185</sup> Using local terms can be a risk, but, as we have seen, it was a risk the Christians in Antioch were prepared to take when they presented Jesus to Greeks as Lord rather than Messiah (Acts 11:20). Putting local terms to new use in translated Scriptures can be a legitimate way of grounding the gospel in its new context and encouraging a healthy contextualisation.

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<sup>180</sup> Dube, "Consuming a Colonial Cultural Bomb."

<sup>181</sup> In this case, German missionaries from the NMG (Norddeutsche Missionsgesellschaft).

<sup>182</sup> Hill, 152-153.

<sup>183</sup> Newbigin, *The open secret*, 146.

<sup>184</sup> Pobee and Ositelu, 28. [Original emphasis.]

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid*, 27-28.

This is an example of the process of societal conversion described by Walls:

Conversion implies the use of existing structures, the “turning” of those structures to new directions, the application of new material and standards to a system of thought and conduct already in place and functioning. It is not about substitution, the replacement of something old by something new, but about transformation, the turning of the already existing to new account.<sup>186</sup>

### 3.5 Whose translation, whose contextualisation?

Nevertheless, the danger of syncretism<sup>187</sup> is always present when the gospel enters a new context and it should not be underestimated. Yet ‘syncretistic’ is a description which is inherently pejorative, since it is a label always applied to others but never to one’s own group.<sup>188</sup> This raises important questions for the African context: Who decides which terms are to be used in a Bible translation? Who decides where to draw the line between legitimate contextualisation and syncretism?

Ogden cites the case of one community beginning a New Testament translation with assistance from a foreign helper who had long experience with a related language. The translators were using many indigenous terms in the translation, terms which the churches were already using. The foreign assistant objected to some of the terms being used, saying they were ‘pagan’ and could not convey the biblical message, but according to the translators they were the only options in the language.<sup>189</sup> I don’t know the rights or wrongs of this particular case, but it would seem preferable that members of the host community are the ones best placed to engage with these theological decisions and to make a judgment regarding syncretism. If outsiders continue to insist on making these decisions, they risk perpetuating a theological imperialism, suggests Hiebert, whether wittingly or unwittingly.<sup>190</sup> The greatest risk of syncretism today does not come from those who are attempting to discover local ways of expressing Christianity in non-western cultures, but from those who (like the first century Judaizers) try to preserve foreign expressions of God’s message in another culture. This is because when foreign forms of Christianity are retained, the meanings are likely to change and become un-Christian.<sup>191</sup>

Today in West Africa, although some translation teams still have expatriate exegetes or coordinators, according to Zogbo, ‘no translation organization worthy of its name would now claim to have expatriate “translators”.’<sup>192</sup> The tendency is for translation

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<sup>186</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 28.

<sup>187</sup> Syncretism means ‘mixing’. Used in a positive sense it refers to Christianity’s capacity to be adopted into different cultures. We are using the term in its more usual negative sense to refer to illegitimate mixing of Christian faith with elements of a culture which result in the fundamental nature of the message being changed. For further discussion see Yong, “Syncretism,” 374–375.

<sup>188</sup> Pobee and Ositelu, 27.

<sup>189</sup> Ogden, 314.

<sup>190</sup> Hiebert, “Critical Contextualization.”

<sup>191</sup> Kraft, *Culture, Communication, and Christianity*, 348.

<sup>192</sup> Zogbo, “The Field Today,” 339.

teams to be made up of highly qualified and well-trained mother-tongue speakers, made possible in recent years by the development of degree level training programmes at a number of institutions on the African continent.<sup>193</sup> However, much of the work is still funded from the West and this can still cause tensions in terms of who is ‘calling the shots’ when it comes to type of project and style of translation. A current example is the recent debate in the Western Christian media about the translation of the term ‘Son of God’ in Muslim contexts,<sup>194</sup> with some Christian bodies threatening to withhold financial support from translation projects if ‘Son of God’ is not translated as they would wish.<sup>195</sup> This debate is complex and ongoing<sup>196</sup> and there is not space to address it here. However, the discussions are not helped (nor are true partnerships developed) when powerful Western organizations attempt to use their financial influence to affect the outcome.

But whoever is involved in contextualisation it should be recognised that it is an extremely difficult task. This was made clear in the Lausanne 1997 Haslev Consultation which acknowledged that not much progress had been made in this domain since the Willowbank Report:

First, contextualisation is very hard work, requiring a demanding set of knowledge and skills, patience and a supporting and enabling community. Few have all of this available to them. Furthermore, ethnocentrism dies hard in every culture.<sup>197</sup>

### 3.6 Foreignness

Translating biblical concepts which are unknown in the host culture is an enormous challenge, and the choice of whether or not to use a local term or a modified local term is a heavy theological responsibility for the translators. It is easy to criticise translators for their choices, but we need to recognise that their options are limited.<sup>198</sup> When it is not possible to use a local term, the translators may need to resort to the use of a term borrowed from another language. (This may be from a language of wider communication, or perhaps a transliteration of the Greek.) The risk with this option is that, while it may provide an accurate translation of the biblical term, it may not communicate anything to the audience.<sup>199</sup> This problem can possibly be overcome through the use of footnotes, glossary and teaching, but there is a danger that the term will be perceived as foreign and not relevant to the audience.

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<sup>193</sup> Eg. FATEAC (Faculté de Théologie de l’Alliance Chrétienne) in Abidjan, Ivory Coast; Africa International University in Nairobi, Kenya.

<sup>194</sup> *Christianity Today* magazine, February 2011

<sup>195</sup> There is also an online petition about this in the US and the UK.

<sup>196</sup> IJFM (International Journal of Frontier Missions) has devoted a whole issue to this topic. ([http://www.ijfm.org/this\\_issue.htm](http://www.ijfm.org/this_issue.htm))

<sup>197</sup> The Lausanne Movement, “Gospel Contextualization Revisited.”

<sup>198</sup> Dube criticises the translation choice for ‘devil’ in her native Setswana, but herself is criticised for not using her own theological experience to suggest an alternative. See controversy outlined by Maxey, 66–69.

<sup>199</sup> Unless this is a term/word borrowed from another language which has already been adopted into the language.

One area which is notoriously problematic to translate is that of spirits (including ‘Holy Spirit’ and ‘evil spirit’). Zogbo says this may seem surprising in a context where the supernatural invades every part of life, yet the difficulty lies, not in a lack of terms, but in the mismatch between the spirit world of the Bible and that of African cultures.<sup>200</sup> Cosmologies do not match exactly across cultures, and so translation choices are difficult. If a literal translation is used for ‘evil spirit’ it does not always communicate well, coming across in many African languages as ‘bad breath’.<sup>201</sup> Alternatively, if a borrowed word is used, it may give the impression that the spirits referred to are unique to Jewish culture and that the Bible does not address the African spiritual context.<sup>202</sup> Hill says her research shows that when new expressions are used for biblical concepts with no bridge to the existing worldview, communication is unsuccessful. She believes this is the case for the expressions used in Adioukrou Scripture for ‘angels’ and ‘demons’ which have still not found their place in Adioukrou reality after seventy-five years. When certain categories in the existing traditional worldview are not engaged during the process of Bible translation, they may not be transformed by the gospel. As a result, dependence on local divinities, for example, may remain just beneath the surface of Christian behaviour.<sup>203</sup>

Although new terms are not so easily assimilated, on the other hand the translation must not give the impression that the biblical events took place in the host culture; Jesus was born in Palestine, not in West Africa! Van Leeuwen questions Nida’s assertion that it is the translator’s task to eliminate what is foreign in the text.<sup>204</sup> I agree with Van Leeuwen that unnecessary linguistic foreignness should be avoided, whilst the foreignness of Scripture as ‘other’ must not be eliminated because this is crucial to its message.<sup>205</sup> A ‘transculturation’ of the Bible, such as the so-called *Cotton Patch Translation*,<sup>206</sup> which leads the reader to believe that the events related in the Scriptures took place in the southern states of the USA, is not acceptable! The Bible consists of ancient, Middle Eastern texts, produced in a time and place which is distant both from us and from today’s African context. Sandra Schneiders agrees, and argues<sup>207</sup> that to seek to eliminate the distance between the ancient text and the current day reader would be to deny that the text is ‘other’. The reader may then be inclined to ‘gobble up’ the text, ‘uncritically assimilating it into his or her own worldview and thus domesticating it rather than being confronted by it.’ She suggests it is the interpreter’s task to ‘bridge the gap’ between the text and the reader’s context, but to do so without suppressing the distance.<sup>208</sup> Goldingay also highlights the danger of readers assuming that they are ‘of one mind with the text’ when in fact they are not

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<sup>200</sup> Zogbo, “Religious World of the Godié,” 191.

<sup>201</sup> Grebe and Fon, “African Traditional Religion,” 107.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>203</sup> Hill, 153.

<sup>204</sup> Van Leeuwen, “On Bible Translation and Hermeneutics,” 296.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 296–297.

<sup>206</sup> Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 284–285.

<sup>207</sup> Following Gadamer.

<sup>208</sup> Schneiders, “Church and Biblical Scholarship in Dialogue,” 355.

sufficiently aware of the source text's presuppositions, due to a lack of background information.<sup>209</sup>

I would argue that it is also the task of the translator to maintain the distance between ancient text and contemporary reader, rather than to translate in a way which would suppress it, but the extent to which the translators decide to 'domesticate' or 'foreignize' it (carrying over some of the speech styles of the Greek or Hebrew)<sup>210</sup> should be audience-driven. By rendering a foreign text into another language, the translator is attempting to reduce the processing cost for the reader, who does not have to learn the original language in order to access the text.<sup>211</sup> Nevertheless the reader must still be able to recognise the text's 'otherness' and must make the effort to enter the text's culturally different 'world' in order to interpret it.<sup>212</sup> Translators and pastors should help the reader to enter the text's world by providing background information and contextual helps,<sup>213</sup> but this information, which is essential for understanding and interpretation, does not belong in the text itself.

Once again this is an area where we see the tension between the particularity and universality of the gospel: there is a balance to be struck between the translated text being 'particular' enough so that it communicates clearly yet at the same time gives the 'flavour' of the source texts,<sup>214</sup> retaining the historical and cultural integrity of Scripture and providing continuity with the same Christian message which has been translated down through the centuries.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture*, 247–250.

<sup>210</sup> Zogbo, "The Field Today," 344–345.

<sup>211</sup> Van Leeuwen, 286.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid*, 286–287.

<sup>213</sup> See earlier comments regarding contextual helps and Hill's suggestions.

<sup>214</sup> Kroneman, "About Sin, Faith and Spiritual Warfare," 10.

<sup>215</sup> Noss, "Translators' words and theological readings," 161.

## Conclusion

The first Christian believers were of course Jewish, and at first were reluctant to allow the Christian faith to break out of its Jewish background. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, however, the church began to realise that Christianity was not culture bound and that the gospel could be presented to non-Jews according to their frame of reference. It therefore abandoned the proselyte model in favour of conversion.

It has been observed that this crisis in the early church was the result of an inherent tension between the indigenising principle and the pilgrim principle. As the gospel enters a new context it needs to be made to feel at home there, but at the same time it must retain sufficient family likeness to the Christian faith expressed differently in other places.

We have seen that God is prepared to accommodate himself to a human level. This is evidenced supremely in the Incarnation, but also in the way God reveals himself in Scripture, in terms of the hearers' culture. The gospel is not bound to any culture, but neither is there such a thing as 'pure' gospel, detached from culture. The message of the gospel can also be expressed in any language, being infinitely translatable.

In chapter 2 it was shown that a colonial hermeneutic of African indigenous cultures resulted in the gospel not being contextualised and a largely Western Christianity becoming implanted in West Africa. Nevertheless, many missionaries did recognise the importance of communicating the gospel in the mother tongue and invested time and effort in Bible translation. The availability of vernacular Scriptures afforded Africans a certain independence from missionaries in terms of biblical interpretation as well as facilitating the setting up of independent churches. But even when the Scriptures were available in the historic churches it was often felt that African issues were not being addressed because the Scriptures were not being read from an African frame of reference.

In Chapter 3 it was noted that the presence of vernacular Scriptures itself did not guarantee that the community would engage with these Scriptures, although the use of indigenous music was seen to encourage engagement and enhance contextualisation. Vernacular Scriptures were also shown to provide a norm for preserving the integrity of the gospel in a new context, yet they are not a blue-print for contextualisation: this must be worked out in each context by local Christians, guided by the Holy Spirit.

It was further demonstrated that the translation process had the potential both to help and hinder contextualisation, in particular by the terms which were chosen to represent biblical concepts. The theologising it required brought the religious-cultural worlds of the Bible and of the host culture into dialogue in the search for appropriate terms in the language, which facilitated contextualisation of the message.

Finally it was noted that syncretism is always a danger when the gospel enters a new context. It is therefore preferable that decisions regarding translation and contextualisation should be made by members of the host community rather than by cultural outsiders. In the majority of cases translation today is being carried out by Africans who need to be the ones making judgments about translation style including the extent of 'foreignization' of the text. As we conclude our thoughts about the

relationship between vernacular Scriptures and the contextualisation of the gospel we should remind ourselves that God and the Scriptures are far greater than our context bound understanding of them!<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Kroneman, 24.

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