

Eugene Nida & William Reuben, 1981  
Meaning Across Cultures

## Preface

Two developments have prompted the preparation of this volume, *Meaning Across Cultures*. One is the increasingly recognized need for some practical guide to help people understand how misconceptions can arise because of differing cultural backgrounds, especially as these relate to many crucial differences between the cultural preconceptions and values of biblical times and those of our own day. The second is the need for an exposition of the principles of communication that may guide one's judgment as to the validity of various types of adaptation and restructuring that occur in many present-day translations of the Bible.

In an effort to avoid traditional and often meaningless word-for-word renderings of the Scriptures, some translators have so altered the linguistic form as to seriously distort the meaning of the text and have so transposed the cultural content as to undermine the significance of the historical setting. And so it becomes necessary to define and describe the principles that govern faithfulness and accuracy in intercultural communication.

The special emphasis of this volume is not upon translation techniques, but upon those basic differences of ideas and attitudes that are so fundamental to any attempt to understand a message produced by persons of a significantly diverse culture. The focus of attention is, therefore, directed not so much to isolated words as to those objects and events in the Scriptures that have quite distinct meanings from what they have in many receptor cultures. Accordingly, special consideration is given to the problems involved in providing in marginal notes and appendices the supplementary information essential for a satisfactory understanding of the biblical message.

The principles in question are treated in terms of the underlying theory of communication, presented primarily in chapters 2 and 3. This is then followed in chapters 4 and 5 by an analysis of the implications of these principles for matters of form and content. A number of practical implications and applications are discussed in chapters 6 and 7.

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## Meaning Across Cultures: An Introduction

All communication across cultures involves problems of meaning, for the words of any language have meaning only in terms of the ideas, values, and circumstances of concrete human lives. In English we can say that "God forgives," even though we do not really understand what the particles *for* and *give* in the word *forgive* have to do with the act of forgiving. But in one of the languages of central New Guinea one can speak of God's forgiveness only by saying, "God doesn't hang up jawbones." In English we "love with the heart," but in many languages in West Africa one must "love with the liver." Strangely enough we speak of the larynx as "Adam's apple," while the Uduks of the Sudan call it "the thing that loves beer."

In one language of New Guinea spoken by persons who have no acquaintance with sheep but who prize very much their carefully tended pigs, a Bible translator proposed substituting "pig-herder" for "shepherd." Such an adjustment would obviously create serious problems because pigs are regarded as unclean animals in the Bible. This type of cultural adaptation can be dismissed as being poorly conceived, but how is one to respond to the insistence of a professor of theology who contends that a dynamic equivalent translation of the Old Testament phrase "thus saith the Lord" would have to be "I just had an important idea"? In both instances most readers would emphatically reject such suggestions for adjustment, but what are the reasons for rejection?

When the languages involved belong to the same language family and are part of a closely related set of cultures—as, for example, in the case of English and German—the problems are not too great, even though in English we have no satisfactory equivalent for *Gesundheit* spoken when a person sneezes, or for *gute Speise* spoken at the beginning of a meal. But when languages are of different language families and involve wide differences of culture—for example, English and Zulu—the difficulties of comprehension increase by almost geometric proportion. And if one adds to these problems certain differences in time, as between modern English and ancient Hebrew, the complications can be enormous.

The communication of meaning across cultures always requires certain adjustments in the form of the message if the content is to be accurately and faithfully transmitted, for strictly word-for-word renderings inevitably tend

to distort the meaning of the source-language message. But how far can one go in making such adjustments?

The traditional tendency to retain so many of the figures of speech and the cultural symbols of biblical life and times does undoubtedly produce serious misunderstanding, especially if the Bibles that contain such expressions have no accompanying marginal helps or adaptations enabling the reader to make some sense out of the seemingly anomalous expressions. In fact, difficulties arising out of differences of culture constitute the most serious problems for translators and have produced the most far-reaching misunderstandings among readers. A literal rendering of Romans 14:7, "no man lives unto himself and no man dies unto himself," has been interpreted by many Africans as being a direct confirmation of the efficacy of black magic, because death is most never regarded as "natural" but is thought to result from the malevolent influence of witchcraft.

In many instances mistakes in comprehending a biblical text are not too serious, because no important theological issue is at stake. West Africans, for example, may read in a translation of the Bible in their mother tongue that a tax collector "beat his breast" as a sign of his repentance. This might seem strange indeed to West Africans in whose own language the idiom "to beat the breast" can only mean to take pride in one's accomplishment. To indicate repentance one should say "he beat his head."

This type of misunderstanding is not especially grave, but there are many instances when failure to deal satisfactorily with some of the basic cultural problems in communication has led to confusion. In one language a term for "reconciliation" was used for a number of years before missionaries discovered that the cultural practice to which it referred differed from biblical reconciliation in one very crucial aspect. In the local culture the use of this term immediately suggested that the persons who took the initiative in the act of reconciliation were admitting their own guilt in causing the initial rupture in relations. Such a term was completely misleading in speaking about God's attempts to reconcile human beings to himself.

In the case of "beating the breast," one may be able to employ a parallel expression "to beat the head." In treating the problem posed by the term for reconciliation, one must either (1) find another term that does not have the implication of guilt for the initiating party, or (2) construct some phrase that will describe the essential elements of reconciliation in an unambiguous manner. But most problems that involve cultural differences are much more complex: they involve conflicting values attached to the same objects.

For example, in the Orient the "dragon" is not regarded as a threatening animal, symbolic of overwhelming evil power, as in the Book of Revelation; rather, the dragon suggests good luck and fortune. Is one to change the symbol of "dragon" to fit Oriental concepts? Or what should be done with the "white robes" of the saints in Korea where white is a symbol of mourning, not of purity? Furthermore, the concept of making robes white by "washing them in the blood of the Lamb" is almost incomprehensible in many lan-

guages; as one person in the Philippines tried to explain, "The blood of the Lamb must not have been red."

Misunderstandings frequently arise out of seemingly quite unimportant details. For example, in a literal translation of John 6:58, "the bread that your ancestors ate, and then died" may imply that the bread must have been poisonous and therefore caused death. Or in John 2:4 the use of "woman" in addressing Mary can only be understood in some languages as meaning "wife." Among some peoples of Southeast Asia, Revelation 3:20 can be badly misconstrued because "knocking on doors" is understood to be a signal from a lover who wants his girl friend to meet him at some rendezvous. But for the Bazanaki people of East Africa this same phrase would imply that Jesus was a thief because only thieves knock on doors (to determine if there is anyone in the house); honest persons call out the names of those inside, and by doing so they identify themselves.

Most persons would consider these problems of translation minor difficulties that can readily be overcome with judicious adjustments of detail. In place of "woman" in John 2:4 one could use "mother" (as in the New English Bible), and in Revelation 3:20 one may employ "call" rather than "knock." But how is one to treat the contention of some scholars that the persons who are spoken of in the Bible as "demon possessed" were only "mentally distressed"? Some scholars insist that the demoniac's use of the name "Legion" (Mark 5:9) indicates that he merely suffered an "identity crisis" and that therefore this fact should be incorporated into the text. One German theologian recently proposed that the term *Gott* ("God") should be eliminated from the Bible and *Wirklichkeit* ("reality") be substituted for it. In Romans 1:7 we would then read, "May Reality, our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace." This type of proposal is unsatisfactory, but on what grounds?

How is it that some adjustments seem reasonable and others are quite unacceptable? If certain changes can be introduced, why not any and all changes? Are there any limits in such a procedure?

If one is translating Hindu theosophical texts or Buddhist meditative discourses, the need for careful reflection of cultural differences is not so great, because these texts do not take history so seriously. But the biblical texts do take history seriously—in fact, extremely so, for it is God's entrance into history, either in the history of his people or the incarnation of his Son, that is the crucial element of the biblical account. And it is precisely for this reason that one must be seriously concerned with problems of changes in form so that the content may be both clear and faithful to the original historical setting.

Some changes are clearly obligatory. For example, in the transliteration of proper names, one must adjust to the sounds of the receptor language. One cannot expect English readers of the Bible to pronounce the various Hebrew gutturals. It is also obvious that certain adjustments must be made in the grammatical categories and forms of words. Hebrew verbs are predomi-