

**Magic, Divine Revelation and Translation
in Global Theological Education Today;
with a focus on Africa**

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*Analytic philosophies ... don't study other languages ...
They're dead ... to the nuances of language"*
(Muehlhauser 2010, citing Caputo).

Caputo's insight may help to explain the predicament of theological education in the majority world, and especially in Africa, today.

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Abstract

The impact or sense of text translated into a different worldview must be transformed if it is to engage its new cultural context. An understanding of why and how this happens is vital if the globalising church is to get away from a uni-central model of theological truth rooted in economic dependency on the hegemony of Western English. This article portrays inter-cultural translation in vivid ways using Scriptural example to show how current models of translation depend on either direct divine revelation or magic for their success. The article advocates enabling Christian discipleship for other than Western people at depth through missionary engagement that is rooted in local languages and resources.

Introduction

Casual observation points to a strong North American domination of the Protestant churches' formal theological education carried out in Africa and elsewhere in the majority world. A great deal of it is engaged in English. Even that which is not in English is often translated from English. Widely recognised problems in the African church include its dependence on the West and its orientation to the prosperity Gospel. This short article uses a simple example to illustrate how indeed the failure on the side of formal theological education to take account of inter-language and inter-cultural differences is resulting in the prosperity gospel, the generation and perpetuation of unhealthy dependency on the West, and other widespread maladies of the non-Western church. This author advocates for theological education using languages that are indigenous to the majority world.

Theological Translation in Practice

A missionary is concerned with sharing the gospel. I will simplify a little to illustrate what happens when the Gospel is shared inter culturally. My primary focus is on Africa. I want to look at what is often considered to be a key New Testament verse, John 3:16.

Let us assume for simplicity's sake that John 3:16 represents the Gospel. John 3:16 in the NIV is as follows:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

I want to take the Luo people of Western Kenya as an example of what happens when this verse is translated into the Luo worldview.¹ When I say 'translated into the Luo worldview', I mean 'translated' in such a way that it makes sense to Luo people. This could happen without translating the passage out of English, if Luo people have an understanding of English. Luo people do not know what they do not know. If there is content in the native English way of understanding John 3:16 that falls outside the worldview of a Luo person, then clearly the Luo person cannot 'get' that part of the native-English content. For example, were a passage to refer to Valentine's Day or Big Ben, then a Luo person who has never heard of either Valentines Day or Big Ben, cannot understand the passage with respect to these things. Instead, the person concerned either has to leave the content of those words in some way 'blank' in their mind, or they have to substitute alternative content. For example they may take a reference to Valentine's Day as being to a 'valuable day' of some sort.

It is difficult for me to illustrate what would happen above using only English as I am required to do in this article. Every English word would have, and does have, alternative nuances for Luo people, who learn English by associating 'new' English words with words in their own language. In order to compare two implicit Englishes, native-English English and the Luo-English, I need to use some kind of labelling. **Perhaps English-English could be written in blue, but Luo-English in green.** Or, every Luo-English word could be written preceded by a z, or underlined² or **put in bold**, etc. The reader would then know that a word that is so labelled is to be taken as having a Luo-people's set of implicatures³, impacts, or sense. An un-labelled word would be taken as having a native-English set of implicatures, or impacts, or senses. It would be even more difficult to distinguish these different versions of language in spoken form than in written form. A strong accent would be one way of doing this. Or someone could use different voices, for example a high-pitched voice (like a female voice) for Luo-English, yet a low pitched voice (like a male voice) for native-speakers' English. The latter would make for an interesting conversation! It would also be rather intriguing, and certainly difficult to hold the two Englishes apart in one's mind as one talked. I guess it would be impossible to do this 100%, although perhaps one could do it to some extent. I am not aware of this kind of communication being carried out in practice.

¹ I am personally familiar with the Luo people's language and to some extent their worldview.

² This is the approach I use here: Harries (2011).

³ An implicature of a word is what the word implies in a given context, rather than what it 'means'.

The normal way of keeping different sets of implicatures and senses distinct would be for each to be expressed in its *own* language. We would need to have two (or more) languages representing two (or more) worldviews. Each language having its own worldview (or, perhaps, range of worldviews) means that translation between worldviews would correspond to translation between languages. This is a means of communication that people have used throughout history.

Although a little arbitrarily, perhaps we can suggest that the most practical way of representing worldview differences, is via language differences. We then come across an interesting process known as translation. Here when I refer to translation I am focusing on translation between different languages. There is currently a widespread understanding, at least in native-English speaking circles, that inter-language translation is possible and helpful. Translation is a process, it should be noted in the light of the above, in which parallels are assumed to exist between signs (such as words) and their implicatures in one worldview or context, and signs and their implicatures in another worldview or context.

Comparing cultures with sports can give us a good analogy. Then we can say that there is an assumption that any state, happening or being in football (soccer) has an equivalent state, happening or being in tennis (or any other sport). In football we have things like; a goal, a penalty kick, a foul called handball, and a throw-in. *The mind boggles a little to know what the equivalent of these things might be in tennis?* This kind of mind-boggling illustrates the dilemmas, frustrations and impossibilities of inter-language translation.

Despite the above difficulties: translation happens. It happens intra-language (between speakers of the same language who have different cultural backgrounds) and it also happens inter-language. I have for our purposes copied a Luo-language translation of John 3:16 below:

*"Nyasaye nohero piny ahinya kama, omyo nochiwo Wuode ma miderma mondo ng'ama oyie kuome kik lal, to obed gi ngima ma nyaka chieng'."*⁴

The above is not a word for word translation. There is not a Luo word for every English word. Key concepts in English have however been designated some kind of equivalent in the Luo language. E.g. for God we have *Nyasaye*, for loved we have *nohero*, for his son we have *wuode*, for gave we have *nochiwo*, and so on.

What is interesting for our purposes is now to endeavour to translate back into English. Of interest to us might be – how would a Luo speaker who is culturally a Luo who is also familiar with English but unfamiliar with the particular English passage that this has come from translate the above passage that has been translated into Luo, into English?⁵ Many,

⁴ From the Luo language Bible, 1976.

⁵ This practice, known as 'back-translation', is of course a known means of double checking translations. A key question perhaps not always sufficiently considered as this is done, is the presupposed context that a back-translator works with.

perhaps almost an infinity, of options is possible. As a fluent Luo-language speaker – I suggest that the below is a likely option:

"He who makes us prosper when pleaded to so thought of the dead that he gave his only son so that people who go along with what he says will receive prosperity to the end."

Those who are theologically aware will realise that the above is a theologically 'wrong' translation. My translation back into English seems to communicate untruth about Christianity and to distort the true biblical passage. A theological or bible student who translated John 3:16 as above would by many be considered to be plainly *mised*. She would not be 'wrong' because she has mistranslated. An expert on the Luo language would be needed to make that assessment. She would be wrong because what she has expressed is not true to orthodox Christian doctrine and belief.

In today's world correction for the above erring student will not come from their own language. It will be communicated in English. (At best, such correction will be translated into their language.) That is to say, that little or no effort will be spent on 'correcting' the translation process. There are no Luo-language Bible schools, except perhaps somewhere a small, most insignificant and informal one.⁶ No one is seriously trying to correct uses of the Luo language to align them with orthodox Christian usages. There are only people telling what 'should' be the correct translation into English. ... In practice then, expression of correct theology in Luoland as in much of Anglophone Africa requires knowledge of English. Presumably it follows, that without knowing English, one cannot be a Christian, or at least cannot be a 'correct' (proper/orthodox) Christian. The English someone needs to learn, as we have discussed above, is not English that is an implicit translation from the African person's mother tongue. That kind of English is faulty. The English the person needs to know in order to be a 'correct' Christian is that of native-English speakers. That is, it is the English that relates to Western and not African ways of life.

Here is the need for 'magic' or direct divine intervention that I have referred to above. In order to know the English that is needed to express correct theology, because native-English speakers' English is rooted in the native-English speakers' worldview, the African person must first be familiar with a Western (i.e. native-English) worldview. Yet we must ask: how can they become familiar with a Western worldview when having been born and raised and still finding themselves living in a culture that is vastly different from it? In order to know correct theology a student of theology must first learn English in the way that Westerners and not Africans know it. If they do not do so, then their theology will be 'incorrect'. The only way, however, that an African born person raised in Africa with an African worldview will learn this kind of 'correct' theology, if not by direct revelation from God or by a process of magic, is through rote learning the correct thing to say.

Something akin to what I have described as 'magic' occurred in the Biblical record in Acts 2:6-12. This was not 'magic' in the negative sense. It was a miracle performed by God.

⁶ I have searched for such a school, and not found one.

Seeking to rely on such miracles is according to some Christians, perhaps especially Pentecostals, legitimate. Wanting to rely on such miraculous intervention in order to acquire correct understanding, does put a question mark on the need for humanly imparted Theological Education. It also puts a question mark on the correction by the church in the West of the majority world church, lest the Western church in 'correcting' the majority world church be contrary to the will of God, the source of revelation. If the Western 'mother' churches are not there to 'correct' the others, however, then we have an issue of Christian unity. Can a church be one, if what it teaches is different in different parts of the world? On the other hand we should also ask: how can theology be contextualised if what it teaches is expressed in identical terms using the same language in whichever part of the world it finds itself?

In practice churches in the majority world today have a dual-level theology or doctrine. Officially their beliefs are expressed in English or European languages. The doctrines they actually operate on in practice are much more accurately expressed in vernacular languages. In many parts of Africa, what churches actually appear to express in English comes across as prosperity gospel. This is what it sounds like in English when African people transfer-over some of their previous dependency on their ancestors to their newly found dependency on he who is in English known as God.

Solutions

I am not aware of a simple convenient solution to the above dilemma currently facing globalised Christianity. I do not, for various reasons, consider the current situation in which correct teaching is all in European languages to be entirely satisfactory. The dominance of European languages, especially English, is reminiscent of Latin as language of the church in bygone centuries; but there are important differences today. One of these differences is the current efficacy of globalised communication. There was no equivalent to the printing press, radio, television, and now internet, in the medieval church. This means that 'correct' doctrine tended to remain in the upper echelons of the church, and people could solve their own problems as they knew best, while under the umbrella of the above. Today the penetration of English globally and especially in Africa, is enormous. This means that the spread of the pretentiousness that goes with the rote learning mentioned above is also enormous, growing pretty much exponentially, and penetrating right down into the grass-roots of the church.

The pervasive cruelty of the currently fast developing global caste-system, as it can perhaps provocatively be called, is the very one-sidedness of it all. In terms of Africa – the rule of Europe over African people seems to be enormous and constantly growing. This has implications for racism in the West – as the association between the possession of white skin and power, authority, wisdom and 'correct' knowledge, never mind money, is in Africa ever growing, and fuels racist thinking back in the West. The disenfranchisement of local people in Africa, who are left with no choice but to rote learn a great deal of what they really cannot understand and that does not come from them at all, continues. The irony of this contemporary-colonialism is that it is not even 'official'. African states

technically are independent. Thus European domination can continue to be irresponsible without ever being brought to justice.

The fact that there is no easy solution to the above predicament does not mean that nothing can be done. The Christian church in Africa is in a unique and highly privileged position. It's penetration to grass roots and its links at the same time globally are absolutely singular. The church leads the way in empowering African people, customs and languages. In some parts of Africa already, if not in many parts, the church is uniquely rooted in the mother tongue (Kody 2009:229). There is potential in the church, if only African languages were encouraged, for education to be rooted in what people understand instead of in rote learning. Growth of indigenous theology is to some extent these days throttled by the hegemonic blanket of Western language, Western funded and Western oriented educational enterprises, and especially for our purposes the Western-rooted theological education enterprise. Inspired Western people ready to buck the trend could do a lot to rectify this. They could take African people (and others of the majority world) seriously on their own terms, so as to emancipate instead of suppress them, by working from a foundation of African thinking and initiative, instead of smothering it using English. They could do this by using African languages (rooted in African worldviews).⁷

Summary and Conclusion

The fact that culture / context affects how terms in language are interpreted inevitably results in alternative understandings that correspond to different cultures. John 3:16 is here examined as case-study comparing English and Luo (western Kenyan) understandings. Implicit Luo interpretations easily appear erroneous when translated back into English. One outcome of this is that African Christians communicating in the global arena can easily have their theological understanding condemned, unless they are very careful to express themselves in English in ways that are known to be acceptable to the dominant native-English world. In effect this means that close knowledge of Western English is required for theology to be expressed 'correctly'. Because most African people are unfamiliar with the detailed cultural presuppositions underlying Western English, they can only be correct if either they copy others by rote, through a process of magic, or through obtaining direct divine revelation. In practice many African churches maintain two systems of doctrine and theology in parallel: Officially there is the globally recognised belief system, usually almost identical to that of mother churches in the West. Then unofficially are the local theologies that are the basis for the actual functioning of the churches concerned, in intricate interaction with local cultural issues. The influence of the latter on the former can have a church's formal English-language theology appear to be prosperity oriented.

⁷ I do not go into detail here to explain that contextual learning of African languages requires ministry to be, in part at least, dependent on local resources. For more details see vulnerablemission.org

Amongst the implications of the above, is the need for cultural sensitivity on the side of theological education. The kind of transfer of a system from one part of the world to another lock stock and barrel as is sometimes happening these days has its weaknesses. When the source of orthodoxy and the language in which it is expressed are the wealthy and powerful, it can push contextualised theologies underground. This approach can lose the heart-rooted transformative power of the Gospel in a sea of foreign impositions. Instead of being transforming of hearts, the Gospel can come to be understood as a means to material prosperity. An important key for Gospel work to be able to penetrate indigenous cultures is for mission work to be carried out, in part at least, using local languages and resources.

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