TRANSLATING RELIGIOUS TEXTS. OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

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Abstract: It is common knowledge that religion and its particular characteristics have been the object of heated debate worldwide. Scholars from various related domains as well as ordinary people have continually sought to identify the nature of religion and establish a series of criteria in order to define and characterize it as accurately as possible.
When it comes to identifying the origins of the term religion, Carl Olson (2011: 1), currently a permanent fellow of Clare Hall, University of Cambridge, pinpoints that religion derives from the Latin religio, which originally refers to the human fear of God or other divine beings.
In the field of Translation Studies, texts dealing with religion have also been subject of controversy. Catching a glimpse of the characteristics of the religious register has become a necessary endeavour, especially since one of the most important aspects to discuss is its profound conservative tendency. Nowadays, when religion has become a crucial factor of conflict and even war, religious texts must be tackled with wisdom and discernment.
Moreover, there are cases when the religious texts are strewn with biblical quotations and patristic references, in order for the text to be more credible and have a higher level of authority. In such particular situations, translators have to tinker with the text more, in order to preserve the original characteristics and provide a faithful translation.
Last but not least, translators can resort to various translation strategies, especially the ones put forward by the Canadian linguists Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet.

Keywords: religion, strategies, challenges, conflict, solutions.

It is common knowledge that religion and its particular characteristics have been the object of heated debate worldwide. Both scholars from various related domains and ordinary people have continually sought to identify the nature of religion and establish a series of criteria in order to define and characterize it as accurately as possible.

First and foremost, when it comes to identifying the origins of the term *religion*, Carl Olson (2011: 1), Professor of Religious Studies at Allegheny College, currently a permanent fellow of Clare Hall, University of Cambridge, pinpoints that *religion* derives from the Latin *religio*, which originally refers to the human fear of God or other divine beings. At the same time, besides identifying the Latin origin of the concept, C. Olson also draws attention to the fact that the precise Latin etymology is unclear. In this particular matter, he gives the example of Cicero, who related the concept to *relegere*, a verb which refers to gathering together or to read over again.

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As far as a general definition of religion is concerned, there have been numerous attempts to put forward a particularly apposite description that encapsulates the character of religion, the major part of which have been linked to different methodological approaches. Therefore, scholars have been interested throughout the history particularly into the acceptations and values the society assigned to the concept at different times, as well as to its implications in people's lives. For instance, these approaches include evolutionary, psychological, postmodern or racial aspects, the research of which, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, has contributed to the creation of definitions based on the particular characteristics of the respective fields.

As far as the psychological approach is concerned, it can hardly be argued that religion has been given a clear-cut definition from this perspective. Following the lines of this particular methodological approach, Carl Olson outlines the figure of the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1766-1834), who connected religion to a feeling of outright dependence when facing something greater than the human being even before the advent of psychology.

At the same time, the experiential aspect of religion has been of particular interest to another German scholar, i.e. Rudolf Otto (1869-1037). He identified the intrinsic nature of religion in an individual experience of the ''numinous, a unique, irreducible or *sui generis* (unique of his kind) phenomenon, and an *a priori* category'' (Olson 2011: 6). In other words, he saw religion as a special experience, internal to the subject. Last but not least, an aspect of utmost importance in discussing the theories put forward by the two scholars is the use of evidence from the Bible.

Moreover, with psychology being recognized as another social science, well-known scholars within the field manifested their interest in the particularities of the personal experience of religion. For instance, in contrast to other opinions, William James (1842-1910) highlighted the normal character of such an experience. He saw elements such as dogma and theology as secondary distinctive attributes of religion, contrasting them to sentient states of experience.

In the development of his theory, James distinguishes between healthy-minded and sick-souls, in order to point out that the latter type of person goes through a transformative state, experiencing a second birth by dying to their former way of life.

In his endeavour to grasp the psychological approach as thoroughly as possible, C. Olson refers to another scholar's outlook on the topic of religion, i.e. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), according to whom the origins of religion can be connected to the Oedipus complex. Thus, Freud relates religion to a projection of dependencies particular to children onto external reality and makes religion a manifestation of mental illness, associating it with psychological neurosis and distress.

Another famous psychologist, Carl Jung (1875-1961), rejects the Freudian theory based on the Oedipus complex, and identifies the origins of religion in the collective unconscious. Here, universal archetypes associated with birth, death, desires, and danger were to be discovered and they appeared in myths, dreams, and symbols of religion.

Within the parameters of the psychological outlook, James, Freud, and Jung considered themselves as scientists of the mind and aimed at approaching religion from a scientific angle in order to accurately identify its origins and trace its evolution throughout the time.

Last but not least, as far as the postmodern context is concerned, one of the features of this particular period resides in the fact that the postmodern view encompasses a fundamental belief that there are no timeless or universal truths, knowledge is fragmented and incomplete. Also, as Olson (2011: 10) pinpoints, according to the postmodern perspective, ''the individual person is a decentred, fragmented, unstable, erring, wandering, decadent, and liminal being living on the fringes of society.''

The elusive nature of religion has been of major interest to another leading figure of the postmodern period, i.e. Mark C. Taylor, a philosopher of religion and cultural critic. Pointing

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to the continual withdrawal of religion, Taylor attempts at defining the elusive nature of religion:

Religion is an emergent, adaptive network of symbols, myths, and rituals that, on the one hand, figure schemata of feeling, thinking, and acting in ways that lend life meaning and purpose and, on the other hand, disrupt, dislocate, and disfigure every stabilizing structure.
Taylor 2007 qtd. in Olson 2011: 10

As a general characteristic of the postmodern approach, Carl Olson summarizes that the postmodern view envisages religion as being akin to a double-edged sacrificial knife that gives human existence meaning and a sense of purpose, while hindering its stability with its destructive aspect.

Last but not least, within the parameters of religion as a special relationship between humans and a superior force, the racial aspect is also of utmost importance. As a striking example of the role religion would play in the lives of African American women in particular, Daniela Doboş manages to accurately render an exceptional portrait of Maya Angelou (born Marguerite Johnson in 1928), who deems religion as an important element of support and comfort in a time of great distress and sadness. In her *Religion Viewed through the Eyes of African American Women Writers: The Case of Maya Angelou and Her Autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Daniela Doboş outlines the major significance of religion in Maya Angelou's life and work. Throughout her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* Maya Angelou provides a series of notable examples of the special personal connection between God and herself:

When I try to describe myself to God I say, ''Lord, remember me? Black? Female? Six-foot tall? The writer?'' And I almost always get God's attention.
Angelou 2008 qtd. in Doboş 2012: 377

Turning to the attempt of defining religion, Olson (2011: 11) emphasises the experiential, substantive, functionalist, family resemblance, and postmodern general types of definitions.

On the one hand, he argues that the experiential definition seeks to isolate an initial religious experience and contrive a theory around it, while the substantive definition attempts at identifying a central belief, such as a belief in spiritual beings, to form the basis of a definition. On the other hand, the functionalist approach seeks to distinguish the manner in which religion operates in the life and organisation of a society, whereas the family resemblance position explores the overlapping analogies comprising social (social behaviour, institutions, and sacred personages), theoretical (doctrines, beliefs, and myths), practical (moral codes and rites), and experiential (visions, emotions, or trances) features. As has already been highlighted, the postmodern approach emphasises the ambiguous and unstable nature of religion.

In other words, the term *religion* is a problematic concept which makes the attempt of establishing a clear-cut definition a painstaking endeavour marked by the fuzzy boundaries and definitional uncertainty of an area that embodies many implications.
Turning to the scholars' interest in religion and its characteristics, the advent of Religious Studies as a more recent academic discipline, the aim of which is knowledge about religion, and which has become a global enterprise, is also of paramount importance.

In conclusion, the diverse approaches and examples highlighted attempt at providing a bird's eye view of the scholars' endeavour to understand the many roles religion has played throughout the history and the development of human beings. Also, another aspect of

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paramount importance in this particular context is the fact that it is crystal-clear that the issue of religion will continue to be of permanent interest to the various scholars worldwide.

In their quest for identifying the origins and establishing an accurate definition to encompass the multitude of the characteristics of religion, scholars from diverse domains will further investigate religion and its implications, both in the human beings' private life and in social and political environments. Moreover, since nowadays religion has become a crucial factor of conflict and even war, religious texts must be tackled with wisdom and discernment.

In the enterprise of analysing the translation of religious texts, the attempt of establishing boundaries for delimitating the category of religious texts is of paramount importance. In the same vein, Eugene A. Nida (1979: 193) claims that the phrase ''religious texts'' can be viewed in two somewhat different senses. First, there are texts that deal with the historical or present-day religious beliefs and practices of a believing community. Second, there is the category of texts that are of paramount importance in the development of a believing community. For instance, a striking example for the first category would be the commentaries on the Bible, whereas the Bible itself would be in the second category.

Moreover, since religious texts are commonly known as being "associated with specific contexts or situations and with specific functions of language in those contexts" (Kittredge & Lehrberger 1982, cited in Albu 2002: 47), they can be considered to be a pertinent illustration of the Romanian linguist Eugen Coşeriu's "functional language" (1994, cited in Albu 2002: 46), or I. R. Galperin's "style of language" (1971, cited in Albu 2002: 46). In her *Using English(es)*, Rodica Albu pinpoints that Coşeriu and Galperin's terms "can be equated to each other and to the term *register*" (2002: 46).

As far as the characteristics of the religious register are concerned, one has to mention among the most important aspects the profound conservative tendency, the use of specific structural *formulae* and argumentative strategies, which can be real touchstones for the translators.

However, even if these general characteristics are established for all religious texts, there are also differences related to the communicative situation, which can change depending on the nature of the public. For instance, religious authors are constantly concerned with making the information comprehensible for the diverse public categories. Thus, public may range from low to highly educated, from people living in rural areas to those from urban areas, intellectuals or people belonging to the middle class.

Moreover, there are also cases when the religious texts are strewn with biblical quotations and patristic references, in order for the text to be more credible and have a higher level of authority. In such cases, translators have to tinker with the text more, in order to preserve the original characteristics and provide a faithful translation.

Also, translators deal with the problems raised by the enterprise of translating religious texts following various approaches. In order for their work to communicate the author's intended meaning, translators have to evaluate whether recipients will also understand the author's meaning, not only the meaning conveyed by the text.

Furthermore, translators of religious texts may encounter difficulties when translating argumentative strategies specific to the religious register, as well as the rhetorical devices used in this type of texts. For example, the rhetorical device of *hypophora* (which consists of raising one or more questions and then proceeding to answer them) is a striking example for this particular category of devices.

Last but not least, in translating religious texts, the matter of content and form is also very important. For example, in the context of the freedom required by the endeavour of translating religious texts, Eugene A. Nida (1998: 26), pinpoints that "since the relevance of a message is not in the formal features of a text but in its semantic content, some measure of

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freedom is required" drawing attention to the fact that reformulating in a more or less free manner is encouraged, for the sake of the text message.

Also, it is common knowledge that the process of translation has generated heated debate among translators, translation scholars, linguists and other influential figures from various fields, such as philosophy and literary criticism. It can be noticed that, throughout the history of the translation process, opinions regarding this activity are shaped by disciplinary trends, in a wide variety, and translation methods and strategies are formulated with precision. Moreover, it is taken for granted that these methods and strategies are of utmost importance when it comes to translating, and it has been repeatedly pointed out by several translation scholars that they require constant decision-making by the translator.

As suggested in the previous paragraph, scholars from various domains have been tackling the problem of translation process, and attempts to provide solutions for translation problems have been put forward.

The following paragraphs consist of a brief presentation of the translation strategies provided by the Canadian linguists Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet. By approaching translation from the field of comparative stylistics, they are known for having provided a theoretical basis for a variety of translation methods that are currently used. According to Laurence Venuti (2000: 70), their (text) book, *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais* (1958, English version 1996), has been a staple in translator training programs, due to the fact that it suggests concrete translation techniques which are supposed to facilitate transcoding. Venuti also pinpoints that, in this influential work, the two authors encourage the translator to consider meaning as a cultural construction and to see a close connection between linguistic procedures and "metalinguistic information", i.e. "the current state of literature, science, politics etc. of both language communities" (Vinay and Darbelnet 1995: 42).

Vinay and Darbelnet provided an approach of translation strategies which consists *grosso modo* of two directions of translating, i.e. in their enterprise, translators may choose between direct/literal decoding and indirect/oblique translation. When direct strategies are used, a direct correspondence between SL and TL is created, with the process of translating involving no restructuring at the semantic or grammatical level. As to the use of indirect procedures, more complex methods have to be used in order to transpose into the TL certain stylistic effects from the SL. Although upsetting the syntactic order or even the lexis may look unusual at first, these strategies permit translators an accurate control over the reliability of the process they are engaged in.

As Vinay and Darbelnet show in their (text) book, "at first the different methods or procedures seem to be countless, but they can be condensed to just seven, each one corresponding to a higher degree of complexity." (1958: 46) Thus, in the case of direct translating procedures, it may be possible to transpose the SL message element by element into the TL, with no formal upsetting on linguistic or extralinguistic grounds, allowing to be understood that the direct translation procedures are of less complexity in comparison to the indirect ones. According to the Canadian linguists Vinay and Darbelnet, there are three basic direct translating procedures: loan transfer (also known as borrowing), loan translation (also called calque) and literal translation.

Loan is used in order to overcome a lacuna (such as an unknown concept, a new technical process), being considered the simplest of all the translation strategies. It implies a transfer of the SL term into the TL, as the latter lacks the equivalent for it. Loans may also occur as the translator decides to introduce in the translated text the "flavour" (Venuti 2000: 85) of the SL culture. For instance, the Mexican Spanish food names "tequila" and "tortillas", "party" and "dollars" from American English can be used in a translation in order to preserve the "exotic" atmosphere of the original (Dimitriu 2002: 32).

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Vinay and Darbelnet (1958: 47) also draw attention to the fact that many borrowings enter a language by means of translation, and that the decision to borrow a SL expression or word for introducing an element of local colour is a matter of style and consequently of the message.

As far as calque is concerned, it is a particular kind of loans whereby the SL elements as such are preserved, but they are literally translated. For example, translations of names of international organisations frequently draw on calque: *European Union – Uniunea Europeană*.

The third direct translation technique put forward by Vinay and Darbelnet - literal, or word for word, translation - consists of the direct transfer of the SL structure into the TL text, possible in cases of identical syntactic order and direct lexical correspondence (e.g. *This bus will leave tomorrow morning. – Acest autobuz va pleca mâine dimineaţă.*)

As previously shown, the translation methods of loan, calque and literal translation do not require any special stylistic procedures. In the case of direct translation procedures, some of the decisions translators make are no more than reflex solutions that make words or phrases be directly perceived as translation units.

As far as the indirect translation strategies are concerned, Vinay and Darbelnet adopt a predominantly linguistic approach. However, they also admit that, apart from the linguistic competence (including the idiomatic levels of language), the oblique translations require socio-cultural competence as well. The stance adopted by the two Canadian linguists proves that no linguistic insight into the process of translation can isolate language from its social context and cultural background. The indirect procedures suggested by Vinay and Darbelnet are transposition, modulation, equivalence and adaptation.

Vinay and Darbelnet suggested transposition as the first oblique translating procedure. This method involves replacing a grammatical class with another without modifying the meaning of the message. It involves several grammatical classes, e.g. adjectives (replaced by nouns): in the *early* 18th century – *la începutul* secolului al XVIII-lea; adverbs (replaced by verbs): Susan *merely* nodded. – Susan *se mulţumi să* încuviinţeze.

An important aspect that needs to be mentioned when it comes to analysing transposition is the fact that it can be classified into two categories: some of them are obligatory whereas some others are optional. It is also important to mention that particular languages favour various grammatical classes which seem to be more frequently exposed to transposition than others. For instance, Romanian and French tend to privilege nominal constructions, whereas English favours verbal constructions: He explained what he *believed in* and *hoped for*. – Îşi expuse *convingerile* şi *speranţele*. (Dimitriu 2002: 34)

Modulation is an oblique translation procedure that consists of a variation of the form of the message, involving a recasting of the semantic perspective. The variation of the form of the message is obtained by a change in point of view and focus. As with transposition, it can be distinguished between compulsory or optional modulations. The phrase "The *time* when...", which must be translated as "În *momentul* în care..." is a classic example of a compulsory modulation whereas the translation of a negative sentence by an affirmative one is an optional modulation. The procedure of modulation is considered to be a touchstone for the translator, since it requires extralinguistic competence also.

Equivalence, as well as adaptation, clearly focuses on the idiomatic area of languages. The method of equivalence implies preserving the SL situation in the TL by means of different structural and stylistic methods. The strategy of equivalence involves the whole of the message, and most equivalences are set phrases, idioms, clichés, etc. In general, proverbs are good examples of equivalences (cf. Dimitriu 2002: 35):

The early bird catches the worm – Cine se scoală de dimineaţă departe ajunge.

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Last but not least, according to Vinay and Darbelnet, with the seventh technique of translation – adaptation – the extreme limit of translation is reached (1958: 52). Adaptation is used in those cases where the situation from the SL is unknown in the TL culture, thereby necessitating some form of re-creation.

Continuing this line of thought, it can be noticed that the strategy of adaptation has amongst its final results the re-writing of the ST ideas in a different manner in the TT, according to its purpose. For instance, a letter translated for use in court must read identically, with no changes performed to the medium or the message delivered. If the same letter is to be sent to a political ally or a potential client, the strategy of adaptation needs to be applied to some extent, since the structure of a letter in Romanian is often different from the English one (different greetings, different place of writing the address). In such cases, even paragraphs may also be repositioned to place focus on identical notions, yet in an order that is more persuasive or appealing in the TC, in order to establish a partnership with an ally or make a sale.

It is also worthwhile mentioning that the notion of adaptation has been assigned various definitions, expanding its meaning and situations of use and reflecting the widely varying views about the concept. Apart from the best-known definition of Vinay and Darbelnet, adaptation is also regarded as a form of translation which characterizes particular genres such as drama, advertising and subtitling. Georges L. Bastin (in Baker 1998/2001: 6) shows that in the case of drama, scholars as Brisset (1986: 10) and Santoyo (1989: 104) consider that the aim of adaptation is to achieve the same effect as that of the original work, with an audience having a different cultural background. As far as advertising and subtitling are concerned, preserving the function and the character of the original text becomes the translator's goal, instead of retaining the form or even part of the semantic meaning.

When it comes to analysing the mode of adaptation, Georges L. Bastin (cited in Baker 1998/2001: 7) argues that the procedures used by the adapter comprise the *transcription of the original*, i.e. literal transcription of part of the text in the SL, a literal translation being usually achieved, *omission*, which consists of the elimination or reduction of part of the ST, and *expansion* – rendering the implicit information from the ST explicit in the TT. Bastin also mentions that this action can be performed either in the main body of the TT or in footnotes or a glossary. Furthermore, one of the procedures used by the adapter Bastin also draws attention to is the *exoticism*, which represents the substitution of stretches of dialect, slang, nonsense words, etc. in the ST by rough equivalents in the TL (sometimes marked by italics or underlining). *Updating* is another procedure, being defined mainly by the replacement of outdated or obscure information by modern equivalents. The last two procedures Bastin makes reference to are *situational equivalence* (the insertion of a more familiar context than the one used in the original) and *creation* (a more global substitution of the original text with a text that preserves only the essential message/ideas/functions of the original).

According to Bastin, the most common conditions which determine translators to resort to the technique of adaptation are *cross-code breakdown* (the absence of lexical equivalents in the TL), *situational inadequacy* (the context referred to in the ST does not exist in the TC), *genre switching* (a shift from one discourse type to another, with the result of a global re-creation of the ST, as in the case of the change from adult to children's literature), and *disruption of the communication process* (modifications in content, style or presentation often required by the emergence of a new approach or epoch or the need to address a different type of readership), procedures which in practice may exist simultaneously.

Bastin's analysis of the technique of adaptation also reveals that these conditions can have as result two major types of adaptation, i.e. *local* and *global adaptation*. The former is caused by problems arising at the level of the original text itself and restricted to certain parts of it, as in the case of the first two conditions mentioned above. The latter is determined by exterior factors of the original text, and consists of a more wide-ranging revision.

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Local adaptation may be applied to isolated parts of the text in order to deal with specific differences between the language or culture of the ST and that of the TT. In this situation, the translator's duty is to preserve the overall coherence of the ST in order to limit the effect the use of adaptation as a technique has on the text as a whole. Bastin sees the procedure of local adaptation as a translation technique which is guided by principles of effectiveness and efficiency and seeks to achieve a balance between the information that needs to be transformed and shed light on and the information that is to be left unchanged.

On the other hand, global adaptation may be applied to the text as a whole. Needless to say, the decision to resort to a global adaptation may be taken by the translator him/herself or may be imposed by external influences, Bastin using the example of a publisher's editorial policy to illustrate this case. He also argues that, in either case, global adaptation constitutes a general strategy aimed at reconstructing the purpose, function or impact of the ST. In order to render the function of the original, the translator's intervention has to be systematically performed and formal elements or even semantic meaning can be sacrificed.

As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the third mode in which the strategy of adaptation can be carried out, as suggested by Bastin, is under certain restrictions, the most obvious of which are *the knowledge and expectations of the target reader* (when the adapter has to assess the novelty of the information shared by the content of the ST), *the target language* (the adapter must find a suitability in the TL for the discourse style of the original text and look for coherence of adapting modes), and *the meaning and purpose (s)* of the original and target texts.

Finally, it is of utmost importance to be aware of the fact that, beside theoretical aspects, in the process of translating religious texts, not only does the translator face the challenge of rendering the message as faithfully as possible, but also he/she has to choose the appropriate translation strategy in order to prevent the target text from running the risk of creating a conflict or even starting a war.

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