

## **ALTERNATIVE MODERNITIES AND BIBLE TRANSLATION: AN INTRODUCTION**

**COLIN J. D. GREENE**  
colin.greeneuk@gmail.com

Research Professor of Biblical and Contextual Theology at New York Theological Seminary  
and Program Leader for Theology, Imagination, and Culture at Sarum College, Salisbury.

We met in late January in Misano, Italy. We were refugees from various foreign lands, it was cold and wet and most of us had never met one another before. We gathered together in a small classroom in the San Pellegrino Institute, a shared campus where the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship (ABS) pursues a varied program of training seminars and a two-week Translation Studies event in May of every year. In total we were five translation consultants, plus Dr. Phil Towner and Dr. James Maxey from the Nida Institute and Dr. Simon Crisp, then Director of Translation Services for the United Bible Societies. Added to the mix, myself, a former Professor of Theology and now a kind of roving consultant, theological educator, and facilitator who specializes in the dialogue between theology and cultural context.

My role was to facilitate a week-long training workshop or seminar for those present on the important topic of alternative or multiple forms of modernity. Well, I thought it was important—I doubt whether any of the translation consultants had ever encountered such dubious phraseology before! It turned out to be a fascinating and rewarding week and the result of our deliberations is this special edition of *The Bible Translator*. I trust that after you have read the various articles you will also agree that training workshops of this nature facilitated by those well versed in the skills and challenges of Bible translation are vital and important ingredients for the people who take on the increasingly challenging and multicultural mantle of the translation consultant.

So to what was I referring by the use of the phrase “alternative forms of modernity”? This descriptor was taken from the work of one of our foremost contemporary ethicists and philosophers, the Canadian Charles Taylor, in his seminal book, *A Secular Age* (2007), especially Parts 1, 2, and 3. In that book Taylor tells a particular story or narrative which he calls the “Long March to Freedom.” It is the tale of how from the sixteenth to the twenty-first centuries Europe changed its mind in regard to the nature and purpose of civil society. The late medieval vision of civil society was understood largely in theocratic terms with both church and state as separate yet interdependent and coterminous areas of divine governance, the unifying principle being that of divine benevolence or providence. Gradually, the rule of law, civil society itself, and later of course the market were loosed from their moorings in divine superintendence, becoming instead largely autonomous or

secular, in the modern sense of the word, spheres of human power and influence. A major factor in this development was what we used to refer to as the Age of Reason or the emergence of the European Enlightenment, when Germany, France, and Britain and later the United States created different forms of constitutional or republican democracy based on three basic principles: the all-sufficiency of human reason, the inherent rights and autonomy of the individual, and the preservation of democratic forms of government over and against the former principle of the divine right of kings. Enshrined in these constitutional developments were momentous changes in scientific and technological development, colonial expansion, urbanization, wealth creation, and social stratification and lifestyle expectations.

The emergence of what has been generally referred to as postmodernism from the 1950s to the present day was hailed by many as the end of modernity or the arrival of late modernity. Both terms were slogans that enshrined a rather heady mix of philosophical overconfidence and sociological uncertainty. There are other thinkers and cultural commentators, and I am one of them, who suggest that what actually took place was the breakup of a hegemonic form of European intellectual and colonial expansion to be replaced, eventually, by a new global reality of alternative or multiple forms of modernity, where the phrase modernity refers to the development of a largely secular, as opposed to divinely ordered and governed, form of society.

In chapter four of the book *Metavista: The Bible, Church and Mission in an Age of Imagination* (2008) I set out a provisional form of the argument that we were now in what I then referred to as the post-postmodern era or the metavista, which actually means, although I didn't realize it at the time, alternative forms of the modernity project. This is the terminology I now prefer and believe more accurately describes our present global market-driven economies and the still-evolving vision of what human life is intended to accomplish and achieve. What I also argue is that there are six forms of alternative modernities which I put into three pairs, as each pair represents two sides of the same phenomenon. They are the post-Christendom and the postsecular, the postmodern and the postcolonial, and the postglobal and what I tried to argue at the time was the postmaterial, until I realized after further reading and reflection that the postmaterial is actually just another variety of the postglobal! (This confusion is particularly apparent in Ward 2009.) So nowadays I think more in terms of the postglobal and the postcritical. It is extremely important to realize that the prefix "post" does not refer to that which we have passed through and left behind, but to something we are currently struggling with, whose consequences are still very much with us. I think our five translation consultants viewed some of this with a sizable pinch of salt and so in their various articles they have carved out some more manageable territory in terms of where they think some of this impinges on their respective tasks and responsibilities. By way of an introduction to the following articles I would like to suggest that there is clear evidence that all of them take up a position in regard to this kind of cultural cartography and that their preferred cultural contexts are an embrace of the postmodern, postcolonial, and postcritical readings of Scripture, which they affirm as helpful preconditions to the task of Bible translation.

### **A postmodern approach to Bible translation**

Daniel Kerber's article on "Faithful Translation" picks up some of the elements of the intellectual and societal journey I have just described. He recognizes in the postmodern condition an impatience, some would claim a decisive break, with the old ordinances of omni-competent reason, individualism, and power claims masquerading as scientific objectivity. With the help of thinkers as diverse as Richard Rorty, Michael Polanyi, and Jean-François Lyotard he maps out some of the key elements in the postmodern pilgrimage toward a more sanguine and chastened appraisal of the nature of truth. He notes that the old correspondence theory of truth is no longer in good health. The idea that our ideas and thinking processes correspond to, or mirror, reality—that is to say they take accurate account of what is actually out there in the objective world—was a simplistic epistemological notion that failed to notice such important issues as subjective disposition and prejudice, ideological preferences, and the way in which ideas tend to mirror what a particular community or society believes is right for them, or indeed the way ideas justify their often tendentious claims for universal rationality.

Not surprisingly, the correspondence theory of truth soon gave way to the coherence theory of truth, a similarly flawed idea that suggests each claim to truth must cohere with the axioms that govern a particular scientific system or make it plausible and credible. Again such a view of truth failed to take note of the fact that apparently implausible or contradictory notions of reality or scientific truth can coexist quite easily, particularly, as Daniel notes, when we are in the midst of a major paradigm shift. In just such a situation, new science topples old theories and the revered tenets of a former system. The move from a Newtonian mechanistic universe to Einstein's theories of special and general relativity are usually cited as evidence of just such a move from apparent parsimony and clarity to the downright oddities of quantum physics, which some claim is a sort of anti-physics that compels us in all kinds of contradictory directions! So where do we arrive in this journey? We arrive at precisely what Daniel believes is a better paradigm in terms of how we go about the task of Bible translation, in other words a consensual theory of truth that accepts a number of important preconditions in terms of any claim to know or squeeze out of a particular passage something called the truth of what the author intended to communicate. Daniel wants to accept that a postmodern approach to truth, or fidelity of translation, has to take on board the reality of differing historical contexts. That is what is often seen as the double bind of not knowing nearly as much about the world behind the text as we think we do and finding it equally difficult to translate a plurality of meanings into the contemporary world in front of the text with its own perplexing plurality of contexts and language idioms. Similarly, Daniel knows about the notion of personal commitment and participation in the knowledge game, what Michael Polanyi called the tacit dimensions of knowing. Nevertheless, knowledge game it indeed is if we have to do what George Steiner (1989) suggests, which is to put a wager on transcendence as the way in which God's faithfulness to past tradition and textual revelation somehow manifests itself in a particular context. This may in fact be the truth, but how we justify such arguments often becomes circular and

unconvincing. Daniel will object that I am pushing him farther down the road of epistemological relativism than he wishes to go. He is right, but I am doing so because I want to underline the fact that consensual theories of truth can often lose the sense of that blessed rage for disorder that inspires the Derridian and Heideggerian notions of the need for deconstruction and decoding before we can be certain we have arrived at any bedrock of tradition or community consensus (in this regard, see Caputo 1997).

The other postmodernist in our group, Ji-Youn Cho, is, however, not only ready to grasp the deconstructionist agenda but to put it to good use. Picking up some hints from chapter three of *Metavista* she utilizes similar arguments in favour of more time, investment, and energy going into Sign Language versions of the Bible. She notes, as I did in the chapter cited, that over the last forty years we have witnessed a sea change in our understanding and public perception of the nature of disability. No longer are disabled people marginalized, institutionalized, and rendered invisible and powerless in our society. What was interesting as far as my own research was concerned was the way in which the various disability lobbies had changed the language of medical deficit into one of social diversity. A deliberate strategy in this social transformation by those supporting a change in the law as far as the discrimination and marginalization of disabled people was concerned, was the destabilization of formerly accepted binary language such as disabled or handicapped as opposed to able-bodied and fully functioning. With such politically disempowering language out of the way then, I suggested, what actually happened was that those with disabilities were ready to set about re-imagining their story and their role in democratic societies.

In an intriguing piece of exegesis Ji-Youn takes the story of Jesus' healing of the deaf mute in Mark 7.31-37 and totally evacuates it of the same theological and political agenda that rendered that particular passage an example of exclusionary and disempowering exegesis. In its place she finds a Jesus who not only utilizes his own form of therapeutic sign language but sees in this man an instance of the liberating presence of the kingdom of God, as opposed to the rather hapless disciples who are systematically deaf and mute in a way they did not recognize! If this is an example of liberating postmodern exegesis then I for one am all for it and want to do nothing more than support the attempts taking place in Korea to provide a SL version of the Bible for a community of people who have much more to offer both society and the churches than many have previously imagined.

### **A postcolonial approach to Bible translation**

Only one of our contributors falls into what I would term a postcolonial approach to Bible translation. To be fair, it may be the case that Edward Kajivora does not recognize this apparent classification as he does not refer to postcolonial exegesis in his article. I hope, however, to persuade him that this is in fact the case! It was quite a breakthrough in my own thinking when I realized that the postcolonial critique of Western colonial imperialism was the other side of the postmodern critique of the epistemological imperialism of the European Enlightenment. In that sense postcolonialism raised an ethical agenda which postmodernism lacked. Franz Fanon captures this ethical agenda decisively:

Colonialism is not simply content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of a dominated country. Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. (Fanon 1963, 169)

In his article Edward is keen to document an experiment in what he calls interreligious dialogue and Bible translation, where both Christians and Muslims come together to share perspectives on chosen texts from the Bible and the Quran. Edward is in favour of this kind of interreligious dialogue not only because it sheds new light on disputed texts but because it is a positive contribution to finding a more peaceful coexistence between the two Abrahamic faiths in the context of the rise of religious fundamentalism and a previous history of genocide and civil war. Edward states his case succinctly:

It is learning about the other, studying their texts and religious practices and so translating them into one's own religion. In Sudan, Bible translation encompasses intercultural and interreligious dialogue. This does not mean that the Bible is being Islamized, but that we attempt to create a middle point where Muslims or people of other faiths can understand the Bible better. (177)

My point is a simple one—for many in Sudan both Islam and Christianity represent colonial imperialism and for some wedded to native African religion an alien imposition of a culturally divisive belief system. Similarly, such interreligious dialogue, important as it is for the reasons already outlined, only thrives because both faiths have, to a certain extent, distorted and disfigured the previous cultural history of religious diversity that defined this area of Africa. This point is implicit at one point in Edward's paper:

The dialogue is between Christians and Muslims only. Those who profess African traditional religion are not included. This is specifically for two reasons: First, although these traditional people are well recognized in the society and their religion is respected, there is no history of practical confrontation between its adherents and those of the other faiths in the area. There is no reason therefore to engage them in the dialogue. Second, Islam considers them *kufar*, pagans or polytheists, with no formal religion. It follows that including them in the dialogue would shut the door for Muslims to join the forum. (174)

When I read this I have to confess that I become uneasy because it seems to me that to exclude both the reality of colonialism and a group that holds memories and narratives that contain elements of the previous cultural history of Sudan is to impoverish the reality of interreligious dialogue rather than to enhance its significance for the processes of Bible translation. Having made this observation I still want to encourage the work that Edward is involved with for the very same reasons that he puts forward. In this troubled part of Africa interreligious debate becomes another example of the hermeneutics of Scriptural Reasoning, a movement among theologians and practitioners that encourages Jews, Christians, and Muslims to come together and explore the different exegetical traditions and

resources of their respective faiths. (See the reference to the work of P. Ochs in the bibliography of Edward's paper.)

### **A postcritical contribution to Bible translation**

I need to begin this section by explaining the nature of the terms I deploy. The phrase postcritical is really a further explication of what Paul Ricoeur intended by the phrase "the second naïveté" (see Stiver 2001). Ricoeur embraced the advance of historical-critical research both in terms of biblical studies and in regard to philosophical enquiry. He did, however, want to add to the frame the importance of what has become known as the hermeneutical turn in modern continental philosophy that stems from the work of Schleiermacher, Gadamer, Heidegger, and Ricoeur himself. Ricoeur put forward the thesis that when we first come to the biblical text we do so in the guise of a first naïveté; in other words, we are often literalist, uncritical, and unskilled in the arena of biblical exegesis and translation. It is important that we move beyond this phase into the critical phase where we learn how to use and deploy the full range of critical tools at our disposal. Yet for Ricoeur none of this is an end in itself; rather, it should be the way we advance into the second naïveté where we become aware of the many dimensions of meaning-making that lie behind any act of critical interpretation. For Ricoeur this meant recognizing the role of symbol, metaphor, and narrative, the hermeneutical dimensions of which must be added to the historical-critical idiom.

In her timely and well-written article Marijke de Lang takes me to task for appearing to dismiss too readily the historical-critical approach to biblical interpretation and embracing instead a kind of postmodern pluralism that does not take adequate account of the more recent debates and qualifiers that have made historical criticism a much more sophisticated tool of exegesis and enquiry than I appear to recognize. Some of her criticism I would now accept. However, she also admits that it was never my intention in *Metavista* to actually enter into all the ramifications of this debate. I was in fact mainly making the point that years of training in the tools of historical criticism had not helped the clergy in particular to close the gap between the academy and the church and that biblical interpretation had for too long been in the hands of a small coterie of the elite, namely the so-called guild of biblical scholars. I have to say that I am still not convinced that the practitioners of the historical-critical method of biblical exegesis and interpretation have really taken on board the full implications of the hermeneutical, literary, and linguistic turns in the social sciences, particularly as these methodologies come together in interdisciplinary approaches to exegesis and translation. It is the recognition of these three revolutions in contemporary thought that really constitutes what I mean by the postcritical approach to Bible translation. Similarly, to invoke Ricoeur again, it is precisely at this point that the Bible translator must learn to inhabit the three worlds of the text—the world behind the text (traditionally the domain of historical-critical science), the world within the text (increasingly the domain of literary studies as applied to the Bible), and the world in front of the text (the domain of cultural studies and communication theory in relation to the application of a text to contemporary contexts). Any comprehensive and inclusive



process of Bible translation must keep the three worlds of the text continually in view.

Last but by no means least I want to draw attention to the article written by Hans-Olav Mørk, which charts the course of the production and reception of the recently published and highly acclaimed Norwegian Bible, a project which fully embraced the literary turn in the social sciences and employed some twelve literary writers including well-known authors and playwrights. While I am familiar with the work of scholars like Robert Alter, Eric Auerbach, Frank Kermode, and in Old Testament literary studies, Michael Fishbane and Meir Sternberg, this is an area where I feel least qualified to comment. The aims of this project outlined by Hans-Olav near the beginning of his article are to my mind both commendable and comprehensive, namely to produce a version of the Bible that took into consideration the following objectives: “to restore the biblical metaphors, especially the body metaphors, that were lost due to a functional equivalent translation method; to recreate the literary structures of the source text where a meaning-based translation had led to a disregard of literary form and structure; and thereby, to make the cultural differences between source text and target text more visible; and to create a stylistically more pointed and less redundant target-language text” (153).

The flattening of otherness that took place due to the ascendancy of functional equivalence in Bible translation is one of its least commendable outcomes. Ironically, this factor also led to the popularity of some modern paraphrase versions of the Bible simply because these versions applied an Esperantist approach to biblical translation! It is also true that the recognition of the ethical claim of the other or otherness arose simultaneously in modern philosophy and postcolonial studies. Literary approaches to Bible translation are alert to patterns of literary structure, analogy, and application that inhabit the biblical text and allow the otherness of original contexts to remain while at the same time enhancing the way in which readers can imaginatively indwell biblical texts and stories.

I commend this edition of *The Bible Translator* as a good and timely example of how a variety of cultural contexts both interact and condition our reception and understanding of particular biblical texts while simultaneously making various aspects of Bible translation a more dynamic and hermeneutically sophisticated task.

### References

- Caputo, John D. 1977. *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Fanon, Franz. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove.
- Greene, Colin, and Martin Robinson. 2008. *Metavista: Bible, Church and Mission in an Age of Imagination*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster.
- Steiner, George. 1989. *Real Presences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stiver, Dan R. 2001. *Theology after Ricoeur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap.
- Ward, Graham. 2009. *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Post-material Citizens*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.