

# Editorial: Cross-Cultural Learning and Christian History

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Study of the interface between Christian belief and education in foreign languages and literatures requires attention to relevant developments not only in disciplines such as literary studies or applied linguistics, but also in theology. Theological reflection on cultural difference and relationships between cultures, while far from being the only relevant theological discussion, is particularly pertinent. A recent work that deserves the attention of scholars concerned with Christianity and education in foreign languages and literatures is the recent collection of essays by prominent missiologist Andrew Walls published under the title *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis/Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002). A central theme of the book is the nature of the interaction between Western Christianity and non-Western cultures as reflected in the history of Protestant missions to Africa and India—a topic already pertinent to current discussions of language education given the rise in published reflection on the relationship between ESL teaching and colonial power. Walls' explorations of the encounter between Western missionaries and non-Western cultures are rather more detailed and nuanced than the over-simplifications that can be found in some recent writings by applied linguists and language educators. The relevance of his book to readers of this journal goes, however, beyond the provision of healthy historical nuance, for he also develops some contours of a positive theological account of the relationship of contemporary Christianity to the task of cross-cultural communication.

Two basic strands of Walls' argument seem particularly pertinent to discussions of the place of foreign language education in Christian educational settings. The first has to do with the nature of the movement of Christianity through history. Walls draws a contrast between Islam and Christianity in terms of the dynamics of their growth. Islam, he notes, "can point to a steady geographical progression from its birthplace and from its earliest years" and

during this period “has not had many territorial losses to record” (13). It also carries substantial fixed cultural content tied to the Qur’an in heaven, Mecca on earth and Arabic as the perfect medium for its message. Christianity, on the other hand, has expanded in serial rather than progressive fashion—rather than expanding outwards territorially, it has undergone a series of cultural translations, moving into new and marginal cultural territories and dying away in areas that were once its heartlands. This continuous movement into new cultural settings is not accidental: “For Christians ... 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.”(29) The profoundest expressions of Christianity are thus often “local and vernacular”, arising from the penetration of a particular cultural location and context by the Gospel rather than the adoption of a supra-historical or culturally uniform set of Christian practices. Christianity began as a demographically Jewish phenomenon, but already within the pages of the New Testament a process of cultural adjustment and translation becomes visible as an initially Jewish church spreads across the culturally Hellenistic Eastern Mediterranean. By the time Jerusalem fell, the “Hellenistic-Roman” model of Christianity was well established, but a few centuries later the Roman world was in turn to face its terminal crisis, at which time the heartlands of Christianity moved further North into Northern Europe. In more recent times, there has been a shift first from Europe to North America and then most recently from Western countries to Africa, Asia and Latin America: “in the year 1800 well over 90 percent of the world’s professing Christians lived in Europe or North America. Today, something like 60 percent of them live in Africa, Asia, Latin America or the Pacific, and that proportion is rising year by year.” (31) Over the past century alone, Walls points out, the number of professing Christians in Africa has risen from around 10 million to somewhere in the region of 300 million.

The key point here, however, is not simply one of numerical shift, but one of cultural shift. These changes in the center of gravity of the Christian world have been inseparable from the development of new expressions of Christian faith and practice woven into new cultural settings. A continuing process of cross-cultural encounter and translation has therefore been an important part of both the spread of Christianity and its historical survival as past cultural incarnations of the faith wane in influence. This has, moreover, not been a matter of the expansion of a culturally homogeneous set of prac-

tices into new territories, but rather a constant process of retranslation in which both the new cultural setting and the self-understanding of Christianity are changed through their interaction.

This does not, of course, mean that the Christian church has not regularly attempted to impose particular cultural assumptions and practices along with the faith itself during such cross-cultural encounters, nor that Christians have not often assumed that their particular cultural expression of Christian faith is universally normative—Walls provides plenty of examples. His argument, however, is that such efforts and beliefs run counter to the theological heart of Christianity itself and to the larger patterns of its diffusion across history. Cross-cultural learning is essential to the identity and history of Christianity, not merely something that resides at its fringes.

This point is reinforced by a second important strand in Walls' argument, one that focuses more on the present than on the past. The book's fourth essay is titled "The Ephesian Moment: At a Crossroads in Christian History." In this essay, Walls begins by reemphasizing that the Christian story is incarnationally grounded within history, and that "genuine manifestations of Christ cannot be separated from specific segments of social reality that occur in time." (74) Accordingly, "we are not the final stage of Christian formation. Others will look at us and see, perhaps with wonder, our incompleteness." (73) At the same time, the particularities of cultural location have to be placed alongside the call in Paul's epistle to the Ephesians to grow into a shared maturity. Walls relates Paul's reminder that in union with Christ "you too are being built together with all the others to become a place where God lives through his Spirit" (Ephesians 2:22) to the cultural differences and tensions between Jewish and Hellenistic believers in the early church. The church must be one since Christ is one, affirming in his humanity all of humanity in all of its cultural diversity. Believers of different cultural backgrounds and practices are therefore to become parts of a single body, not through cultural homogenization but through a common yet particularized grounding in Christ. Each part of the body retains its difference, yet needs the others for maturity:

"The Ephesian metaphors of the temple and of the body show each of the culture-specific segments as necessary to the body but as incomplete in itself. Only in Christ does completion, fullness, dwell. And Christ's completion, as we have seen, comes from all humanity, from the translation of the life of Jesus into the lifeways of all the world's cultures

and subcultures through history. None of us can reach Christ's completeness on our own. We need each other's vision to correct, enlarge, and focus our own; only together are we complete in Christ." (79, alluding to Ephesians 4:13)

Finally, Walls returns to the changing realities of the present day. With the heartlands of Christian faith shifting from the West to Africa, Asia and Latin America (even as Christian presence continues in the West), and increasing migration, often in the opposite direction (Walls cites UN figures suggesting that immigration could push the population of the US to 400 million by 2050), Walls sees the advent of an "Ephesian moment" in which the church is "more culturally diverse than it has ever been before" (81) and also mainly a church of the poor. He suggests that the "question at the Ephesian moment is whether or not the church in all its diversity will demonstrate its unity by the interactive participation of all its culture-specific segments, the interactive participation that is to be expected in a functioning body." (81) Once again cross-cultural learning and cross-cultural communication edge towards center stage as essential parts of the mature expression of Christian faith.

Many of the readers of and contributors to this journal work in the context of North American Christian education, that is, in educational institutions shaped by Western cultural and theological assumptions. Western cultural assumptions have typically included the normality of monolingualism (we refer, for instance, to the learning of additional languages as "*second language acquisition*," revealing the assumption that one language is the standard model) and have acknowledged the utility of serious cross-cultural learning only at the margins. This is reflected in the repeated need to make a case for continued support for foreign language and cross-cultural learning in educational institutions. The picture that Walls draws of the path of Christianity through history and its present global situation offers grounds for a long, hard look at these assumptions on the part of Christian educational institutions in the West; the interest of his book therefore reaches well beyond the bounds of missiology narrowly conceived. It is a book that would repay the attention of foreign language educators who desire to explore constructive relationships between Christian faith and cross-cultural learning and to find ways of articulating the importance of such learning within Christian educational institutions.

## Introduction to Volume 6

This sixth volume of the *Journal of Christianity and Foreign Lan-*

guages once again brings a rich tapestry of topics with some interesting interconnections. Dianne Zandstra and Deborah Berho both focus on political realities in the history of Argentina, the former exploring the use of the grotesque by Griselda Gambaro, and the latter providing an analysis of religious metaphor in the political discourse of Juan Domingo Perón. These two papers examine from opposite ends of the spectrum the relationship between religion and political power in Argentina. Phyllis Mitchell and Jolene Vos-Camy share a concern for helping students to authentically encounter a foreign other in the language classroom, whether through an understanding of Lituma's cross-cultural experiences in the novel *Lituma en los Andes* or through coming to terms with the different cultural norms that shape the interactions between characters in the French film *Un Air de Famille*. In the *Forum*, Herman De Vries contributes a meditation on the kind of attentiveness needed to encounter language and its speakers in ethically adequate ways. The *Forum* also contains a collection of short pieces on the use (and misuse) of the Bible in language classrooms and a survey of recent work on teaching literature in Christian settings. The review section includes reviews of two books by NACFLA member Lindy Scott, plus a review of a recent volume by Bill Johnston that gives attention to the relationship between morality, faith and language teaching. We hope that this varied material will provide much scope for fruitful reflection.

*David I. Smith and Dianne Zandstra*

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