Translating Babel: Religion and Translation in the Early Modern Period

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All of the major cultural exchanges in history required translation – the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment are obvious examples. Yet Translation Studies have been little interested in history and most historians still treat translation as an invisible given, as if a translated text were „the same" as the original. Recently, scholars such as Peter Burke and R. Po-chia Hsia have urged increased study of the role of translation in cultural encounters in the Early Modern period. They point in particular to the need for studies on religious translation, since translators do not just translate linguistic items but religion itself.

An international, English-language conference at the Research Centre Gotha 20-22 July 2017 sought to answer this call by focusing on the translations, transformations and adaptations of religious texts across cultural and national boundaries in the Early Modern period. The conference was funded by the State Art Collections in Dresden (SKD) and by the German Research Council (DFG). The guest lecturers from Europe, Israel and North America addressed a cluster of questions: What negotiations and compromises did translators make? What did they translate and what did they omit? How did they transform meaning through interventions, abridgements, or amplifications? Did these transformations amount to misunderstandings or could they be perceived as enrichments? How did translators make material familiar or attractive for recipients? How did they „translate" written texts into visual art or into other contexts, such as natural philosophy? Did translations result in new practices or rituals? Finally, why were certain texts or ideas interesting to a certain culture or sub-culture at a given time?

The conference organizer, LUCINDA MARTIN (Erfurt), opened the conference in a talk on „Translation and the Meaningful Ambigu-ities of the Religious Text". She raised questions of ambiguity using the case of the mystical philosopher Jacob Böhme who melded words to create neologisms with multiple levels of meaning (qual + quellen = quallen). She showed how Böhme translated science into religion and religion into science, so that, for example, rebirth was both a spiritual and a chemical process. Böhme's interlocuters then used visual translation to make his complex ideas more accessible through paintings and drawings. At the same time, his enemies translated his work in ways calculated to bring him ill repute. Martin introduced the term „biased translation" to differentiate between translators with strategic or polemical intent and modern scholars who at least try to remain true to an author's intent when translating texts. Martin set the stage for the rest of the conference by asking how authors, biased translators and modern scholars deal with ambiguity in religious texts.

In her keynote address on „Religion as Translation in early modern South Asia," ANNE MURPHY (British Columbia, Canada) focused on Sufi texts in Early Modern Punjab. She explained that historical scholarship on the region is „haunted" by the violence of the twentieth century. Yet, in the Early Modern era, Islamic and Hindu traditions existed side by side and often in productive exchange. Her paper emphasized that translation is not just based on difference, but also on perceptions of commonality. She posited that the notion of two „competitor" languages is a distortion introduced by colonialism and one that simplifies much more differentiated processes of exchange and mutuality. In the discussion following the address, participants noted that the whole notion of discrete languages that coordinate neatly with nations and faiths may be a modern idea. In earlier times, language was often perceived in a more organic way. Indeed, Robert Young has argued that in many parts of the world, the colonial period ushered in the „invention of language."

The conference also underscored the mental connection not only between languages and nations, but also between nations and certain canonical texts. FABIAN FECHNER (Hagen) problematized these relationships in his paper about Spanish Jesuit activities in South

America. Missionaries' arguments over how to translate the name of the Divine revealed notions about a hierarchy of languages. Yet, it is only through missions that many indigenous languages became written in the first place, thus binding those languages forever to a memory of colonial oppression. In this context, the conference participants observed that Christianity is itself a religion of translation.

CAREN REIMANN (Würzburg) addressed questions of authenticity and authority in her discussion of the Arabic and Arabic-Latin Gospels produced by the Typographia Medicea press in Rome. The project had missionary goals that were not limited to non-Christians – a primary aim was to reconcile the Western and Eastern branches of Christianity. Yet attempts to produce a useful Arabic translation of the New Testament ended up revealing cracks in the authority of the Vulgate itself. Furthermore, the idiosyncratic woodcut program employed by Arabic translations highlighted the need to address different cultural contexts in translations.

FEDERICO DAL BO (Barcelona) thematized negotiations and the role of privilege in discussing the first Latin translation of the Talmud. The translation was, in Bo's words, „correct but not correct" – on the one hand, the passages were translated perfectly and the annotations showed deep knowledge of cultural and ritual practices. On the other hand, by selecting only the most „exotic" bits and ripping them out of their explanatory context, the text portrayed Jews as superstitious and harmful. Other lectures at the conference discussed similar kinds of manipulation on the part of translators.

The case of the first complete Hebrew translation of the Book of Matthew provided YAACOV DEUTSCH (Jerusalem) with a case for exploring the motivations for religious translation: the wish to learn the „holy" language of God in order to read and understand canonical texts, missionary efforts, a need to authenticate Scriptures and even simple scholarly curiosity. Deutsch showed how questions about the trustworthiness of a translation could lead to repeated efforts to translate the same text – often with differing results.

One section at the conference connected religious translation to violence and politics in Britain. Using the case of Protestant-Catholic polemical debates in Elizabethan England, ELISABETH NATOUR (Heidelberg) pointed to the importance of the framing of texts. Through the use of introductions and marginalia, authors could take accurate translations of older texts and connect them to new political situations. Natour demonstrated, for example, how such additions could be used to condone or condemn civil disobedience.

FLORIS VERHAART (Belfast) followed up with a detailed study of political-religious polemic using the translation of Guillaume du Buc's „Institutiones" by Robert Hill. In this case, the translator intervened directly in the text, refuting the author where he did not agree with him and writing whole new sections. Hill used Scripture to advocate for specific political positions, and in particular to shore up the status quo – a position in direct opposition to du Buc's basic text. In this way, the translator was able to capitalize on the popularity of the du Buc text to spread an opposing view.

In his paper, ARIEL HESSAYON (London) focused on the networks of book publishers, sellers and translators who dealt in continental spiritualist works during the English Revolution, 1641-1660. These included a wide variety of mystical, alchemical and esoteric texts, including the texts of Jacob Böhme and his followers. Hessayon argued that after decades of war and upheaval these translations served the grand goal of universal reformation using all of the media of the day.

Relying on Oswald Croll´s „Basilica Chymica" (1609), STEFAN LAUBE (Wolfenbüttel) explored the connection between alchemy and religion in Early Modern Europe. Alchemy was religious service: not only was matter purified, but the alchemist was also redeemed. Oswald's „Basilica Chymica" thus served a double role as nature book and devotional book, and became a standard work of the Paracelsian healing arts all over Europe. Central for Laube's discussion was the book's impressive front cover, which Laube asserted can be seen as an „intersemiotic translation" (Roman Jakobson). A lively discussion ensued about whether or not visual renderings can be understood as

translations of verbal texts.

In his paper on Socinian translation practices, SASCHA SALATOWSKY (Gotha) discussed the Socinian program of vernacular publishing. In contrast to most sixteenth-century theological discourse in Europe, Socinians specifically targeted lay people with their early translations of catechisms. In doing so, they tried to match their message to their audience and to this end they formulated eight principles of translation. As a controversial, outlawed „sect," the Socinians needed translation to survive.

In the last paper of the conference, CORINNE BAYERL (Oregon, USA) presented her research on French Jansenists. The group was labelled heretical by Jesuits because they dared to present religious texts in French instead of Latin. The fact that Jansenists studied Hebrew and Greek was also suspect, since even knowing the original languages of the Scriptures implied a challenge to clerical authority. Bayerl's paper, like others at the conference, revealed that when knowledge of a language is tied to certain social or political hierarchies, then translation can quickly amount to heresy or sedition.

The conference made clear that religious translations served individuals and communities in a variety of ways, from missionizing to polemical purposes to the defense of persecuted minorities and beyond. While the Catholic Church, particularly the Jesuits, pursued large-scale, strategic publishing programs, religious nonconformists spread their ideas through manuscript translations transmitted in clandestine networks. Both established churches and nonconformists relied on émigrés, exiles and outsiders as translators and mediators. In some cases, texts underwent multiple translations, often through a „bridge" language and culture. Multiple layers of decontextualisation and recontextualisation created displacements. Translations designed to spread meaning thus also changed it, and indeed, translators' goals often diverged from those of the authors themselves, as when Christian scholars repurposed Jewish and Islamic texts to „prove" aspects of Christianity. Religious communities, translators, publishers and patrons thus implemented conscious translation strategies to ac-

complish their goals, achieving both foreseen and unforeseen shifts in the cultural landscapes of the Early Modern world.

Conference overview:

Martin Mulsow (Erfurt / Gotha): Greeting

Introduction

Lucinda Martin (Erfurt/Gotha): Translation and the Meaningful Ambiguities of the Religious Text

Keynote Address

Anne Murphy (British Columbia/Canada): Hīr-Vāris Shāh: Religion as translation in early modern South Asia

Guest Lectures

Fabian Fechner (Hagen): The Holy Scripture in Devilish Tongue? Inner-Catholic Debates on Indigenous Translations of Catechesis in Latin America

Caren Reimann (Würzburg): „Glory" and Eleven Other Good Reasons for Learning Arabic: The Arabic and Arabic-Latin Gospels

Federico Dal Bo (Barcelona): The Latin Talmud: Assessing Boundaries between Judaism and Christianity in the 13th Century

Yaacov Deutsch (Jerusalem): The first complete Hebrew translation of the New Testament

Elisabeth Natour (Heidelberg): Translation and Religious Controversy in Early Elizabethan England

Floris B. Verhaart (Belfast): The Translation of Guillaume Du Buc's *Institutiones* and its Political Uses in Catholic-Protestant Debates in England

Ariel Hessayon (London): The Tasks of the Translators: Social Networks and the Publication of Continental European Writings during the English Revolution, 1641–1660

Stefan Laube (Wolfenbüttel): Fabulous Images as the Path to Salvation: Frontispieces as Translation in 17th Century Alchemical Books

Sascha Salatowsky (Gotha): A Vernacular Translation Strategy and the Socinian Message of Equality

Corinne Bayerl (Oregon /USA): „A Sect of Hellenists": Translation as Religious Nonconformism in 17th-century French Jansenism

Closing Remarks

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