

## RELIGIOUS TRANSLATION

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IN his collection of articles 'on Englishing the Bible' Mgr Knox has discussed the literary problems of translation with great thoroughness, shrewdness, and wit. But the translation of religious texts poses what might almost be called a special theological problem that he has not, I think, really considered. It is true he has devoted a whole article to the discussion of the theological contents of the words *justice* and *scandal* in the New Testament; and he remarks on the difficulty of dealing with words like *grace* and *faith*, which subsequent theological history has given a precision they lack in the Scriptures. But it is just here that he fails to locate the translator's theological problem in quite the right place. He is concerned with investigating the precise meaning of the word *justice* or *grace* in any given text, and then finding the best way of expressing it in English. That is the literary pre-occupation of any translator of any work, sacred or profane. The peculiarity of words in religious contexts is that in the very originals they are translations, of divine realities into human terms. Revelation itself is a work of translation, culminating in the translation of the eternal Word into time-bound flesh.

Mgr Knox considers all the various meanings that the word *tsadiq-dikaios-justus* has in the Bible, and concludes quite rightly that no one English word, be it *just* or *righteous*, really covers them. But if it comes to that, did the word *tsadiq* really cover them? The point is that the word's various theological meanings are constructions by analogy on its social human meanings, and it is important that the analogy should not be lost in translation. But it is lost if you translate it by five different English words in five different contexts. Mgr Knox protests that words are not coins to be given fixed arbitrary values. But when they are used to express religious truth, Humpty Dumpty, we must confess, does come into his own. We do have to make words mean what we want them to mean, we need what Mgr Knox calls token words, which if not coins, are at least fixed strings with wide resonances. The art of the translator is not to avoid straining words, but so to put the right strain on the apt word that his readers will catch the analogy.

What we miss in Mgr Knox's translations is precisely the resonance and the echoes and the harmonies of the revealed word of God.

His case is that the urgent task today is to bring out the melody and let harmony come later. Very well, but in that case let him admit that what he has given us is not strictly a Version of the Scriptures, but a Targum on the Scriptures. His work has not been a translator's, but that of a highly sophisticated dragoman, the interpreter through whom ten minutes of grand Arabic eloquence reach the English traveller as 'The sheikh says he would be delighted to have your company at dinner tonight'. According to his intention he has told the ordinary casual reader what the Bible means; he has not really told him what the Bible says. He has done much, that is, to help people acquire general religious knowledge, but little towards the refashioning in English of an effective religious language. And this is a work which is of apostolic urgency today, and for which good translation is the first thing that is needed.

Catholic religious English, whether theological or devotional, is nowadays a language of technical words, mostly Latinisms, which are even foisted on children in the catechism, and which for the ordinary mind bear no relation to the language and mental concepts of everyday life. That is to say, the analogies inherent in them have become obscured, and they are in consequence as useless for leading the mind up to divine things as a ladder which has lost all its bottom rungs.

It is indeed inevitable that some words should become assigned exclusively to religious use, and lose touch with the profane. The very names *God*, for example, and *Deus* and *Theos* and *El* have lost touch since time immemorial with whatever objects of man's temporal experience they were taken from, to be applied to the unknown something or someone 'which we call God'. But that they were taken from some such objects cannot be doubted. In this connection it is interesting to note the different ways different missionaries have reacted, when they come across peoples who have no equivalent word for *God*. St Francis Xavier in Japan first picked on what happened to be the proper name of a particular god of the Japanese pantheon—as if the Latin *Deus* had been put into English as *Woden*. When he realized his mistake, he gave up his attempt at translation and took refuge in the transliteration of the Latin word *Deus*, a word of course which could have no

associations at all for the Japanese, and which could therefore give the preacher no lever in explaining Christian doctrine about God. In China, on the other hand, Matteo Ricci, faced with a similar situation, translated *God* as the *Lord of Heaven*. Like Xavier he coined a token word, treating words as coins *pace* Mgr Knox, but instead of minting a new coinage he was at pains to use a currency with which his hearers were familiar, and revalue it according to a Christian standard.

The temptation to transliterate has always beset translators. A little of it does no harm, and serves perhaps to give a sense of the continuity of our religious inheritance. Jewish and Christian Greek preserved a handful of Hebrew words like *Amen*, *Alleluia*, *sabbath*, etc. Christian Latin kept rather more Greek words, *Christ*, *angel*, *mystery*, *baptism*, *eucharist*, *bishop*, *Church*, *alms*, etc. But when it came to translating Christian Latin into English, transliteration exceeded all bounds. Not that one would advocate a return to pure Anglo-Saxon. It is part of the character of modern English to be a mixed language, with a very large vocabulary taken directly or at one remove from Latin. But when English takes over a Latin word, it hardly ever leaves its native meaning undisturbed. The ordinary meaning of *assume* and *assumption* is quite different from the ordinary meaning which *assumere* and *assumptio* have in Latin, and which they continue to have in connection with the feast of August 15th. Satisfaction for sin (in English we usually say satisfaction *with*, not *for*), in its English sense, is the last thing one would wish to associate with the virtue or the sacrament of penance. *Aedificare* means quite simply *build*; *edify*, invented solely, one supposes, to render St Paul's metaphorical use of the word, means—well, it is a rather sanctimonious words for *set a good example*. And how the word *act* is misused in devotional language! Acts, in English, are opposed to words; our prayer-books make them entirely consist of words. They are not made, either, they are done. In the sort of contexts in which the prayer-books indulge in them, normal English leaves them out altogether. You do not say to a grumpy or a frightened child, 'Make an act of hilarity, make an act of courage' (I beg your pardon: of 'fortitude'); you say, 'Try and be cheerful, be brave'. Let us be honest, then, and admit that what we do out of the prayer-books is to affirm our faith, hope, charity, contrition (a very good exercise, too), not perform acts of them.

*Contrition* is an example of those many words whose meaning, though accurate enough, is poor and colourless compared with what they signify in Latin. It is a technical word for sorrow for sin. Many people, perhaps, who could well manage to be really and truly sorry for their sins, find the complicated business of making a perfect act of contrition too much for them. The Latin word means literally *crushing* or *grinding* or *bruising*; but the English ear, taking the metaphorical sense for the proper one, misses the metaphor completely, and metaphor is the very sap of an effective religious language. 'Make a good act of contrition while I give you absolution'; what would be wrong, except that it would be unfamiliar, with saying, 'Try and bruise your heart for your sins' (or simply 'Be really sorry for your sins'), 'while I untie you from them'?

*Sacrament* is another word that has become impoverished in English in this sort of way; also *grace*. The reality of grace is something exclusively Christian and religious, and so, unfortunately, is the English word, or practically so. But this is not the case with the Latin *gratia* and the Greek *charis*. Mgr Knox says that one of the difficulties in translating St Paul is to know when he is using it theologically and when in its wider sense of *favour*. But why should the translator be more precise than St Paul? His task surely is to be aware of the analogy between the two senses and to try and find an English word which will carry it, and give the divine thing its bearings in natural human experience. *Grace* having become de-analogized, it would be better to translate *gratia* throughout by *favour* (except of course where English idiom demands the word *thanks*).

These words belong to a whole group, which English received after their meaning had become modified and restricted by centuries of theological or popular Christian use. That is how, in their English shape, they have lost so much fat. An interesting pair of words to suffer like this (one of them it is true, not of Latin origin), is *soul* and *spirit*. As Mgr Knox points out, the Hebrew *nepesh* means much more than what we mean by *soul*. In Hebrew the soul is sad, happy, feels hungry, is satisfied by food. In fact it is not, as in English, primarily a religious concept, but one of self-evident experience. It is the self in all its manifestations of life. An entirely unphilosophical notion, it tallies curiously with the classic Aristotelian and Thomist doctrine of the soul, in which it is defined as

the principle by which a living body lives. It is practically synonymous with life. And the Greek *psyche* and the Latin *anima* are so used in the New Testament. 'Whoever wants to save his life shall lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake shall find it'. The Greek and Latin have *soul* where the English translates *life*. 'Do not worry about your life, what to eat or drink, or about your body, what to wear. Is not the life something more than food, or the body than clothing?' Again for *life* read *soul*, and you have what the original says literally. The suggestion is not that the English is wrong to translate *psyche* and *anima* in these contexts by *life*, but that it is a great pity the language has been so impoverished in this respect, that the expression 'lose or find one's soul' can have only one meaning, and is now incapable of bearing the paradoxical analogy placed on the equivalent Greek and Latin in the Gospel. The word *soul* has been warped by an over-spiritual view of it as the prisoner in the body, an entity complete in its own right, something which has really nothing to do with the vulgar business of animating the body. If you said that dogs and snails have souls, people would think nowadays that you were maintaining a sentimental theory that dogs and snails survive after death. The word has in fact filched most of its present connotations from the word *spirit*. When St Paul talked about the flesh warring against the spirit, he did not mean at all the body warring against the soul; but that, one suspects, is how his words are commonly taken. For him the soul is so very much not spirit, that he contrasts the 'psychic' man and the 'pneumatic' man, in Latin the 'animal' and the 'spiritual' man; and again the 'psychic, animal' body, and the 'pneumatic, spiritual' body. The English of most versions renders 'natural' body, and 'natural' or 'sensual' man, as against 'spiritual' body and 'spiritual' man. In the circumstances there is little else they could do; but how one wishes the early translators had bequeathed us good token words for *anima* and *spiritus*, *animalis* and *spiritualis*, to be used woodenly in all contexts. Even now something might be done to restore to English minds those biblical Pauline concepts, which in this case are not only more resonant but more precise than our own. Where *anima* is rendered *life*, it could perhaps be given as *life and soul*, or *self and soul*. St Paul's adjectives are more difficult; perhaps *soul-governed* and *spirit-governed* would do. As for *spirit*, the word has quite lost the concrete reference to blowing or breathing which it has in

Greek and Latin. Personally I would like to see it everywhere rendered by *breath*, leaving the contexts to show that it is not physical breath which is meant; but this doubtless would not be generally acceptable.

To return to the problem of over-transliteration from Latin. One reason for it may be that English is very weak at the task of word formation. It is easy enough to translate *assumere take up*, *aedificare build up*, *satisfacere make amends*; but we seem to have no means of forming words to correspond to *assumptio*, *aedificatio*, *satisfactio*. So we transliterate.

A difficulty of this sort, surely, could be surmounted if more attention were paid to the special characteristics of English syntax. English, being the least inflected of all European languages, is at the opposite pole from the highly inflected Latin and Greek. The function of word formation goes hand in hand with the mechanism of inflection, and the need for it is not in fact so great in a language which constructs its sentences with a minimum of inflection. We can often use the same word, without any modification, as noun, verb, or adjective at will. *Build up* and *take up* can both be used as nouns, though not with quite the same significance of the act of the verb as *assumptio* and *aedificatio*.

But in any case there is no need always to translate verb by verb and noun by noun. The slavish following of Latin or Greek syntax and sentence construction is perhaps the fault that does most to mar the translation of religious documents, from Bible and missal to catechisms and papal encyclicals, and to make them sound so foreign and unreal. English co-ordinates clauses and words where Latin subordinates. English being analytic in temper is less interested than Latin in a word's grammatical status, and more in its bare significance. So it leaves out purely grammatical relative pronouns, and treats prepositions with a freedom which would short-circuit many a more intricately constructed and graded Latin sentence. It does not feel the Latin and Greek need to connect each sentence with its neighbours by some link word, as Mgr Knox has noted. It finds the subjunctive a nuisance and delights in infinitive constructions. But of these simple syntactical beauties most religious translation gives no inkling.

Curiously enough, English is in these respects nearer Hebrew than Greek or Latin. To my taste at least the idiom of Ecclesiasticus, being essentially Hebrew, makes it much pleasanter reading

than Wisdom, which is mostly written—and translated—in idiomatic Greek.

The syntax then of the original ought not to be lifted into the English version; but it is important as far as possible to convey its style. There is a fetish here that needs exorcising, called Dignity of Language. By all means keep it where it is found in the original, as in St Leo's sermons for example, or the canon of the Mass. But not all, nor yet the greatest, religious works are written in dignified language. To impose elevated diction on St Augustine's sermons or even on the Gospels is to mistranslate them. 'Peace, be still' is a beautiful dignified phrase. But what our Lord actually said to the wind and the sea was literally 'Be gagged, be quiet'; much nearer the undignified but vigorous *shut up* of colloquial English. If street smells have invaded the original, do not drive them out with incense from the translation.

The ideal translation is one which is perfectly literal with words, to preserve the analogies; perfectly free with syntax, to achieve idiomatic English; and perfectly faithful in style, to make the same sort of impact as the original on its readers. An impossible ideal, of course, because style is built on bones of syntax out of the flesh of words. And it is because it is impossible that translation will always be having to be done afresh; which is why Mgr Knox's brave attempt at making a translation to end translation in timeless English was bound to be chimerical. He has done invaluable pioneer service in showing how translation can be freed from the slavery of Gracco-Latin syntax. But stylistically, timeless English turns out to be the Knox style, which is not the many and various styles of his originals.