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The (non-)translatability of the Holy Trinity

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This article considers the ambiguous translatability of the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The theme of the Trinity, as a central Christian doctrine, is brought into conversation with the so-called 'translatability thesis' regarding Christian history, which has been particularly expounded upon by Lamin Sanneh and Andrew Walls. Does the translatability of the gospel also imply the translatability of the Trinity, or is the equation not that straightforward? In answering this question, specific reference is made to early church formulation and controversy surrounding the theme, as well as attention to specific attempts at translation or interpretation in the modern and contemporary forms of Christianity. The article acknowledges the problematic nature of Trinitarian translatability and concludes that such translatability is nonetheless possible as long as a static conception of Trinitarian doctrine could be avoided.

Keywords: African Christianity; Korean Christianity; Monotheism; Trinity; Translatability; World Christianity.

Introduction: Christianity's vulnerable monotheism

Lamin Sanneh, the recently deceased Professor of Missions and World Christianity at Yale Divinity School, was well known for a highly influential publication on the so-called process of vernacularisation, which results from and coincides with scriptural translation in the missionary-indigenous encounter in Christian history. The book in question, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, soon became the foundational document in what would, in the budding academic field of World Christianity, become known as the translatability thesis. The other prominent name associated with the translatability thesis is the Scottish historian of Christianity, Andrew F. Walls, according to whom the Christian gospel is 'infinitely translatable' (Walls 2002:29). Sanneh uses similar vocabulary to emphasise the centrality of translation in Christianity, which while strengthening the religion's ability to cross linguistic and cultural boundaries also makes it somewhat vulnerable. According to Sanneh (2009), Christianity made:

> [*T*]ranslation the original medium of its Scripture. And translation opened Christianity to secular influences as well as to the risk of polytheism – Christians adopted as their own the names of God of other people…. Once an entire culture opened itself to the Christian presence it was possible for the missionary to influence and mold that culture without fear of total rejection, though that did not resolve the problem of syncretism. (p. 43)

With this last comment, Sanneh points to one of the more serious concerns for Christians fearing the contamination of the unadulterated gospel. This is no idle or indeed new concern. In fact, the spectre of heresy, which is a close cousin of syncretism, has haunted Christian self-understanding, as well as Christians' understanding of the confessional and/or the cultural other in Christ from early on in history.

However, syncretism, which mainly refers to the mixing of some sort, does not have to be interpreted negatively. More sympathetically, it serves to describe the creativity of a multitude of worldwide Christian responses to the message of the gospel. Such creativity and multiplicity are the inevitable consequences of translation. Yet, the more serious question for this article, as for Christians from the early church until today, is: Does Christianity's translatability perhaps inevitably work against and undermine its own monotheistic assertions? This article will not attempt to fully answer this question, but it will show that translation and translatability complicated in various ways Christian understanding of the oneness of God. Christian monotheism is indeed a vulnerable monotheism.

Translatability versus non-translatability in religious history

An important if controversial aspect in *Translating the Message* concerns the way in which Sanneh compares and contrasts Christian and Muslim positions on translatability and analyses the

Note: The collection entitled 'God as One', sub-edited by Erna Oliver (University of South Africa) and Willem Oliver (University of South Africa).

supposed consequences for the two religions and their adherents. Sanneh (2009) distinguishes in the book about early Christian views on monotheism over and against Judaism and Islam:

> For one thing, Judaism remained predominantly the religion of the people called Jews for whom conversion was both a religious step and incorporation into a racial community. For another, although Islam made submission to one God the towering call of its mission, it placed this alongside the revelation of the Arabic Qur'an, so that when the 'sword of truth' was unsheathed against polytheists and unbelievers, its double blade gleamed with the point of God's oneness and the infallibility of the Arabic revelation. It was always difficult to judge which blade cut deeper, the conviction of the one God or the power of the Arabic Scripture. (p. 42)

Hence, Sanneh argues that 'Arabisation' and 'Islamisation' went hand in hand in Muslim history. According to this view, Islam is fundamentally untranslatable. Arabic is sacrosanct and Muslim scripture can at best only be interpreted to non-Arabic speakers, but such a rendition is not the real revelation, which is the Arabic Qur'an. The contrast with Christianity could not be any greater, as also explained by Walls (2002):

> The divine Word is the Qur'an, fixed in heaven forever in Arabic, the language of original revelation. For Christians, however, the divine Word is translatable, infinitely translatable. The very words of Christ himself were transmitted in translated form in the earliest documents we have, a fact surely inseparable from the conviction that in Christ, God's own self was translated into human form. Much misunderstanding between Christians and Muslims has arisen from the assumption that the Qur'an is for Muslims what the Bible is for Christians. It would be truer to say that the Qur'an is for Muslims what *Christ* is for Christians. (p. 29)

I shall focus on the theme of translatability in Christianity with the background question in mind of whether Christianity is fundamentally constituted by its original message, the Word in other words, or whether the most central doctrines should also be part of the equation. For now, it would be important to note that Christian translatability, according to these above-mentioned authors, has everything to do with the peculiarity or rather particularity of the Christian understanding of God.

The Trinity as a problematic concept in history

The Trinity is of course the way in which Christians express their peculiar understanding of the oneness of God. It might seem like a compromised form of oneness, even a contradiction in terms. Three is of course not equal to one, as any grade 2 mathematics learner would be able to point out. Christian insistence on the oneness of the Trinity has not by and large been able to convince Muslims about Christianity's adherence to monotheism. On the contrary, Christians have often been suspected of harbouring polytheist sentiments. To quote from an English interpretation of the Quran: Indeed, the truth deny they who say:

> Behold, God is the Christ, son of Mary … Behold, anyone who ascribes divinity to any being beside God, unto him will God deny paradise, and his goal shall be the fire … Indeed, the truth they deny who say: 'Behold, God is the third of a trinity' – seeing that there is no deity whatever save the One God … The Christ, son of Mary, was but a messenger. (Surah 5.72–75)

Yet, for biblical and historical reasons, which I cannot elaborate on much here, Christians really have no other option to express their belief or ours the oneness of God than through the apparently paradoxical Trinity. It is a mystery, perhaps more accessible to the heart than the head, as great theologians such as Gregory of Nazianzus (Nazianzen, Orations 40.41, quoted in Letham 2004:378) and John Calvin (see *Inst*. III.2.8.), among many others, have believed.

Before proceeding, and possibly at the risk of belabouring an obvious point to a learned readership, it seems nonetheless necessary to mention a few points about the pre-history of the doctrine of the Trinity. Church historian Franz Dünzl explains that what we refer to as monotheism was described as 'monarchy' (*monarchia*) by early Christians. 'They spoke emphatically of the "sole rule of the one God", of the divine monarchy' (Dünzl 2007:25). The divine monarchy was of course a preservation of Jewish monotheism (Dünzl 2007):

> [*E*]xcept that the God of the Old Testament has appeared as a human being in Jesus Christ, he has suffered as a human being and has redeemed us…. It is quite imaginable that in the second century, at least in Asia Minor, such modalism was common church teaching. (p. 28)

This view was however progressively challenged by the so-called Logos theologians who had deeply imbibed Greek philosophy and resided in ancient variants of the contemporary multicultural cities, such as Alexandria, Rome and Carthage where they identified Christ with the eternal Logos. These included learned scholars such as Origen (see *Against Celsus* bk II, 36), but especially Tertullian (see *Praxeas*, 5), who more than anyone would be responsible for early formulations of the Trinity.

The Trinity was formulated as a concept that countered modalism, but which still maintained an underlying monotheistic principle. In reference to Praxeas (8.5–7), Dünzl (2007) writes:

> Thus according to Tertullian there is only one God, only one divine state of being or status, only one divine substance and one divine power. But in salvation history, in creation and redemption different gradations, forms and specific expressions of the deity can be distinguished, namely the Son and Spirit alongside the Father. (p. 32)

Tertullian, it should be added, was a Latin-speaking theologian of the West. In the East, the most important Logos theologian when it came to formulating the Trinity was Origen. Origen emphasised the point that there was only one God, yet in his Trinitarian conceptions he emphasised distinctiveness over unity. Here, the Greek terms *ousia* [divine substance] and *hypostasis*, 'derived from the verb *hyphistamai*, "be present, exist"' (Dünzl 2007:35), become important, and ultimately controversial. According to Dünzl, *ousia* and

hypostasis were still interchangeable, and therefore Origen used both to point to the distinctiveness within the Trinity (see *Commentary on John* II 10.75; X 37.246). On the other hand, in Origen's understanding, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit were unified through 'harmony (*symphosia*) and identity of willing', as well as through an under-conceptualised 'essential goodness', which distinguishes them from all other existing beings (Dünzl 2007:35–36; cf. Phan 2011:8–9).

It seems that the unity aspect of Origen's trinitarianism was somewhat vague then, and he was subsequently criticised in church history for not being clear enough about that. However, the most serious challenge to trinitarianism emerged when Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria who was originally from Libya, proposed a way of reconciling Christology with monotheism. This he did around 318 CE, by arguing through his exegesis of Proverbs (8:22–25) that the Logos did in fact have a beginning, in contradistinction to God who has no beginning. This is what we can surmise based on polemicist writings against him, because his original thoughts and words were not preserved. Based on such secondary sources, the following deduction has been made (Dünzl 2007):

> Arius inferred from the text that the Son of God, the Logos, had a *beginning* – certainly before the earth, the depths, the springs, before the mountains and hills and even before the time of the world (*aion*); but he did have a beginning, and for this beginning of the Logos scripture uses not only the metaphor 'begetting' (which is common in the church) but also the term 'creation'. (p. 43)

The point about creation, which made it possible to talk about the Logos as a creature, and therefore in no way a threat to the oneness of God, was of course extremely controversial. In spite of having some powerful Bishops as allies, Arius was eventually excommunicated, although he was later pardoned (see MacCulloch 2010:215–216).

However, the Arian idea was not put to rest that easily and the question of exactly how the Logos as identified with the Son in Christian Theology relates to the Father continued to divide the church. The dispute was eventually brought to a head by the emperor Constantine, who, interestingly perhaps from a Roman conception of religion where unity of faith was everything, became alarmed at the evident disunity among the religion he had adopted and identified as a most suitable cohesive factor in his empire. Hence, he called into being the Council of Nicaea, likely not out of any theological concern for ultimate truth regarding the Christian conception of God, but rather to ensure an end to disunity among the churches in the empire (Dünzl 2007):

> His perspective was that of a Roman emperor who wanted to promote the unity of religion in order to ensure for himself the protection of the supreme deity. His intervention in the dispute over Arius was no exception here. (p. 50)

The Nicaean creed achieved Constantine's goal of preserving unity, and it even went some way towards creating a common understanding of the Trinity, but, partly because of divergent linguistic interpretations between the East and the West, some misunderstanding and contrary views continued to divide opinion for many years to come, as I shall shortly elaborate.

However, before moving on to the complexities involving translation and translatability, some words are needed on the Holy Spirit as part of the Trinity, particularly because the Spirit is an important feature of Pentecostal religiosity, which increasingly takes centre stage in contemporary world Christianity. It is perhaps significant that although the Spirit has always been part of Christian conceptions of God, none of the controversy surrounding the relationship between the Father and the Son characterised the role of the Spirit. Dünzl (2007) explains:

> The fact that the equivalent for 'spirit' in Greek is neuter (*to pneuma*) and thus evokes more the idea of a gift than that of a subject, and that talk of the Pneuma – unlike talk of the Son of God – did not immediately and automatically pose a question to monotheism must also have played a role in bracketing off the Spirit from the discussion. Moreover Judaism had already been able to speak quite unproblematically of the spirit (*ruah*) of God without seeing the unity of Yahweh being affected. (p. 117)

Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit, as part of the Trinity, was also not at all a problem-free designation, and indeed in post-Nicene times there were the so-called Pneumatomachi ('fighters against the Spirit'). The Neo-Nicene author Basil of Caesarea wrote his treatise *On the Holy Spirit* specifically to persuade these 'fighters' of the Spirit's place in the Trinity (Dünzl 2007):

> Basil emphasizes the equality of rank within the Trinity, as it is clearly expressed in the command of the risen Christ to baptize in the name of the Father *and* of the Son *and* of the Holy Spirit (cf. Mt 28.19, *Holy Spirit* 10.24–26). Unlike the Eastern subordinationists, Basil thus sees Matthew 28.19 as documenting, not a gradated order of ranks, but the equality of Father, Son and Spirit. (p. 121)

It is noteworthy that the 381 Council of Constantinople, which at least for a time united the Eastern and the Western understandings of the Trinity until the *filioque* controversy would rear its head, largely followed Basil of Caesarea's doctrine of the Spirit (see Anderson 2010:61). I do not have the space here to elaborate on the *filioque* controversy, except to state that it involved a seemingly minor point of disagreement regarding the question of the Spirit's procession from the Father, as was the original Nicene formulation, versus the Latin church's increasingly frequent use of *filioque*, which is a clause that adds (and the Son) to the doctrine regarding the Spirit's procession. In other words, in the Western church, the Spirit was confessed to have proceeded from both the Father and the Son. This apparent change to a dearly held ecumenical creed was problematic for the churches of the East. This ultimately unresolved disagreement between the East and the West was partially responsible for the 11th century schism between the Eastern (Greek) and the Western (Latin) churches (see MacCulloch 2010:310ff.).

Translatability and the doctrine of the trinity

With the above, I have presented a glimpse into how different interpretations of key terms used to describe the Trinity have led to tension, controversy and back and forth accusations of heresy. Given the complexity of the doctrine, especially the fine line its formulators had to tread between holding fast to monotheism and an understanding of divinity that allows for their confession of Jesus of Nazareth as Lord to be included in such a monotheism, it is not surprising that tensions and sometimes contrary interpretations arose. What furthermore becomes apparent is that Greek and Latin renditions of key concepts did not convey exactly similar semantics in the different contexts. Referring to the Council of Nicaea, which began its deliberations in June 325, Dünzl (2007) maintains that it is not an insignificant matter that the language in which deliberations were held as well as the theological disputations surrounding Arius were Greek:

> For in the years and decades after Nicaea it was to prove that the church in the West, which had been using Latin as a theological language for just under a century, could not always follow the finer details of the Greek discussion, with the result that because of the difference in language people sometimes missed the point. (p. 52)

Although the Arian heresy had been conclusively dealt with, questions remained. Most importantly, there existed a gray area which caused some tension between interpretations of the Trinity as three distinct entities over against those emphasizing God's oneness. Language had much to do with this. In reference to Origen, above, I have mentioned the terms *ousia* and *hypostasis*. For Origen, it was important to emphasise that each of the Trinity had its own *hypostasis*, or way of existing. Yet, Dünzl (2007) points out the problem created by translation:

> [*T*]he Latin equivalent of the Greek term *hypostasis* was *substantia.* The two words correspond to some degree etymologically (*hypo-stasis – sub-stantia*), so intrinsically the translation is not wrong. But the content changes with the translation into Latin: if Eastern theology spoke of two hypostases, in Latin that amounted to a difference in substance between Father and Son. Accordingly, around 210 the first Latin trinitarian theologian, Tertullian of Carthage, had coined the slogan *una substantia.* (p. 72)

The tendency to treat hypostasis and substantia as interchangeable led to much misunderstanding and mutual suspicion of heresy between the East and the West in the years following Nicaea. It is only with the rise of the so-called Cappadocian fathers that this divide was crossed to a large extent thanks to the pioneering work of especially the oldest among the Cappadocians, Basil the great, who was Bishop of Caesarea in around 369 or 370. Basil came to realise that 'substance' and 'hypostasis' had to be separated for the sake of the Trinity (see Schaff, Letters 236.6). In Basil's solution, which more narrowly defines the meaning of these terms (Dünzl 2007):

> '[*S*]ubstance' relates to what is common to Father and Son, what is *general*, whereas the term 'hypostasis' denotes what is *particular* to Father and Son, i.e. what makes the Father *the Father* and the Son *the Son*… Thus in principle the Neo-Nicene solution was found. There is only *one* incomprehensible divine substance which is realized in different ways in the *three* hypostases of the Godhead… (p. 107)

In spite of this near miraculous agreement reached on interpreting the Trinity, it should be emphasised that it had come through an amount of linguistic manipulation. 'Substance' could mean one thing, and one thing only. 'Hypostasis' could mean another thing, but that other thing only. If everyone abided by these narrowly defined linguistic boundaries, then the Trinity could be understood. That is well and good, but it raises the question regarding the translatability of terms that had to be so closely circumscribed in the first place. Surely, any attempt at translation would be entering a minefield. It would be near impossible to stay clear of some of the problems that characterised the initial misunderstandings between Greek and Latin terms, not to mention any additional misunderstanding resulting from more recently adopted linguistic cultures and their worldviews.

It is interesting to note that Sanneh did not address the Trinity much at all in the above-mentioned book. The Christian message, according to him and other proponents of the translatability thesis, is translatable, even infinitely translatable as Walls would have it, but is the Trinity translatable? Or is it not really central to the message itself? If the latter were the case, then it is obvious that the question of its translatability is a moot point, but one would imagine that the seriousness of the early church's contentions surrounding this theme would be enough to convince most reasonable readers that the Trinity is really central to the message. Hence, in spite of questions one might have regarding the concept's basic translatability, an overriding factor seems to be the fact that it really should be translatable for Christianity to make sense. The question then becomes, how could this be done, and moreover, who is to be responsible for it?

I shall, in the final analysis, return to the point regarding interpretation, vantage point, etc. Firstly, I want to pay attention to the ways in which the translation of the Trinity could work, or not. The theologian Christine Helmer is helpful in this regard, because in an essay on post-Reformation Trinitarian theology, she unmasks what she considers to be a false binary opposition in the conventional narrative between orthodoxy and Enlightenment (Helmer 2011):

> The received story that sees the Trinity as a triumph of orthodoxy represents the Enlightenment as eroding the fundamental doctrinal pillars of Christianity. Yet this caricature of the Enlightenment … with its concomitant demand among cultured despisers of modernity that Christians resist it, must be questioned as to its representation of what happened. [The] alternative story, rather than demarcating the boundary between revelation and reason in antithesis, considers the far-reaching and exciting contributions of the Trinity to modern thinking. (p. 150)

Helmer then goes on to show a number of interesting interpretations, translations if you will, of the Trinity in post-Enlightenment thought. One of the more interesting cases she mentions is that of Count Nicolas von Zinzendorf (1700–1760), the Pietistic Moravian sponsor of and inspiration for Protestant missions to far-flung lands. Helmer writes that von Zinzendorf's 'Jesus centred piety' did not detract him from seeing the 'Spirit as Mother, thereby implying a marital relation between Father and Spirit' (Helmer 2011:158).

Even more influential Trinitarian innovations, or translations into modern modes of thought, occurred in the writings of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Friedrich Schleiermacher, respectively (Helmer 2011):

> Hegel situated the Trinity as the two end points of his 'metanarrative' system; the Trinity was his system's ground and goal … [In] Schleiermacher's system … the Trinity was a culmination of faith statements expressing the redemptive effects of Jesus and of the Spirit in the church, and ultimately through the church in the world. Both demonstrated how seriously the Trinity was to be taken in Western thought. (pp. 165–166)

Such openness to a specific kind of translatability when it comes to the doctrine of the Trinity, it must be said, has itself been marginal in Christian theological thinking. Far more dominant is the view that Hegel et al. exchanged the traditional 'economy of salvation' idea associated with Trinitarian theology with the 'inner' life of God (see Rahner 2001:14–21). This placed the Trinity in an abstract category devoid of much influence in the life of ordinary believers, according to Hegel's critics of which there were many. One theologian taking this type of line of a much more negative influence of Enlightenment thinking on Trinitarianism is Veli-Matti Kärkkainen (2007) who furthermore writes:

> Since the Enlightenment, the waning of the doctrine of the Trinity also has had to do with the rise of biblical and dogmatic critique. Whereas for even older Protestant theology, the Bible offered proofs of the Trinity, biblical criticism of the Enlightenment destroyed that approach. (p. 56)

Thus, it is clear that not everyone would allow for the idea that the Trinity could be infinitely translatable, even into the depths of Enlightenment philosophy, for example. Nevertheless, Helmer's view is important for my purposes here because she indicates indeed that the concept of the Trinity was not only bound to early Christian discourse, but it could even be translated into an allegedly religiously antagonistic epoch, such as the era of Enlightenment. Helmer (2011) even goes as far as to state:

> The Trinity gradually emerged as the central defining doctrine for Christianity by the end of this epoch because its ultimate systematic conceptualization satisfied the dual idioms of history and speculation that had been established by academic consensus. (p. 166)

This then seems to be a strong endorsement of translatability, albeit an unlikely translatability when it comes to the Trinity. Trinitarian theology has similarly been translated by innovative theologians into systems of thought as diverse as feminism (see Fox 2011:274–290), black and liberation theology (see Díaz 2011:259–273) and African (Kombo 2007) and Asian (see Kim 2011:293–308) philosophies to name but a few. I shall elaborate below a bit more on the African case particularly. As could perhaps be expected not everyone is convinced by such more recent innovations.

In a recent book, entitled *Divine Names and the Holy Trinity*, Kendall Soulen sets out by explicating the historical Jewish Christian embeddedness of the Holy Trinity, and follows this up with a discussion of more recent reinterpretations of Trinitarian dogma in the context of World Christianity. Soulen refers specifically to a keynote address given by Korean theologian Chung Hyun-Kyung at the Seventh General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra, Australia in 1991. Chung on this occasion took the opportunity to reinterpret the life of the Trinity using Asian concepts such as the Korean (*han*), which broadly denotes a kind of existential suffering (Soulen 2011):

> *Ina* (Tagalog for mother, also denoting the great goddess from whom all life comes); *ki* (a Northeast Asian concept denoting life energy and harmonious interconnection…; and *kwan in* (an East Asian divine personification of compassion and wisdom). (p. 15)

Hence, this was creative translatability at work, showing linguistic fluidity and perhaps illustrating the essential truth of the translatability thesis. Yet, is such a translated trinity really still the Trinity? It seems that Chung's speech created quite a measure of controversy. Not all of her hearers were equally comfortable with the directions she took. As Tso Man King (1991), at the time general secretary of the Hong Kong Christian Council, put it:

> The presentation drew both an overwhelming standing ovation and severe condemnation and criticism of syncretism and paganism… It was obvious that Dr Chung's presentation received angry criticism not only because of her way of doing theology, which deviated from that of the Orthodox, but also because she utilized Korean resources and rituals that were considered as 'Gentile'. (p. 355)

In this case, it is clear that the critics understood the original formulation of the Trinity as sacrosanct, something that was not supposed to be creatively translatable. However, in objecting to the 'Gentile' elements in Chung's formulations, her critics were apparently blind to the original Gentile background of the Logos with its pre-Christian Stoic roots (see Stead 1998). Yet, this concept became a cardinal aspect of early Trinitarian conceptualisation. That is a notable irony, but it clearly shows the untranslatability of the Trinity when approached from a certain perspective.

However, Andrew Walls in writing about what he describes as the 'translation principle in Christian history', emphasises the connections between translation and incarnation. He even goes as far as to state: 'Incarnation is translation. When God in Christ became man, Divinity was translated into humanity, as though humanity were a receptor language' (Walls 1996:27). Walls furthermore indicates how this aspect

of Christianity makes it quite different from the other Abrahamic faiths. He states (Walls 1996):

> At the heart of the Jewish faith, as at the heart of the Islamic faith, is the Prophetic Word – God speaks to humanity. At the heart of Christian faith is the Incarnate Word – God became human. (p. 47)

Walls shows how from Christianity's first entrance into Gentile Hellenism a link was established with the pre-Christian traditions. In the Hellenistic case, this occurred through the adoption of the title *Kyrios* to indicate Christ. By doing so, early Christians had effectively translated the Jewish concept of messiah into a term that 'Hellenistic pagans gave to their cult divinities' (Walls 1996:34). That pattern had repeated itself in subsequent missionary translations of Christian scriptures into indigenous languages. Missionaries have often sought to identity a name in an indigenous language that the speakers identified with their understanding of a Supreme Being. Upon identifying such a name, those names were fairly routinely used to designate God in the vernacular translations of the Bible.

If the idea that God has many names is accepted, then what Walls describes makes sense. Translation means that words are interchangeable to convey similar meaning across cultural and linguistic boundaries. This has been a particularly successful aspect of translation in African Christianity as Walls, Sanneh and others have indicated. Regarding the Christianisation of African concepts of God through this type of translation, the African theologian, James Henry Owino Kombo (2007) writes:

> The implication of this is that *Nyame, Leza, Modimo,* and *Nyambe* will no longer refer to their respective native referents. The 'Christianized' *Modimo,* for example, will have no need for the *badimo* and will certainly not have to be an *It* since he will have made himself known in the Son. (p. 233)

With the above commentary about *Modimo* and the *badimo*, Kombo implies that, for example, in Sotho-Tswana communities, the traditional name of the Supreme Being, *Modimo*, would be filled with new semantic content under Christian translation, whereas the ancestors (*badimo*) would become increasingly redundant religiously speaking. However, the concept of the Trinity, according to Kombo, in an African context is not solved by such translation.

Kombo's preferred name for God in the African context is 'the "Great *Muntu*"; a "subject" with the ultimate personality and thus distinct from everyone and everything else' (Kombo 2007:235). However, to turn the Great *Muntu* into the Triune God of Christian theology is for Kombo apparently not a process that would spontaneously result from translation. To the contrary, this must be constructed in a deliberate way (Kombo 2007):

> [*T*]he African Christian thought must 'Yahweh-ize' the Great *Muntu* and name him in Trinitarian terms. This is a significant point of departure that must be deliberately addressed. The African context, as we have noted, knows monotheism, but the idea of God as Trinity is a completely new concept. … It follows, therefore, that African theology should – with urgency – carefully and systematically Christianize the African sense of the Great *Muntu.* (pp. 236–237)

As could be expected, Kombo has a proposal for solving this perceived problem, which we do not have to go into at this point, because the purpose of quoting him is purely to indicate that, according to the most recent treatise that I could find by an African theologian writing on the subject of the Trinity in African Christianity, an Africanised version of this doctrine has to be introduced from the outside. The Trinity is not something that could be translated into pre-existing categories.

However, the above might not be the full story, nor the final word on the translatability of the Trinity into African Christianity, or indeed into any other aspect of World Christianity. One question is whether one considers the translation process to be exclusively the theologian's preserve, or whether one agrees with the above quote by Walls, which would have translation more or less equated to incarnation? If one holds the latter perspective, then the process clearly does not belong to the academic theologian. To the contrary, translation would be a Spirit-imbued process occurring in the life of a community of faith. Through such a process, God incarnate, in other words the risen Christ, would become more and more visible to believers in their own linguistic and sociocultural paradigm. That, I believe, is the implication of Walls' statement that 'incarnation is translation'. If we furthermore believe that the incarnate Logos, however translated, provides the necessity for a Trinitarian confession, as the early Christians evidently did, then it would follow that the Trinity would also become translated in one way or another into World Christian contexts, even if the original parameters surrounding the debate of early Trinitarian formulation no longer exist or even make sense to contemporary believers.

A related question is whether in contemporary contexts of World Christianity, where, for example, the Pentecostal–Charismatic movement plays a central role, the very notion of belief in concepts continues to play such an important role as in former eras. This, admittedly, is a big question to throw out towards the end of an article on the Trinity, and I do not mean to either deal with it or brush it aside lightly. However, there are certain indications that historically more recent forms of Christianity such as Pentecostalism and African Initiated Christianity (AIC) are in some ways more deeply vested in orthopraxis than orthodoxy.

What one does, how one speaks, how one worships and even what one wears on specific occasions might be of a greater concern than formulated concepts regarding beliefs in the abstract. This reflects my own experience of African Pentecostalism and AIC, but the observation is also borne out by what others have encountered. For example, one of the leading scholars of African Pentecostalism, Kwabena

Asamoah-Gyadu from Ghana, writes similar things in reference to the American sociologist of religion, Harvey Cox. Asamoah-Gyadu (2007) states:

> Generally, African Pentecostals are not given to creedal confessions because of the oral nature of their theology, preferring to sing, dance, and pray their faith rather than recite it…. Cox (1995:15) observes that while the beliefs of other religious groups are enshrined in formal theological systems, those of the Pentecostals are embedded in testimonies, ecstatic speech, and bodily movement. (pp. 128–129)

Hence, these types of description, although they do not mention anything about specific beliefs such as the Trinity, would seem to bear out my contention that orthopraxis plays a greater role than orthodoxy. Or perhaps the term embodied faith is even a better description of Pentecostal religiosity. Whatever the case, the suggestion seems to be that if the Trinity features in this type of setting, if the Trinity has indeed been translated through an incarnational process if you will, then the Trinity might form part, perhaps even an integral part, of the lived spirituality encountered in these churches. This might be so, even if the centrality of the Trinity in such churches might not be obvious to an outside observer. Of course, this is a radically different conception of the Trinity than the confessional emphasis of the early church, or of the Reformed tradition, for that matter, but within an understanding of translation as incarnation, a Trinity expressed in worship rather than confessed as a matter of individual belief actually seems like a fair example of translatability.

Conclusion: Translatability and static versus fluid conceptions of the Trinity

I have purposefully entitled my article, the (non-) translatability of the Holy Trinity, to indicate the ambivalent responses that could be given to such a theme, if framed as a question. Unquestionably, the Trinity as a doctrine, even if a very central Christian doctrine, falls into a different category than the Gospel or Message, such as expounded upon by proponents of the translatability thesis in Christian history, such as Lamin Sanneh and Andrew Walls. However, with the early church having given such enormous weight to the correct formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, and with the subsequent theological tradition in Christian history broadly agreeing with the centrality of a Trinitarian conception of God, it seems inevitable that if the Gospel is infinitely translatable then so is the Trinity. At least so it should be. I have indicated that there has been no shortage in terms of theological creativity when it came to attempts to re-interpret or translate the Trinity in different World Christian contexts. That such attempts were unacceptable for some should not be surprising. Translation is always risky, and it is threatening to those clinging to dearly hold 'original' formulations. One's response to such efforts perhaps comes down to whether one has a static or concrete view of the Trinity cast in the proverbial stone of its original formulation, or whether one has a fluid, or even an organic perspective. In the former case, a specific formulation of the confession would be sacrosanct. However, if you are prepared to consider the Trinity more organically, perhaps by prioritising the incarnational aspect that is inherent to the confession, then both creative reinterpretations of the doctrine and a de-emphasis of the doctrine itself in favour of the lived religion as seen in much of contemporary Christianity would not be threatening at all. Perhaps, the Trinity should simply be trusted to manifest Godself in all God's vulnerable oneness. After all, if the Trinity really is the Trinity, then our anxiety over the theological concept's translatability, or not, would really be missing the mark. Worshipping the Trinity would be the more appropriate course of action.

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