



The Role And Significance Of The Translation Of The Bible

by Kwame Bediako

[posted 08-2008]

Into African Languages In The Consolidation Of The Church And Its Expansion Into Unreached Areas

Introduction: a new configuration of the Christian world

I believe that there is a sense in which your present Africa Area Forum and the concerns that bring you together are particularly providential. For this reason, it is important to begin with a recognition of the historical context of our present discussion, namely, the fact, now generally accepted, that in the course of the last century there occurred a shift in the centre of gravity of Christianity from the North to the southern continents, from the Western to the non-Western world. The maps of the world's religions have had to be re-drawn in the course of the last 20 or so years, and some of them, in only the last ten years.

For those who are familiar with *The World Christian Encyclopaedia*, edited by David Barrett, (Nairobi: CUP, 1982), the notion of a modern shift in the centre of gravity of Christianity presents no great difficulty. The idea that in our time, the heartlands of the Christian faith are found no longer in the Western world, but in the non-Western world; not in the northern continents, but in the southern continents of Latin America, Asia and particularly, Africa, has now become common currency in virtually all discussions of the Christian presence in the world. In 1900, 80% of the world's Christians lived in Europe and North America. Today, just over a century on, more than 60% of the world's Christians are said to live in Latin America, Asia and Africa. In other words, we are living through a new configuration of the Christian world.

Before the publication of the Encyclopaedia, Barrett had predicted, in an article entitled, "AD 2000: 350 million Christians in Africa", in the *International Review of Mission*, January 1970, that by the end of the 20th century, Africa might well "tip the balance and transform Christianity permanently, into a primarily non-Western religion" (Barrett 1970: 50) Not only in demographic terms, but in other respects too, Christianity has become a non-Western religion. This does not mean that Western Christianity has become irrelevant; rather, that Christianity may now be seen for what it truly is, a universal religion, and that what has taken place in Africa has been a significant part of this process.

At about the same period as Barrett's researches and prediction, Andrew Walls, founding Director of the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the non-Western World, University of Edinburgh, then in Aberdeen, wrote: "Theology that matters will be theology where the Christians are." The point he was making was that there has never arisen a significant theology that does not emerge from, or relate to, a significant body of Christian believers. Therefore, as "it looks as if the bulk of Christians are going to be in

Africa, and Latin America and in certain parts of Asia" -- with Africa having a particular significance in this southward shift of the centre of gravity of Christianity", he went on to state:

It follows from this that what happens within the African churches in the next generation will determine the whole shape of Church history for centuries to come. Whether and, in what way, world evangelization is carried on may well be determined by what goes on in Africa; what sort of theology is most characteristic of the Christianity of the twenty-first century may well depend on what has happened in the minds of African Christians in the interim.'

For Walls, this global transformation of the Christian world in our time has far-reaching significance, which he has expressed more recently in the following terms:

This means that we have to regard African Christianity as potentially the representative Christianity of the twenty-first century. The representative Christianity of the second and third and fourth centuries was shaped by events and processes at work in the Mediterranean world. In later times it was events and processes among the barbarian peoples of Northern and Western Europe, or in Russia, or modern Western Europe, or the North Atlantic world that produced the representative Christianity of those times. The Christianity typical of the twenty-first century will be shaped by the events and processes that take place in the Southern continents, and above all by those that take place in Africa.'

Kevin Ward, (of Leeds University, UK), in the newly-published World History of Christianity (ed. Adrian Hastings), concludes, "...that, at some point in the twenty-first century, Christians in Africa will become more numerous than Christians in any other continent and more important than ever before in articulating a global Christian identity in a pluralist world."

The significance of African Christianity - some assessments

It is perhaps too much to expect that this global significance of modern African Christianity should readily find general and unqualified acceptance. Indeed, one internationally recognised researcher into African Christianity, Paul Gifford, of the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London, is rather puzzled at this prospect of Christianity becoming a dominant religion in Africa, and of Africans contributing a visibly high proportion of the world's Christians. In his recent book, *African Christianity - its public role* (1998), Gifford sees in this significance of Christianity in African life, a sign of Africa's dependence. In his view, Africa compounds its own political and economic marginalisation by succumbing to Western hegemony as one of its best remaining ways of opting into the global order. According to Gifford, 'whatever else it is, Christianity is a cultural product, honed in the West over centuries.'

Newsweek of April 16, 2001 also carried a major article on Christianity under the title: 'The Changing face of the Church - How the explosion of Christianity in developing nations is transforming the world's largest religions', written by Kenneth Woodward, the Religion Editor. It is evident from that article that the fact of the shift in Christianity's centre of gravity is a phenomenon that cannot now be ignored; and Woodward even records the suggestion in some Roman Catholic circles that the next pope might conceivably be an African. And yet, on reading the article, one gets the distinct impression that Woodward too is somewhat puzzled about the fact of Christianity's southward shift. This is how Woodward concludes his article:

Although Christianity's future may lie outside the West, Western influence is still decisive wherever the Gospel is preached. In religion, as in other international affairs, globalisation means that superpowers remain dominant. For the world's poor, Christianity often appeals just because it is seen as the religion of the most successful superpower, the United States. Nonetheless, as the world's most missionary religion, Christianity has a history of renewing itself, even in the most culturally inhospitable places. That is the

hope that hides behind the changing face of the church. (p.52)

It is not difficult to discern that behind the views exemplified by Paul Gifford and Kenneth Woodward, there lies, as Andrew Walls has noted, the continuing 'hidden assumption that, "Christianity is essentially a religion of the West, with the resultant opinion that the fact that such a high proportion of the world's Christians now are Africans, is 'almost a nuisance'."

African Christianity as Vernacular Religion - the legacy of the modern missionary movement

Be that as it may, it does not require extensive research to demonstrate that the Church in Africa today is continuous with the modern missionary movement from the West, since the late 18th century onwards. Hence, there is a great deal which is evident in African Christianity that is explainable in terms of the cultural impact of the West upon Africa. And yet, there is equally a lot which goes on which is not directly traceable to the western impact. For the purposes of this presentation, I shall draw attention to one factor that I consider of immense importance. It is the fact that the history of the modern expansion of Christianity in the last two centuries can be written as the history of Bible translation in a way that the missionary history of the West itself cannot be. One only needs to recall the important collection of essays edited by Philip Stine, *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church - The last 200 years* (1990).

Every student of European Church History knows the prolonged dominance of Latin in the Christian history of northern and western Europe. The long dominance of Latin as the scriptural medium meant that evangelisation took the form of an acculturative process which 'laid the effect of taking the consciousness of the peoples of the north and west beyond the locality and the kinship group which had traditionally bounded their societies'. This preservation of Latin, not as a vernacular language, but as a "special" language for Christians - "a common language for Scripture, liturgy and learning" meant that as the ancient peoples of the north and west became Christian, the language of Scripture functioned less as the motor for the penetration" of their cultures than as 'The vehicle for the appropriation and expression of a new identity,' which originally had not belonged to them.

We can therefore appreciate the question that Professor of Theology in Free University, Amsterdam, Netherlands, Anton Wessels poses in the title of his book: *Europe - Was it ever really Christian?* But that kind of question also helps us to appreciate the importance that the vernacular Scriptures subsequently came to assume in the religious and cultural renewal movement that we call the Reformation, which, in due time, would bear fruit, even if somewhat belatedly, in the missionary expansion. Modern African Christian history, on the whole, has not followed the earlier European model. Rather it is the link between the vernacular principle, on the one hand, and religious and cultural renewal in Christian history, on the other, which the modern African Christian story seems to demonstrate most prominently. Here, I suggest, stands the real legacy of the modern missionary movement in Africa, that is, the emergence of African Christianity as, not Western religion at all, but rather, as vernacular religion, as mother tongue Christianity.

The point I am making is this: African Christianity today is inconceivable apart from the existence of the Bible in African indigenous languages. By its deep vernacular achievement, therefore, relative to Europe's own missionary past the modern missionary movement from the West in Africa actually ensured that Africans had the means to make their own responses to the Christian message, in terms of their own needs and according to their own categories of thought and meaning.'

In the Epilogue I contributed to the book by Ype Schaaf, *On their way rejoicing - the history and role of the Bible in Africa*, I have suggested that

This, in turn, ensured that a deep and authentic dialogue would ensue between the Gospel and African tradition, authentic in so far as it would take place, not in the terms of a foreign language or of a foreign culture, but in the categories of local idioms and world-views. Africa in modern times was experiencing the reception of the Word of God in ways and at levels which the crucial formative generations of Christians of northern and western Europe, who received Christianity through the medium of a special ecclesiastical language, Latin, may never have known.

On this subject, Lamin Sanneh (originally from the Gambia, and now Professor of World Christianity in Yale University, USA) has made an important contribution in his vigorous demonstration that the modern missionary movement from the West, far from destroying indigenous cultures, has in fact aided their revitalisation. By identifying vernacularisation rather than westernisation, as the essential outcome of the translation process, Sanneh helps focus our attention on the potentialities and valences of receptor languages and cultures, an outcome that sets the Christian example in sharp counterpoint to the Muslim standard of the non-translatable Qur'an. The image of the finger, trigger and the bullet readily comes to mind here. So long as the finger rests on the trigger, the bullet in the gun remains within one's control. The situation changes radically once the trigger is pulled. Once the gun is fired, one cannot recall the hurtling bullet; such has been the effect of the vernacularisation of Christianity in Africa.

In relation to Africa, Sanneh makes the point that the importance of Bible translation and its priority in modern Christian mission were an indication that "God was not disdainful of Africans as to be incommunicable in their languages. This in turn, had two consequences. First this imbued local [African] cultures with eternal significance and endowed African languages with a transcendent range". Second, it also presumed that the God of the Bible had preceded the missionary into the receptor culture, so that the missionary needed to discover Him in the receptor culture. In other words, the fact that the central categories of Christian theology - God, Jesus Christ, creation, history - could be transposed into their local equivalents -- carried implications for the theological understanding of the new worlds of meaning being penetrated. As a historian of religion, Sanneh was particularly sensitive to what this might mean in relation to what he described as 'the salvific value' of Africa's primal religions:

The enterprise of Scriptural translation, with its far-reaching assumptions about traditional religious categories and ideas as a valid carriage for the revelation and divine initiative that precedes and anticipates historical mission, concedes the salvific values of local religions.

In this connection, the fact that in Africa, in the vast majority of cases, the God whose name had been hallowed in indigenous languages in the pre-Christian religious tradition, was found to be the God of the Bible in a way that none of the major European gods, whether Zeus, Jupiter or Odin, could be, presents a challenge that remains to be fully processed. It means going beyond the stage of simple correlations into the implications for a fuller articulation of a fuller Christian doctrine of God. If it is the case that Scripture is the revelation of Ngai, Muungu, Chineke, Olorun, Mwari, Unkulunkulu, Nkosi, Nyame and Onyankopon rather than of an ancient Germanic or Teutonic "gott", then what new opportunities for our Christian theological understanding might this present to us? What might an African Christian doctrine of God look like if the starting point is Ngai or Muungu, who has been known for generations in African pre-Christian tradition, and who also turns out to be the Christians' God? Europe had no equivalent, except the philosophical construct, 'god', which is a generic term, whereas Muungu, Ngai, is His name.

I wish to suggest, therefore, that what the missionary movement, through its envoys, has delivered in Africa is not 'a cultural product honed in the West for centuries' (Gifford). What it has delivered are the basic raw materials for re-affirming the missionary movement's own unique insight into the nature of the gospel, namely, that the Christian faith is essentially vernacular religion, confirmed by the missionary commitment to translation; universal, not uniform, and therefore culturally translatable. That Africa as a continent has the largest number of Bible translations, and in view of the multitude of its languages, is set to continue as such, is probably a moot point. However, the fact that this has happened on a continent

whose people were regarded as more ill-rated than most at the start of the missionary movement may well be worth noting.

It is possible that the full implications of this development for African Christians may not have registered adequately within all African churches. And yet, it is my view that all the ingredients are present for its full impact to be felt in due time. How this essentially vernacular consciousness of the Christian faith is maintained in the context of the so called globalised society of our time might well be one of the most insistent challenges to face us now.

I trust I may be permitted to make a few brief observations about globalisation. This phenomenon presents a particular set of problems, including the prospect of the progressive attrition of vernaculars or mother-tongues and their replacement by so-called "world languages", with the English language appearing to emerge and to function as the new Latin! In my own view this prospect may well prove to be a false dawn. The contemporary revival of distinctive linguistic and cultural identities in several parts of the world, combined with the embracing of new unifying knowledge in science and technology, may well be the indication that people may be less prone to be victims of predatory globalisation than it may be assumed.

But more important still is the fact that the Bible, as the revelation of the mind and design of God, retains its own eschatological vision of world community. The eschatological vision of Scripture, in Revelation 7 points to a plurality of redeemed cultures of equal standing, with an enhanced capacity for communication among them, as a direct fruit of the redemptive presence of the Living God: "...there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language..." (v. 9).

It is important also to realise that Christianity which 'has always been universal in principal,' can be said to have become universal in practice only in recent history, a fact which 'Is not only unique among the world's religions; it is a new feature for the Christian faith itself.' The fact is that, as in the very earliest phase of the rise of Christianity in New Testament times and in the immediate centuries following, the present modern shift in the centre of gravity of the Christian heartlands has produced a situation in which the Christian faith has emerged as, by and large, the religion of the relatively and absolutely poor, centred in the poorest parts of the world".! If the levers of global economic and hence political power, are likely to be 'located in the post-Christian West' then it is also likely that the poorest parts of the world where the majority of the Christians of the world will be found, will be perceived as not significant when viewed from the standpoint of the geopolitical interests of the West. Gifford and Woodward reflect this perspective, as we noted earlier.

But our concern is with the mind and purposes of the Lord of mission, and not the schemes and projects of world empires and superpowers. In the expectation that it is the eschatological vision of Scripture that will prove more enduring, therefore, it is my view that in the coming decades, the cumulative effect of the impact of the resurgence of religion in its various forms generally, and of Christianity in particular, now for the first time in history a universal faith, could well be a reverse process to the prevailing western-driven globalisation. A process of globalisation "from below", in which the social and cultural significance of religious belief and religious communities - associated with the less affluent parts of the world - could become appreciated afresh and so lead to a considerable modification of the now generalised expectation that the Two-Thirds of the world has little choice but to follow in the trail of the One-Third. In my view, the southward shift in Christianity's centre is likely to have a decisive impact here.

Bible translation and the theological significance of language

Earlier on, I related the availability of the Scriptures in African languages to new opportunities in theological understanding. Indeed, it may well be that it is in modern Africa that Christianity's essential char-

acter as culturally 'translatable' will be most notably seen and appreciated afresh. But translatability is another way of saying universality and therefore implies its fundamental relevance and accessibility to persons in any culture within which the Christian faith is transmitted and received. Nowhere is this essential character of Christianity more evident than in the Christian understanding of Scripture. Whereas, say, in Islam, the effectual hearing of the word of Allah occurs only through the medium of Arabic Christian faith rejects the notion of a special sacred "heavenly" language for its Scriptures, and makes God speak in the vernacular so that "all of us hear ... in our own languages ... the wonderful things of God" (Acts 2:11). This is reflected in the title of Aloo Mojola's recent book, *God speaks in our own languages* (1999).

This brings our thought to the theological significance of language. Aloysius Pieris (of Sri Lanka) has suggested that "Language is the experience of reality, religion is its expression." If this is the case, then it makes language, each language, a distinct way of apprehending and experiencing truth. The significance of Scripture translation here is that it enables a people's language and thus their experience of truth, to be connected to the reality and actuality of the Living God. It is this which makes language itself into a theological category, conferring upon it "eternal significance ... and transcendent range" (Sanneh).

The vital place of mother-tongue Scriptures, therefore, resides in the fact that by enabling us to "hear in our own language[s] the wonderful things of God" (Acts 2:11), they create resonances and reverberations which make other overlapping recognitions occur. Mother-tongue Scriptures, in all our churches in Africa, accordingly, come to constitute one irreplaceable element for the birth of theology, in that they enable us and our Christian communities to "drink from [their] own wells", to borrow the title of the book by Gustavo Cutierrez. Christian apprehension and reflection in African languages, therefore, are set to become more, not less, important and may well be one of the major means for forging new intellectual categories in the coming decades. This also means that if the church in Africa were tempted to capitulate to the prevailing globalisation on the grounds that the new generations seem to prefer English (or French), then the church would be depriving itself of the opportunity for new insights into the Gospel. For the very channels for gaining access to those insights would have been blocked.

In the postgraduate research programmes at Masters (MTh) and doctoral (PhD) levels that we organise from our Centre in Ghana, it is a stipulated requirement that students produce abstracts of their dissertations in their mother tongues! The impact of this requirement on the students' ability to internalise the Gospel and to demonstrate originality and creativity has been remarkable. How can we minister the Gospel effectively if we are not equipped to reflect theologically in the languages in which we pray and ... dream?

If one were to object that this process would serve to entrench ethnic divisions, I would reply that this is not confirmed by empirical evidence, and that the objection indicates a theological misconception about the Christian faith. For, as the central categories of Christian thought - God, Jesus Christ, creation, sin, death, redemption, history, incarnation, resurrection, new humanity - are transposed into their local equivalents, the Scriptures become the fundamental route for sustaining a dialogue between Gospel and culture that addresses realistically the elemental and subliminal forces that operate within that culture. It is by a deep engagement with the redemptive and reconciling mind of Christ mediated through the Scriptures in mother tongue, that one will learn to deal with the ethnocentric mind.

The Bible in African languages and the expansion of the Church

How, then, may the Bible in African languages yet serve the expansion of the Church into unreached areas? It is evident that what has actually happened in the emergence of vital Christianity on the African continent has established the primacy of the role of indigenous languages in African Christian experience. In this regard it is interesting to observe how an increasing number of African academic theologians, while continuing to write in European languages, also recognise the importance of their particular African

vernacular languages in their theological reflection. As early as 1979, John Pobee (of Ghana) felt able to write:

Ideally, African theologies should be in the vernacular. Language is more than syntax and morphology it is the vehicle for assuming the weight of a culture.

Subsequently, Jean-Marc Ela (of Cameroun) spoke of a need for African theology to undergo a 'Passover of language' in which the confrontation of the message of the Gospel and the African universe must bring forth a meaning with the power to transform the lives of African Christians. For without this 'Passover of language', 'the meaning of the Christian message will not be understood'. 'More recent developments seem to suggest that we might well be on the threshold of a movement of 'mother tongue theology' in which some African theologians are now making an intentional effort to begin their theological reflection in their African languages, their mother tongues.' This is something in which I myself share through the work at the Akrofi-Christaller Centre in Ghana, and the continental network in which we participate the African Theological Fellowship.

As these developments become consolidated, they argue forcibly for the continuing translation of the Bible into new languages in order to provide the essential ingredients for the birth of theology in those new languages. By theology I mean not so much an academic exercise, but the development of mature Christian thought and life within the cultural worlds of those languages. There is ample evidence that, in situations of non-translation of Scripture into the languages of a significant body of people, even where there has been prolonged contact with the Christian faith mediated through other languages, there is a discernible lack of conversion and therefore of mature Christian consciousness. This situation appears to be remedied once the Scriptures become available in those languages. In other words, no language group should be considered as reached until they have the Scriptures available in their mother tongue as the foundation for building sustainable Christian thought, life and community. It stands to reason, therefore, that African Christians and churches that have derived the greatest benefit from the availability of the Scriptures in their mother tongues, should be the ones to shoulder the responsibility for offering this same gift to other African communities. It is my prayer that from among such African Christian communities, persons will emerge with a vision for this ministry and will allow God to use them in enabling others to hear God speaking to them in their own languages.

Here we get to the heart of the Great Commission - the discipling of the nations - the conversion to Christ of all human cultural worlds, the things that make people into nations, the shared processes of thought and conduct, and their penetration by the mind of Christ. For, as Christ becomes incarnate in each cultural context, so new dimensions of Christ himself are revealed for the benefit of the world church.

Conclusion: Africa's opportunity, Africa's responsibility

We began this paper by noting the important place that Africa now occupies in the new configuration of the Christian world. We noted that paradoxically, the modern Western transmission of the faith in Africa has served to re-affirm Christianity as essentially vernacular religion, as African mother tongue religion. The shift in the centre of world Christianity through which we are currently living, is no unique phenomenon; and, arguably, it will not be the last in Christian history. The centre shifted from the Jewish to the Hellenistic world; subsequently from the Hellenistic to the Barbarian or northern European world. Now it has shifted to the southern continents, with Africa as a major privileged arena. African Christianity will not remain representative Christianity, willy-nilly. Africa can fail, though she need not fail, in her moment of opportunity, her kairos from the Lord.

What the present configuration of the Christian world and this new significance of Africa require, has been laid upon others before, in other times and in other contexts namely, the same spiritual discipline, in-

tellectual rigour and faithful life and witness that characterise all authentic responses to the initiatives of God throughout the history of the People of God. Hearing and receiving the Word of God as God speaks to us in our own language, and living by the light that God sheds on our path through his Word, is the essential prerequisite for fulfilling this task.

May God grant us grace to hear and to heed what God's Spirit says to us in our time, to the end that our Lord Jesus Christ will rejoice in our obedience as he sees the result of the travail of his soul in the salvation of the nations.

This paper was given at the Wycliffe Bible Translators International Africa Area Forum, Limuru, Kenya, 16-18 May 2001.

Dr. Kwame Bediako was head of Akrofi-Christaller Memorial Centre for Mission Research & Applied Theology, Akropang-Akuapem, Ghana. Dr. Bediako passed away the week of June 8, 2008.