

Editorial: Tourists, Guests and Why We Learn Other Languages

David I. Smith

It was 6:30 in the evening on New Year's Eve. I had landed in Germany with a group of students earlier that day and traveled by train to Köln. After months of anticipation and a night of largely sleepless travel it felt surreal to suddenly find ourselves in Germany. Now, after catching a few hours of rest at the youth hostel, we were braving the cold and the jetlag to wander across the Rhine for a New Year's Eve service. Later, the group would record their first impressions in their journals:

We're finally in Germany! That's all I keep hearing from everyone else and something I have to keep reminding myself. I still can't get over it ... It's so hard to not just observe instead of experience. Maybe the reality of being here hasn't sunk in because I feel like I'm in a movie or a picture where everything surrounding me is fake. Probably because it is so foreign.¹

The massive gothic cathedral, impressive enough by day despite the black cloak of mourning placed upon its shoulders by decades of air pollution, becomes almost unearthly after dark, a soaring, inscrutable thing lit against the night sky, countless tons of hand-carved stone somehow become ethereal. Earlier in the day miscellaneous groups of tourists had milled around the interior, pointing at carvings, admiring the windows, gazing up at the impossibly high ceiling. The following day we would join them, making our own attempts to decipher the myriad messages encoded into stone and glass.

Now, as we arrived just in time to hear (and feel) the first organ tones resound, perhaps a thousand worshippers packed the pews, with late-comers such as ourselves still slipping past the barrier to claim standing

room around the periphery. The postures of those inside were now different from earlier in the day. Instead of gazing outward at the details of the walls and ceiling, all eyes were towards the center, focused on the priests who were leading the service. Two red-robed ushers stood courteous but vigilant guard at the barrier near the entrance, letting some pass, blocking the way of others.

Going through customs [I was struck by] the silence of the officials as they opened a new window – they just expected new lines to form without announcing that they were open! And the lines formed. There are so many unwritten rules that are built into our societies that I probably don't notice in America and Germans probably don't here. But it does seem like a different planet from the pavement to the structure of the buildings to the cars and the narrowness of the streets...

The criteria by which they admitted or excluded became clear as we approached the barrier. Just in front of me one of the ushers was calmly but insistently refusing to let a young man pass. Apparently the visitor did not speak German – the usher was repeating his refusal in several languages to make sure the message was getting across. The visitor was smartly dressed and looked respectable – it was apparently not disregard of James' warning against showing social favoritism that was causing the rejection. We wondered what was happening, and whether we would be admitted to the service. As we shuffled forward, the reason became visible: he was holding a video camera, and it was to this that the usher pointed as he persisted in his polyglot attempts to communicate that only *participants* were at this point in time welcome: "Missa, verstehen Sie? Missa, keine visitors." When our turn came, we passed the barrier with ease – a brief "wir wollen zur Messe" ("we want to attend the mass") was enough to be waved on into the church, leaving the frustrated tourist behind us.

It was easy to see why he would want to take pictures; the aesthetics were impressive, the sense of medieval drama vivid. The stained glass windows, spectacular by day, were now grey and lifeless against the night sky. But hundreds of candles, some of them a hundred feet in the air on ledges that left us wondering if the cathedral employed a stuntman to light them, flickered against the walls. Incense rose toward the distant ceiling

from the altar, where a group of robed priests began the mass against the backdrop of swelling organ tones and soaring choir. Futile, of course, to think that any of this could be captured on film, but one could understand the impulse to try. The criteria for admission were, however, clearly and doggedly stated: worshippers only, no “visitors”.

Thinking back on those moments the next day as I prepared to talk to my students about why I did not want them to see themselves as tourists during our stay in Germany, they seemed pregnant with meaning for our journey. Tzvetan Todorov describes the archetypal tourist as “a visitor in a hurry who prefers monuments to human beings”.² Instead of facing the subtler and more arduous work of participating, listening and beginning to weave human connections, the tourist is intent on capturing the moment on film to be digested later in the safety of the home or shown off as a trophy to friends and relatives. As a result, tourists are often courteously but firmly shut out of the human heart of the culture they are visiting. They are left observing distantly and dispassionately from behind a barrier. And all the time, the way through is not some arcane password, known only to the illuminati, but rather some basic ability to communicate and the simple desire to participate, to be included in some way in the Cardinal’s opening cry, arms spread wide, of “Brüder und Schwestern!” (brothers and sisters).

Of course things aren’t quite that simple. Perhaps many of those who made it into the mass were there mainly for the aesthetics, carrying their cameras within, in their spirits instead of around their necks. As for us, we remained in significant measure outsiders, denied for the moment the sheer time investment needed to build relationships, to pick up the manifold threads of a community, and in many cases struggling with the sudden immersion in the German language in a vast, echoing space. But all of us were inside at least to a degree that the man with his camera was not. We did not just admire the view; we allowed ourselves (within the limits of our varied competence in German) to be addressed by Cardinal Meisner’s lively sermon, and we echoed his prayers for his church and his country, that the “practical atheism” of the culture might give way to a “new Pentecost”. We saw the cathedral not just in its daytime guise as a beautiful relic, but as a functioning house of faith. We saw that fireworks and revelry were not the only things going on in Köln in New Year’s Eve. We came out with, I hope, more than a home movie as reward for our evening, and then separated to find food or sleep.

Last night [New Year's Eve] I was finally starting to feel a part of it instead of just watching – but it was only a glimpse. Speaking in German helps – being in the restaurant and pausing a while to decipher what the waitress last said to us was exciting – proving that this culture isn't entirely foreign. We are able to crack pieces of the code in order to be a part of it.

The next day, as we discussed the events of the previous evening, I reminded the group about the forlorn tourist and his encounter with the recalcitrant usher, and the difference between his experience and ours. This was why we had been laboring to learn German instead of just booking a European vacation. In the following days and weeks we would be repeatedly warmed and a little shamed by the pleased surprise of Germans when they encountered American travelers who spoke their language. We would see many sights and take many photos, but we would also hear stories, engage in discussions, get to know families and begin at least to gain a sense of the issues occupying the attention of our German hosts, the hopes that animated them, the anxieties that troubled them, the questions that puzzled them. We aspired to be good guests, not merely tourists; listeners and not merely observers. It is possible to tour a land at length in aloof detachment, but seeking to be good guests made us more vulnerable, dependent on the hospitality extended by our German hosts. We were not disappointed.

Basic to the whole journey (and, I suggest, to the reasons why we teach and learn foreign languages and cultures) was the distinction we observed on New Year's Eve at Köln Cathedral. Learning the language of the country where we were guests, and coming with a desire to connect and to listen, allowed us to participate at some level from the start, instead of standing outside the barrier. Not just "let me take your picture", but "let me stand alongside you and begin to learn". Not just monuments, but *people*, with all their hopes and concerns. Not just photos for later, but *participation*, being present, listening and asking questions in the language of our hosts instead of gesticulating at an usher trying to tell us "no" in every language he knew.

Introduction to volume 4

This fourth volume of the *Journal of Christianity and Foreign Languages* includes treatment of a fresh range of topics. There is a clear preponderance of Spanish topics (colleagues in other languages take note!). The research articles open with Julia Aguilar's comparison of the implicit theologies that underlie the different (yet related) conceptions of the detective story that can be found in the works of Jorge Louis Borges and G. K. Chesterton. Borges' works reflect an Eastern worldview and the influence of Schopenhauer, while Chesterton embraces a linear view of history with the cross at its center. Aguilar argues that Borges nevertheless always remained drawn by the cross because of its answers to questions that his own worldview could not satisfactorily resolve. Michael Sullivan reaches further back in time to Calderón's sonnets, in particular a pair of sonnets that retell the story of Pharaoh's dreams from the book of Genesis. Sullivan's article examines how Calderón glosses Scripture, and goes on to outline some implications for pedagogy in the Christian literature classroom. In the third research article in this issue the focus shifts from literature to film. Christine Kepner examines three films by the Argentine director María Luisa Bemberg, showing how each reflects a "feminine gaze". Kepner traces the complex interweavings of feminist and Christian themes in Bemberg's films and suggests ways of dealing with them in the Christian college classroom.

Our Forum section, inaugurated in volume 3, continues with three thematically related contributions, each dealing in different ways with the dynamics of cross-cultural encounter. Mary Docter explores Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's evolving view of the Indian in the New World of the 16th century, and finds there lessons for us and for our students in terms of our attitude towards the other. Kevin Williams discusses a British journalist's reactions to Italian culture, including in particular his discovery that culture and religion are deeply intertwined. Lindy Scott, Matthew Reynolds, Annsley Scruton-Wilson and Mark Ortman report on a study visit to Cuba, relating how their own preconceptions were challenged and changed and how the perceptions that they encountered within Cuba concerning the place of Christianity in Cuban culture varied among the different individuals with whom they interacted. All three pieces, together with the present editorial, reflect a shared concern with exploring the ways in which any crossing of linguistic boundaries brings in its train an ethical encounter with cultural difference that can have significant and long-lasting effects.

The Forum is intended to offer space for other kinds of writing

than the research article, and we continue to invite a range of types of writing for this section: reports on research in progress, descriptions of successful pedagogical interventions, meditations, challenges to our thought and practice - all of these and more are potentially welcome contributions. While Forum pieces will typically be less extensively referenced than research articles, we are still looking for careful, high quality writing and relevance to the concerns of the journal and its readers.

We present this fourth issue of the *Journal of Christianity and Foreign Languages* to you in the hope that you will find it stimulating and helpful and will recommend it to colleagues (see page 83 for details of a gift subscription offer).

David I. Smith and Donna West

NOTES

¹ Italicised citations are from the journal of Ruth DeMaster.

² Todorov, T. (1993). *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism and Exoticism in French Thought*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, p.342.

Fourteenth Annual Conference
of the
North American Christian
Foreign Language Association

Location: Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa

Dates: March 25-27, 2004

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