You don't have to be a believer to know it

(做圣经翻译研究不必为信徒)

Anthony Pym

On a street in Peru the shopkeeper asks me if I am a believer, if I have faith – by which he means Christian faith, since there are few other brands in town. He asks because I am there with a Christian missionary, and we have explained we are in Lima for a conference on translations of the Bible. For the shopkeeper, it was natural to suppose that scholars interested in the Bible would have to believe in the Bible. So how should I answer?

The really remarkable thing is that, at that conference, and indeed in all of the work I have done with and for the United Bible Societies since about 1995, at no time has anyone ever asked me that question. I have attended conferences, published papers, participated in debates, contributed to workshops for Bible consultants, and no one has ever asked about my personal beliefs. This is not because faith is automatically assumed, I think (there are many sects and divergences of belief, so all assumptions are precarious). It is not because there might be something to hide, I hope (rather like the Don't Ask Don't Tell policy for gays and lesbians in the US military). And I don't really think it is because of any assumption that faith is merely a private, internal affair (Protestants do believe in a direct relation between the individual and divinity, but there are also plenty of Christian beliefs in mediated salvation and socialized faith). No, I suspect the reason for the non-question is more likely that, in this and any other field of scholarship, personal beliefs do not matter. For the scholar, internal knowledge is made public knowledge. It is thus to be shared, compared, improved, always in cooperation and competition with others. And in that public process of shared knowledge production, whatever we believe privately becomes irrelevant. It does not disappear; it remains in the inner realm of hopes and motivations, but it is not a matter for public scholarship. So there is no need to ask.

In my various discussions of translation with Professor Ren Dongsheng in Monterey, California, in the Fall of 2015, he never asked me that question either. We debated literary translations, linguistic problems, with and without references to Bible translation, as if our very different backgrounds were of no significant consequence. One suspends the internal past in the interests of scholarly exchange.

You do not have to believe in the Bible to be fascinated by it. It is probably the most translated book in the world, now available in some 2,800 languages. Of the three great Western religions based on fixed unitary books (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), Christianity is the one whose book is officially recognized as a *multilingual* collection, whose transmission is officially through *translation*, and whose sacred bestowal of sacred

status has overtly been on *translated* texts: the Greek Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate of Jerome are said to be divinely inspired, placing the Greek and Latin languages on the higher rungs of the Medieval hierarchy of languages. The history of Christianity has been a history of translations, perhaps more so than any other religion.

For me, that history is inseparable from the history of Western thought: the impetus of translation, prime mover of the Western sacred, has carried over into the translations of secular texts in the Western traditions. With the Bible, we learned to translate and to talk about translation. It is then often from Bible translation that we began rendering other texts and finding ways to talk about them. For example, the concept of "dynamic equivalence", which we attribute to Eugene Nida and sometimes apply to all translating, is found *in nuce* in Luther's precept that the Bible should draw its language from "the mother in the house, the children in the street, and the common people in the marketplace" (*Sendbrief*, 1530), while the basic dichotomy had been announced by Jerome when he distinguished sense-for-sense from word-for-word translation (*Letter to Pammachius*, 395) – admittedly drawing on similar binarisms formulated by Horace and Cicero. Or again, the admonition to completeness and accuracy in translation, part of the ideological Western translation form, might also be traced back to punishments proposed in the Bible for those who add to or take away from the sacred text (Deuteronomy 4:2; Proverbs 30:6; Revelation 22:19) (Pym 2007). For better or for worse, whether one is for or against literalism and completeness, the terms of Western thought have been marked by the various traditions of Bible translation.

As modernity spread from the West in the nineteenth century, moving along the lines of travel and dissemination opened by steam technologies, so too did the tenets of the Western translation form and its theories. As Chan (2001) recognizes, when intellectuals of the May the Fourth period debated for or against literalist translation, the terms of their very debate had become modernist, in the style of the West. But what Chan does not say – no doubt because the historical connections admittedly will require more research – is that an important Modernism of the nineteenth century occurred first in the Church, in the movements to interpret the Bible in terms of its historical setting – Alfred Loisy's Biblical Modernism was precisely that, drawing in turn on Harnack, the Tübingen School of Protestant theologians, Baur, Historical Criticism, and so we trace the lines back to the German preacher Schleiermacher, at once Protestant theologian and renowned translation theorist, famous for reproducing the classical binarisms in a new translational form: domesticating vs. foreignizing. Biblical scholarship, along with the binarisms, was part and parcel of that modernity.

As we now seek to go beyond the classical binarisms, and also to reach beyond the limitations of Western tradition, we too easily forget that others have been there before. Some date a "cultural turn" in Western Translation Studies to 1990 or thereabouts, when the objet of study moved from the text to the cultural relations that include the text. And eco-translatology, chasing a similar expansion of the object of knowledge, dates from around 2010. The Catholic Church, however, had made a similar move some years earlier: "inculturation" is the term authorized by Pope John Paul II from 1985 to describe "the incarnation of the Gospel in autonomous cultures and at the same time the introduction of these cultures into the life of the Church" (1985: 21). It is thus a potentially two-way interaction between cultures (in practice highly asymmetric), and this model of cultural interaction that has framed Vatican translation policy for the past

three decades or so. Indeed, the entire history of the Christian Church has been rewritten as a series of successive inculturations (Babylonian, Judaic, Greek, etc.; in *Varietates Legitimae*, 1994), that is, as a history of translations.

Given the millennia of human investment, as befits a text of salvation, the Bible is no longer just a linguistic object, passively awaiting reading and analysis. So much of it has entered the ways scholars think that the book speaks even when closed. And then, as evangelical translators, from the Jesuits in China through to the present day, attempt the impossible task of making words from prior to first-century Palestine speak in the deserts, jungles and cities of the twenty-first century, they have accumulated such a huge body of crosscultural knowledge that, for the knowledge if nothing else, their efforts must be understood and taken seriously.

There is, of course, much to question in biblical discourses: the traditional binarisms do not serve us well; inculturation must not become imperialist absorption; the plurality of personal belief is to be defended at every turn. And yet, to understand where our ideas come from, to place them in the terrain of historical action and accumulated knowledge, one cannot afford to ignore the Bible.

And you don't have to be a believer to know it.

References

Chan, Leo Tak-hung Chan. 2001. "What's Modern in Chinese Translation Theory? Lu Xun and the Debates on Literalism and Foreignization in the May Fourth Period". *TTR : traduction, terminologie, rédaction* 14(2): 195-223.

Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. 1994. *Varietates Legitimae. Inculturation and the Roman Liturgy: Instruction*. March 29, 1994. http://www.adoremus.org/doc_inculturation.html

John Paul II. 1985. *Slavorum Apostoli,* Encyclical epistle, June 2.

Pym, Anthony. 2007. "On the historical epistemologies of Bible translating". *A History of Bible Translation*. Ed. Philip A. Noss. Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura. 195-215.

November 2015