# Translating and Transferring

Dinah Livingstone

1

'When the facts change I change my mind.' Or 'When my information changes I alter my conclusions'. Recently it has been disputed whether this remark, usually attributed to John Maynard Keynes, was ever actually said by him. Nevertheless, it is not only something he might well have said, it is also a good idea. Jesus announced the imminent arrival on Earth of a reign of God or kindness, which would be good news for the poor. His mission was to inaugurate it and it would come in power in the lifetime 'of those standing here present'(Mt 16: 28). Jesus, the early Christians and Paul, who translated Jesus's 'good news' into a wider Greco-Roman culture, all believed that this divine intervention would come soon. It did not come. Two thousand years later it still has not come.

There have been enormous advances in our knowledge about the universe. There is no evidence that God answers prayers. Our information has changed and it is reasonable to conclude that the idea that God intervenes or acts upon this world is imaginary. Many people, especially in Britain and Europe, have done so. This has also led them to conclude that God as a person who listens and responds is also imaginary. A personification of actual and potential forces in the world and ourselves. Personification is a poetic trope like metaphor; they belong to our 'shaping spirit of imagination'.

With Europe, in particular, becoming ever more secularised, in 1962 Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council, whose task was *aggiornamento*, updating Christian theology to make it more appropriate for the new time. At the Council the young Joseph Ratzinger was a *peritus*, an expert theological adviser. He was regarded as a progressive and indeed the Council introduced a good number of reforms that he supported. But on the subject of God's activity in the world, Ratzinger fought and won a fierce dispute on whether Scripture and tradition were the two sources of 'divine revelation'. No, said Ratzinger, God revealed himself and was the only source of revelation; Scripture and tradition were two 'rivulets' which ran out of that source.

In 1981 Ratzinger was appointed Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (previously called the Inquisition) and in 2005 he was elected as Pope Benedict XVI. As prefect of the 'Inquisition' Ratzinger came down hard on liberation theology in Latin America. Liberation theology supported a 'preferential option for the poor' and believed that Christ was to be found today in people living now, particularly the 'crucified people', crucified *by* not for the sin of the world. The 'sin of the world' included rich oppressive dictators and unregulated feral capitalism. Christ was rising again in the crucified people's struggle for a better life.

Many Christians joined in the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua, which toppled the dictator Somoza. They gave the Revolution a strong theological input and saw it as a struggle to begin establishing the reign of God on Earth. For prefect Ratzinger (and the Polish Pope John Paul II) that was anathema, humans hubristically assuming a role that belonged to God alone. The Catholic priests (including Ernesto and Fernando Cardenal) in the Sandinista government were suspended from the priesthood and liberation theology was condemned.

Actually, on his terms Ratzinger was right to fear liberation theology, because although its theologians still believed in a personal God, their focus was on human life and human action in this world, where Christ was to be found today. They were translating and secularising the gospel into a sane and kindly humanism and not waiting any longer for God to come and establish a reign of kindness himself. Ratzinger had grown up in Nazi Germany and after the War had seen his country divided, with East Germany governed by an oppressive communist regime. He believed all such 'atheistic utopias' would lead to disaster.

Canute-like, he sat firmly resisting the incoming tide of a Christian humanism that rejected the supernatural. But I believe this

translation of the Christian story into humanist terms is essential today, because it is no longer possible to accept its supernatural elements. I also believe humanism is inherent in the Christian gospel from its beginnings. I will say more about this shortly but first I'd like to say a bit more about translating and transferring.

2

When I was at school, quite a few years ago now, we had to chant the principal parts of Latin verbs. I remember one of my favourites was the verb 'to carry': *fero, ferre, tuli, latum.* This could add the prefix *trans* – 'across' – to become *transfero, transferre, transtuli, translatum.* Our English words 'transfer' and 'translate' come from one and the same Latin verb. In his Introduction to his translation of Ovid's *Epistles* (1680) John Dryden describes three kinds of translation: literal translation, which he calls 'metaphrase or turning an Author word by word, and line by line, from one language into another'. He warns against the shortcomings of this sort of translation: 'Nor word for word too faithfully translate…Too faithfully is indeed pedantically: 'tis a faith like that which proceeds from superstition, blind and zealous.' The second way of translating, the one he adopts himself, he calls 'paraphrase or translation with latitude'. The third he calls an 'imitation' or we could call it a 'version'.

If translators go for 'translation with latitude', they have to decide how much of the culture to translate. A problem with a literal translation, as well as its ungainliness, is that any transfer from one language and culture into another acquires new resonances. For example, in the song about the death of Carlos Fonseca, one of the leaders of the Sandinista Revolution, the Spanish has: *'Una bala en la selva de Zinica/ penetró en tu recio corazón de santo'.* Literally this reads: 'A bullet in Zinica forest penetrated your stubborn heart of a saint'. Which sounds rather like Father Ted on Craggy Island. So we could translate it: 'A bullet in Zinica forest struck you in your great heart.' Now the resonance is with Great Heart in *Pilgrim's Progress.* And actually, Fonseca and Great Heart had something in common; Fonseca had the reputation of often being reported dead but then popping up alive again. Great Heart tells the pilgrims about to enter the Valley of the Shadow of Death not to be afraid, for: 'I have gone often through this valley, and have been much harder put to it than I am now; and yet you see I am alive.' Neither of the English cultural resonances was there in the original Spanish, but in the context the resonance with Great Heart is more appropriate.

In Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* Puck changes Bottom's head into a donkey's head and when Bottom returns to his mates Quince sees him and cries: 'Bless thee, Bottom, thou art translated!' Bottom does not realise his head has been changed and thinks they are playing a trick on him. He says: 'I see their knavery: this is to make an ass of me.' Here of course, Bottom is using 'make an ass of me' in a *metaphorical* sense. With a metaphor we can say to someone: 'You're an ass' or 'You're a lion' without actually changing their physical appearance at all. But, in a metaphorical sense, we do mean what we say. Incidentally, the word 'metaphor' comes from the Greek word *metafero*, and is an etymological parallel to the Latin *transfero/translatum.* our 'transfer', 'translate'.

An example of an 'imitation' or version – perhaps we should just call it a 'borrowing' – is Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* whose source was a story called 'Amleth' (which means 'mad' in Old Norse), recorded in about 1200 AD by the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus. The old Scandinavian 'Amleth' was a crude revenge story, which Shakespeare 'translated' into his great play.

3

When Paul set out to spread the gospel beyond Palestine and to the Gentiles, he had to decide how to translate it. Jesus had begun his ministry by going into the synagogue at Nazareth and quoting the prophet Isaiah:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
> Because he has anointed me
> To bring good news to the poor.
> He has sent me to proclaim release to captives,
> sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,
> To proclaim the year of he Lord's favour.

Then he rolled up the scroll and said: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing (Lk 4: 18-21).' He was claiming to be inaugurating 'the

year of the Lord's favour', an imminent reign of God on Earth. His fellow Nazarenes reacted by trying to throw him over a cliff but he escaped.

His quotation from the prophet Isaiah was a poetic oracle and his own 'Sermon on the Plain' in Luke's Gospel is also rhythmical (Lk 6: 20-21):

> Blessed are you who are poor,
> for yours is the kingdom of God.
> Blessed are you who are hungry now,
> for you will be filled.
> Blessed are you who weep now,
> for you will laugh…

As well as being 'a prophet and more than a prophet', Jesus has been described as a 'subversive poet'. He often taught in parables, vivid and memorable little stories or fables about how to behave and be prepared for the coming reign of kindness. He said his mission was only to the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Mt 15:24). But he was so charmed by the Canaanite woman's witty repartee that he healed her daughter. Perhaps he learned from her.

ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE


A WORLD WITH ROOM FOR ALL THE WORLDS
Painting by Beatriz Aurora. Image: anthropologies.es

Paul probably never met Jesus before his death. He seldom quoted Jesus's own words. But Paul was steeped in the Jewish scriptures and understood clearly where Jesus was coming from. The Christian communities Paul established or visited throughout the Roman Empire kept the rituals of baptism and the Eucharist (the latter often celebrated in private houses, sometimes with women presiding). These early Christian communities also expected the imminent return of Christ Jesus. The word 'Christ', is from a Greek word meaning 'the anointed one', a translation of the Hebrew word for 'Messiah'.

Paul had seen the Risen Christ in a vision which he equated with the appearances of Jesus to the disciples after his death. The word Paul used for both visions was ὠφθη – *ofthe* – meaning ' he was seen' (1 Cor 15: 5-10). Inspired by Jesus' own words at the Last Supper, which he does quote (1 Cor. 11: 23-25), in a brilliant translation or transfer of the idea of the 'reign of God' he creates the metaphor of the community as the 'body of Christ'. A kingdom and a body of people are both *a society*. He says: 'You are the body of Christ and individually members of it (1 Cor 12: 27). And: 'The bread that we break isn't it a sharing in the body of Christ?. We who are many are one body because we all share the same bread.' (1 Cor 10: 17). So: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.'
(Gal 3: 28).

That famous proclamation is programmatic, saying no to racism, no to classism and no to sexism – a humanist agenda. It translates the idea of a reign of God into the metaphor of a 'new humanity' as one body forming a kind society. It also makes clear that this 'one body' extends beyond the Jews to the whole human race. Perhaps it also drew from its surrounding Greek culture of 'mystery religions'.

Paul does not often use the word 'kingdom'/ reign (βασιλεια – *basileia).* But that word does occur in the introduction to the poem in the letter to the Colossians (perhaps not written by Paul but by one of his 'school'): 'Give thanks to God 'who has rescued us from the power of darkness and *transferred* us into the kingdom of his beloved Son' (Col 1:13). The Greek word used here is μετεστησεν – *metestesen* – which Jerome translated in the Latin Vulgate as *transtulit.* Back to our principal parts *fero ferre* ***tuli*** *latum.* And here 'transferred into the *kingdom* of his beloved Son' both refers back to the word of Jesus and is a parallel metaphor to 'the body of Christ', being 'in Christ'.

4

The great translation at the heart of Christianity is expressed in the Christmas hymn: 'He came down to Earth from heaven/who is God and Lord of all.' As the statement of the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) so resonantly puts it: κατελθοντα σαρκοθεντα ἐνανθροπεσαντα – *katelthonta, sarkothenta enanthropesanta* – come down, embodied, become human. God is translated from heaven to Earth. Humanism was inherent in Christianity from its infancy. When we understand that the whole supernatural realm is a product of the human imagination, Christianity comes of age and is translated into a mature poetic tale, becoming what was in it all the time.

God does not act in human history but the twin vision of a 'reign of kindness' and a new humanity as members of one social body, in which all are of equal moral value and none go hungry, remains a good idea. In a secular society the task is to translate the poetic tale into non-supernatural terms and also to translate its good idea into practice. Even if we fail again and again to create a kind society, it is worth keeping that inspiration and trying to make it happen, both personally and politically. Not all translations are good. For example the *Deutsche Christen* were pro-Nazi Evangelical Christians at the other extreme from Bonhoeffer. We need to 'hold fast to what is good' (1 Thes 5: 21).

The story itself needs sifting. For example, the idea that Jesus' death was a sacrifice to God for the sin of the world is repugnant to many people today. In the first century sacrifice of animals was normal, even obligatory, for the Jewish religion and the religion of the Roman Empire. So it is not surprising that we find this idea of Jesus' death as an atonement sacrifice developed both in Paul's letters and, especially in the Letter to the Hebrews (not written by Paul). Jesus himself probably did not see his own death in that way. But we can translate and see Christ today in the 'crucified people', sacrificed not *for* but *by* the 'sin of the world'. In Britain the need for food banks in our rich society is a structural sin. As Blake put it: 'Is this a holy thing to see/in a rich and fruitful land/babes reduced to misery,/fed with cold and usurous hand?... And so many children poor?/It is a land of poverty.'

In the theology (poetic tale) of the Incarnation it is the divine Word (Son) who comes down to Earth and is embodied. Then Christ becomes the head or figurehead of a body of people. In the book of Revelation he is the bridegroom, and the new Jerusalem is his bride, the *city,* which is transferred from imagination's heaven down to Earth. So now we have three linked images of a kind society: the kingdom, the body of Christ and the beautiful city.

From the theology of Incarnation, over a few centuries a theology developed of God as Trinity: Father, Son and Spirit. It is the *Son* – not the Father– who becomes human. This can remind us that we are generated by a world that was there before us and is our origin. We did not give birth to ourselves. So translating 'God' into 'our highest values' is insufficient. Indeed, God personifies love ('God is Love': 1 Jn 4: 8). As 'Father' he also personifies the forces that create the universe, the Earth and us. As Son he personifies word. So translating the Trinity sees three 'distinct not separate' divine personifications of Life, Language and Love.

As well as inspiration, there is great richness and enjoyment to be derived from these poetic tales. They interweave in our culture, our lives together, our huge, growing forest of poems and stories, with their resonances and associations. It would be a great pity to lose them, even if we no longer take the supernatural bits literally. As Coleridge says in his Letter to Sara Hutchinson: 'Joy, Sara, is the Spirit and the Power'.

---

Dinah Livingstone translates from Spanish, French, German and Italian. Her most recent translation is *Benedict XVI – A Life* (volume 1): *Youth in Nazi Germany to the Second Vatican Council,* by Peter Seewald (Bloomsbury Continuum, London 2020).