

Bible

The transnational character of the Christian Bible (the Old Testament and the New Testament in its Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant forms) is based on two contradictory, but at the same time complementary phenomena: on the one hand, the Christian Holy Scriptures created a worldwide cultural common ground by spreading one single creed and one single sacred narrative; on the other hand, through its translation into numerous languages, dialects and tribal tongues – not only worldwide but also within specific nations and societies – it conserved and often encouraged cultural pluralism.

The Bible is the Holy Scripture of c. 2.1 billion believers. In 1600 the Bible, or a portion of it, was translated into 45 languages; during the 19th century, its expansion became a worldwide phenomenon: early in the century, it was translated into 125 languages, in the second half the number increased to 205, in 1904 to 378. In 2003 the whole Bible existed in 405 languages, the New Testament in 1,034, and at least one book of the Scriptures in 864 languages and dialects, spoken by 97 per cent of the world's population. Moreover, it is the most circulated book in history.

The Bible was a vital instrument in the expansion of Christianity in Europe, and in shaping the nature of its different churches. In its vernacular translations of the 15th and 16th centuries, it fostered the creation and development of national languages and of national identities in Europe. Though the spread of the Bible in non-European languages began long before the heydays of European colonialism and imperialism, it was an integral part of the spread of the Christian faith as a result of the Christian missionary enterprise and the work of the various European and American Bible Societies outside Europe (for example: the British and Foreign Bible Society produced biblical texts in 700 languages and dialects and distributed over 550 millions copies all over the world; the Bible Society in China has distributed more than 300 million copies since 1823), which were driven by the zeal to spread the 'Word of God' and to convert non-European societies to Christianity. Since Christianity is essentially a Bible-centred religion, it was essential to make the book accessible – orally (through public worship, preaching, sermons and teaching) or in writing. As a result, many individuals and organized initiatives were involved during the 19th century in the (often heroic) enterprise of translating the

Bible into numerous languages and dialects. Outside Europe, different societies faced various difficulties in the process of assimilating the Bible into their own vernacular and indigenous cultures and languages; in some cases – mainly in oral cultures with a spoken tongue only – the translation was the driving force behind the initiatives to create distinct letter scripts (alphabets), vocabularies and grammatical constructions, which resulted in spreading literacy and fostering a process of nation building.

With the expansion of European power and influence outside Europe from the mid 19th century, Christian missionary agencies were able to act more freely than before; this activity resulted in converting whole nations, or in creating minority communities of Christian believers. However, the transnational character of the Bible is based on more than its being a book of faith. It is par excellence a history of global diffusion and transmission, on the one hand, and on the other, of modes of reception of major religious and cultural assets. Goethe's statement that the Bible 'surpasses every other book in offering material for reflection and opportunity for meditation on human affairs', can be seen as showing a Christian and a Eurocentric sense of superiority and supremacy and as an announcement for the Bible's role as a spiritual tool in the service of the West's 'civilizing mission', i.e., imperialism. However, it also reflects the fact that a multitudinous variety of human societies accept the book and its sacred narrative not only as containing religious doctrine, dogmas, and articles of faith, but also as containing a multilateral repertoire of insights about the human condition and behaviour, moral dicta, paragons and paradigms; in other words, as both a meta-text and as a 'semantic reservoir' for perceptions of the world and for value judgments. Thus, the history of the Bible is also about the modes and ways the recipient societies encountered alien culture, absorbing it into their 'indigenous' (a process of indigenization) worldviews and value systems – or rejecting it – incorporating the meaning of biblical words, idioms, concepts and messages into their own system of values and thought. This was made possible only after the Bible had been translated into their language.

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