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Localization of the Bible and the Politics of Memory and Oblivion

Sergei Averintsev (1937–2004), an outstanding Russian philologist and scholar of cultural studies, known for his studies on Byzantine Christianity, claimed that ‘the very idea of overcoming the past, that is, the idea of systematic criticism of a nation as a whole, in contrast to criticism of the nation’s high-rankers, is quite new and has had no parallel in the history of humankind’¹. Averintsev was referring to the idea of overcoming the totalitarian past – a task ‘that all nations that had to go through a totalitarian experience, theoretically speaking, have to face’.

In my view, the idea of overcoming the Communist past in the former Socialist countries is not that unique and can be compared to the idea of overcoming the patriarchal past in the West. Both in the East and the West, *memory* and *oblivion* can be viewed as a step toward political reconciliation. As Cochran argues, the capacity to remember is vital for political success, but too much memory, or the wrong kind of memory, stokes the fires of revenge².

Marxism views the history of the society as the history of class struggles and attributes all human sufferings and woes to social conditions and institutions. In the same wake, feminism sees the root of all problems in patriarchal patterns and sexist manifestations of power. Thus, Thomas Lough insists that expunging patriarchy and sexism from our culture will solve, for instance, the population overshoot problem³, a biological phenomenon used by ecologists to describe a species whose numbers exceed the ecological carrying capacity of the place where it lives⁴. The main difference between these two intellectual exercises to overcome the past is the following:

- the post-Communist East formally rejects Communist texts adopting new texts and restoring the authority of pre-Communist texts such as the Bible;
- the West manipulates traditional texts including the Bible to formally fit them into a new agenda.

Averintsev claims that totalitarianism was possible ‘insofar as it was an

¹ S. Averintsev, „Overcoming the Totalitarian Past“, *Religion In Eastern Europe* xxiv, 3 (June 2004): 27–34. *Abridged translation by Olga Yurchenko – as appearing in Europaica No.35 pluslight editing by REE editor.*

² C.E. Cochran, „Joseph and the politics of memory“, *The Review of politics*, Cambridge University Press, vol. 64, Nr. 3, 421–444.

³ T. S. Lough, „Energy, Agriculture, Patriarchy and Ecocide“, *Human Ecology Review*, Vol. 6, Winter 1999, Nr. 2, 99–125; Thomas Dietz, Guest Editor.

⁴ T. Mosquin, „Human Population: Why set One Billion as the Upper limit?“, January, 2006. Ecocentrism Homepage. <<http://www.ecospherics.net/pages/population.htm>> (accessed 21 December 2007).

absolutely false answer to quite real questions⁵. My stance on the issue is more moderate, i.e. I am inclined to view totalitarianism not as an absolutely false answer but as one of the possible answers to quite real questions. In the same wake, tolerance and inclusivity also represent one of the possible answers to the same real questions. Far from conceding to the extremes of non-judgmentalism, I nonetheless hold that labelling political and social ideas as being ‘absolutely false’ or ‘absolutely correct’ may be a step along the road leading to totalitarianism.

The difference between the East and the West in the approaches to texts in the process of overcoming the past can be explained in terms of their political and social development. After the fall of Communism, the post-Communist East needed new guidelines, new priorities, and new texts. It would be hard to start building a market economy and a democratic society with works of Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Brezhnev in hand. In the West, on the other hand, there has been no abrupt change of the political and social system, no revolution discarding private property and religion. Western civilization is deeply rooted in Christianity and despite the popularity of the secularization theory and the growing tendency to eliminate religious instruction in schools in many Western countries, the Bible is increasingly used as a tool in the construction of identities. One of the trends in modern Translation Studies is to view translation as a confrontation with the nonidentical, as a potential threat to identity⁶. This view assigns to translation an important role in the dynamics of self-definition.

As a result, focus shifts to interpretation of and manipulation with ‘patriarchal texts’ such as the Bible. Thus, Amador points out that current American feminist appropriations of hermeneutics pursues the „universal“ attainment of „truth“ through models interested not in activity but in interpretation⁷. Mary Ann Tolbert, George H. Atkinson Professor of Biblical Studies and executive director of the Centre for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry at the Pacific School of Religion, believes that feminist biblical scholarship is profoundly paradoxical because ‘one must struggle against God as enemy assisted by God as helper, or one must defeat the Bible as patriarchal authority by using the Bible as liberator.’⁸ To find their way out of this paradox, inclusive translators assume the role of manipulators and active participants in the construction of new identities.

The concept of text manipulation and translator as manipulator usurping the author’s role is not a new one. In a treatise on translation „An Essay on Translated Verse“ Wentworth Dillon, 4th Earl of Roscommon (c. 1630–1685), describes how the translator takes the place of the author. Thomas Francklin in „Translation: A Poem“ (1753) represents the translator as a male seducer who gains more power

⁵ S. Averintsev, *op. cit.*

⁶ C. Robyns, „Translation and Discursive Identity“, *Poetics Today*. 15:3 (Fall 1994).

⁷ J. D. H. Amador, „Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: A Failure of Theoretical Nerve“, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 66, (Spring, 1998), Nr. 1, 39–57.

⁸ M. A. Tolbert, „Defining the Problem: The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics“, *Semeia* 28: 113–136. *The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics*. (Semeia, No 28). Scholars Pr (June 1983).

over the text than the author originally had. In line with this concept Diderot (1745) seduced the „Inquiry Concerning Virtue“ by the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury turning it into his own *‘Essai sur le Mérite et la Vertu’*. Nowadays scholars like Theo Hermans, J.R. Lambert, H. van Gorp and Susan Bassnett represent the Manipulation School whose main focus is on the interplay between theoretical models and practical case studies, on the ideological shifts between the source text and the target text.

It is true that mainstream Christian exegesis itself gives numerous examples of ‘correct’ interpretation. Jesus Christ distances himself from the Jewish tradition appealing, however, to the prophetic tradition of the Torah. As a result, Christian interpretation of the Old Testament as the first part of the Christian Bible is predominantly allegoric. Thus, Christian exegesis firmly places Psalm 22 in the group of the so-called „Messianic psalms“ interpreting it as the picture of the Suffering Messiah. From the Jewish perspective, the overall theme of Psalm 22 is the plight of the Jew who, speaking as an individual, prays for an end to Israel’s long exile from its land and Temple⁹.

Even a quick glance at the approaches and principles in contemporary Translation Studies and Bible translation practice supports the opinion that the inventory of translation techniques themselves have not changed since Cicero¹⁰. The proposed new terms such as dynamic or functional equivalence, transparent translation, text manipulation etc. describe old approaches known during the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment. What I am particularly interested in is the strange interplay between the two opposing tendencies, Romanticism and Positivism, in contemporary humanities as a whole and in Translation Studies, in particular.

The Romantic tradition relies upon spiritual communing between author and translator that, in their view, can be established. As a result, it is claimed that the meaning of the original writer, of the Other from a distant age or culture is apprehendable and can be clearly communicated to the reader in translation. The Romantic tradition, which at the beginning of the 19th century focused on the Other, on the Poor, on the Oppressed, stimulated the development of feminism, the history of mentalities, anthropology, and modern cultural studies. The direct results for the translation studies are feminist literary and translation scholars, translations from small languages, and emergence of localized Bible translations.

Romanticism is essentially an anti-Enlightenment movement influenced by symbolism and mysticism, stimulated by feelings and imagination. This explains the overt emotionality of many contemporary translators and translation theorists who have clear stances on main social and political issues and defend them through

⁹ Y. Uri, „Does Psalm 22 Describe the Crucifixion Scenario?“, *Messiah Truth. Counter-Missionary Education*. <<http://www.messiahtruth.com/psa22.html>> (accessed 11 April 2006).

¹⁰ L. G. Kelly, *The True Interpreter: A History of Translation Theory and Practice in the West*. New York, 1979; G. Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, Oxford University Press, 1975.

their activity. Similar to the Romantics of the early 19th century, they are inspired by the pathos of revolution, of the dramatic changes in the contemporary society.

On the other hand, these scholars and translators are the product of the modern positivist science appealing to reason, rationalism, and empirics. As a result, intuition and imagination in their approaches clashes with reason and analytics. Despite the proclaimed aim to study the past, including the Bible, from 'inside', from the point of view of the people of the past, their real objective is to use Biblical texts as a basis for the creation of a new 'picture of the world', of new identities. This naturally leads to the concept of text manipulation enabling the translator to manipulate texts at various levels. The direct result for the theory and practice of the Bible translation is the manipulation with cultural values. Translators become manipulator and active participants in the construction of identities aiming to correct the purported wrongdoings of the world. Focus is not on literature as art but on literature as a tool for political and social change, as an instrument of education in the spirit of inclusivity, tolerance and multiculturalism. That's why I define this approach as 'pedagogical equivalence'. In my view, it is quite similar in nature to the requirements of the infamous 'socialist realism' seeking to put all arts into the service of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Discussing modern gender-neutral Bible translations, Minton notes that „often the Word of God has been made clearer in such editions, but the Word is sometimes changed and even distorted for contemporary politically correct culture'¹¹. What we are witnessing today is an extreme case of what I call 'groupcentric Bible translation' or 'Bible localization', also referred to as 'niche Bibles'. Groupcentric translation is a logical continuation of ethnocentric translation that distorts the other culture to suit the views of a new audience. Another way to describe this phenomenon is to use the term 'localization' taken from the software industry that describes any changes required to adapt a product to the needs of a particular 'locale', i.e. a group of people united by their common language and cultural conventions.

The upsurge in gender-inclusive Bible translations since the 1980s is a direct result of the development of the post-colonial and feminist translation theories. The growing competition on the Bible market, coupled with the increased self-awareness of various social, ethnic etc. groups, has forced publishers to cater to the needs of these locales. Bible localization has always been a fact of life – there are Catholic and Protestant translations, there are Jewish translations, there are Orthodox Christian translations – all aimed at a special audience. However, these rather broad group divisions have been replaced by extremely narrow ones – we have Feminist Bibles, Gay Bibles, Rap Bibles, Black Bible Chronicles, Bibles in various slangs (Cockney, Aussie) and dialects (Geordie, Brummy etc.) These can be further split into Bibles for Women of Colour, Bibles for Young Women of Colour, Bible for Men of Colour, Couple Devotional Bibles, Teen Devotional Bibles, Surfers Bible and so on.

¹¹ R. Minton, „Gender-Inclusive Bible Translations“, *CTS Journal* 9 (Spring 2003), 141–146.

Driven by the desire to offer a Bible translation that fits into the agenda of tolerance and inclusivity, Sister Mary O'Dernity (1996) makes „A Modest Proposal for Scriptural Translation“. Pointing out that modern scriptural translators have become more and more sensitive to the way in which language can be used in an inclusive or exclusive fashion, she insists that „If we are to be truly church, we must have liturgical texts that reflect our commitment to equality and inclusivity.“ From this point of view, she criticized the translation „Son of Man ascending to the right hand of the Father“ and offers an inclusive version of „Human One changing location to the near proximity of the celestial committee-chair.“ Envisaging criticism on behalf of intolerant, exclusive and sexist individuals, Sister O'Dernity assures them that „If you say it ten or fifteen times, it sounds very natural“¹².

As Stendahl states, we are a Society of Biblical Literature which includes the Bible both as a classic and the Bible as Holy Scripture¹³. For centuries the Bible and its teaching have been used to construct identities in the Western world. Today the range of 'legitimate' identities is much larger than several decades ago. Facing issues of ethnicity, religion, gender-role identity and sexual orientation, people are confronted with restated contemporary questions of 'Who am I?, and 'What is the meaning of my life?' These questions are often hard to answer and many people struggle with them throughout their whole lives.

The Christian Bible is a layered book with a distinct history. After the emergence of Christianity, the books of the Tanach, acronym for Torah (Pentateuch), N'vi-im (Prophets), and K'tuvim (Writings), written and belonging to the religion and culture of the Jewish people, are adapted and become an indelible part of the Holy Scriptures of the Christian church. As a result, every passage of the Tanach (usually in the translation tradition of the Septuagint) may receive different and sometimes conflicting interpretations within Christianity. The origins of the Christian perception of the Jewish Bible can be traced back to Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C.E.–50 C.E.). The perceived teachings of Jesus Christ de-emphasize primary sources in the Jewish tradition, opting for the prophetic tradition of the Torah. As a result, Christian interpretation of the Old Testament as the first part of the Christian Bible is predominantly allegoric. In the words of the German-Jewish theologian Franz Rosenzweig, Christians hate Jews because they depend on them, because Christianity cannot succeed in the absence of Jews¹⁴.

Throughout 2000 years of teaching contempt towards the Jewish people, Christians kept pleading with God, „O be favourable and gracious to Zion; build up the walls of Jerusalem“ (Psalm 51:19). Only at the end of the 20th century did Pope John

¹² Sister Mary O'Dernity, „A Modest Proposal for Scriptural Translation“, *Catholic Dossier*, March/April 1996. <<http://www.catholic.net/RCC/Periodicals/Dossier/mar-apr96/proposal.html>> (accessed 10 December 2007).

¹³ K. Stendahl, „The Bible as a Classic and the Bible as Holy Scripture“, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 103 (Mar., 1984), Nr. 1, 3–10.

¹⁴ F. Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*. Trans. by William Hallo. University of Notre Dame Press: London, 1985.

Paul II acknowledge that Jews „are the people of the Covenant, and despite human infidelities, the Lord is faithful to his Covenant“¹⁵. In the same wake, the United Church of Canada issued a statement acknowledging that „The One who is ‘our judge and our hope’ lives as a Jew, dies as a Jew and is raised as a Jew“, affirming the Jewishness of Jesus and seeking opportunity for growth in Christian self-understanding that exists through closer dialogue with, and respect for, Judaism¹⁶.

Quite naturally, the role of the Christian Bible in Western society reflects this ambiguous attitude towards Jews and Judaism. In his pioneering study of the hundreds of editions of the Bible during the century following the American Revolution Paul C. Gutjahr speaks of „a fervent longing to keep the Bible the country’s most physically and intellectually accessible text“¹⁷. Back in 1935, a collection of essays came out offering suggestions for increasing Bible reading. Refuting the notion that „the Scriptures have become outdated“, the book insisted that the need for character training could be best met by absorbing Bible teaching¹⁸.

According to Paul Gutjahr’s ‘too-much-of-a-good-thing’ explanation, the very existence of hundreds of editions of the Bible diminished the aura of the Good Book as the immutable Word of God. However, I am more inclined to believe that the problem is not the ‘aura of the Good Book’, but rather in the confusion among potential buyers caused by the proliferation of so many different, specialized versions.

In biblical translation, exegesis and freedom have always represented a strange and mystical union pushing translators (at least theoretically) to one of the two extremes (cf. Desnitsky 1999): 1) a strictly confessional translation, in which all ambiguous places are translated in compliance with the translator’s religious tradition, and 2) a free translation that rejects any previous interpretation of the Bible and claims to reveal the Bible’s „original meaning“. However, a completely „free“ translation is hardly achievable, because every translator will, either consciously or not, follow a certain exegetical tradition or else will create a paraphrase of the original text. Interpretation of the Bible is, in fact, an important part of our experience in this world, an exercise in humbleness and tolerance requiring both the capacity to remember and the capacity to forget. From this point of view, the Bible may be perceived as a record of this dialogue experience between human beings and God. The translation of the Holy Scriptures, in its turn, is an extension of this Dialogue with God into other languages and other cultures broadening the range of participants and increasing the diversity of (conflicting) opinions. Many see

¹⁵ D. Levy, „Sicut Judaeis“ and beyond – The Popes and the Jewish People“, *Jewish-Christian Relations*, 1998. <<http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?item=942>>.

¹⁶ „Statement On United Church – Jewish Relations Today.“ 38th General Council of the United Church of Canada, August 2003. <<http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?item=998>>.

¹⁷ P. Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777–1880*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999.

¹⁸ J. Wishart, Vance, Beaven, Bowie, Wents, and Hough, *The Bible in Our Day. A Symposium*, Published for the American Bible Society by the Oxford Press, 1935.

the essence of religious life in the affirmation of their religious beliefs. At a closer scrutiny, however, it becomes quite obvious that religious beliefs are just different „languages“, different modes of communication enabling us to maintain constant dialogue with the Creator and to find support in meeting the challenges of day-to-day existence, to find the right balance between memory and oblivion.

Резюме

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Локализиране на Библията и политиката на паметта и забравата

Столетия наред Св. Писание е извор на духовната храна на европейската цивилизация. Столетия наред тази книга обединява и разделя християните и юдеите, обединява и разделя и самите християни. Столетия наред преводът играе важна роля в този процес.

Като цяло спектърът на използваните преводачески техники не се е променил съществено от времето на *Септуагинтата* и арамейските *Таргуми*. Предлаганите нови термини като например „динамична“ или „функционална“ еквивалентност, „прозрачен превод“ и др. описват отдавна познатите подходи, прилагани и през Средновековието, и през Ренесанса, и през Просвещението. Интерес представлява любопитното преплитане на две противоположни тенденции, а именно на романтизма и позитивизма в съвременните хуманитарни науки, като цяло, и в преводазнанието, в частност. От една страна, ясно проличава романтичeskата традиция, вниманието към въображението на преводача, който трябва да проникне в съзнанието и мислите на хората от други епохи и култури, които са много различни от днешния ни свят, да се опита да разбере Другия отвътре и да представи това свое виждане на читателя. Романтизмът в основата си е антипросветителско течение, повлияно от символизма и мистицизма, опиращо се на чувствата и въображението. Това, очевидно, обяснява и ярко изразената емоционалност на много съвременни теоретици и практики на превода, които имат ясни позиции по основните социални и политически въпроси и ги защитават чрез своята дейност. В теорията и практиката на библейския превод това се изразява в стремежа да се набляга на определени културни ценности за сметка на други, в резултат на което преводачът взема активно и съзнателно участие в създаването на културни идентичности.

От друга страна, същите тези учени и преводачи са продукт на съвременното позитивистко научно познание, апелращо към разума, рационализма и емпиризма. Поради това в подходите им интуицията и въображението се сблъскват с аналитизма и емпиричността. Въпреки често декларираната цел да се изучава миналото, в това число и библейските

събития, „отвътре“, от гледна точка на човека от онези епохи, често реалната цел е да се използват библейските текстове като основа за създаване на нова „картина на света“, на нови идентичности.

Въз основа на теорията на релевантността авторите на „локализираните“ Библии се стремят да представят Св. Писание във форма, релевантна (или предполагаемо релевантна) за определени социални и други групи хора. Това се отнася най-вече за тъй наречените „политически коректни“ Библии. Тук преводачът наистина се превръща в „манипулатор“, който предварително си поставя политическа или социална цел, която иска да постигне с превода си, т.е. литературата като цяло сякаш остава на заден план. За сметка на това на преден план излизат задачите обществото да бъде „феминизирано“, „деконструирано“, „политически коректирано“ и т.н., поради което дефинирам подобен подход като „педагогическа еквивалентност“, насочена към съзнанието, към разума, а не към естетическата функция на словото. Подобни преводи и преразкази на Св. Писание са много показателни примери за „етноцентричното насилие“ на превода.

Педагогическата еквивалентност в библейския превод има за цел да спомогне за преодоляването на «патриархалното минало» на западното общество и изграждането на ново, политически коректно и «полово неутрално» общество. В това се крие както противоречието, така и приемствеността на педагогическата еквивалентност, основана не върху отричането на традицията, а върху нейната интерпретация в зададено направление.

Друг е пътят за преодоляване на „тоталитарното минало“ в Русия и страните от бившия социалистически блок. „Каноничните текстове“ на комунистическата идеология едва ли могат да бъдат приспособени към новите условия, поради което се стига до практически пълното им отричане и забравяне. Това, на свой ред, естествено води и до възстановяване авторитета на някои традиционни докомунистически текстове, в това число и на Библията. Историята на света, на паметта и забравата продължава да намира отражението си в историята и практиката на превода.