1 Introduction

Henri Meschonnic (2011), who both translated sacred texts and engaged with philosophical questions posed by sacred text translation, remarked, “And religious texts, in comparison to texts commonly deemed literary or philosophical probably push to their peaks the ethical and political stakes of translating” (123; see also Chapter 6 “Ethics in Berman and Meschonnic” in this volume). What is translational ethics in the religious context? And how can we engage critically with the debate on translation ethics as they manifest in different religious communities?

Although ethics is most often perceived as closely related to religious thought and philosophy, there has not been much scholarly attention on translation ethics specific to the context of sacred text translation. However, the translation of sacred texts is as implicated in ethics as other kinds of texts, since any act of translation that involves choice immediately raises questions of ethics. Notwithstanding this, “ethics” is not a stable category even though most religions seek to establish a set of core values as ethics emanating from the main principles of each tradition. Identifying what is ethical in sacred text translation is not always a clear-cut process either, since there are usually several, and often contradictory, considerations to take into account. Definitions of ethics change over time and across cultures (see also Chapter 2 “Virtue ethics in translation” in this volume). But while it may be considered desirable to have in place a certain code that can hold translators accountable, it is important to keep in mind that the bases or relevance for these codes change. Some ethics will have changed within each religious tradition in response to historical and cultural permutations, and some sets of ethics may gain more prominence in some religions than in others.

At the heart of the notion of ethics in translating religious texts are three key issues: attitudes to what is perceived outside or alien to oneself, the availability of choice, and agency in terms of the power and degree to which individuals feel they are able to exercise choice. These three ethical considerations operate in different permutations in each religious tradition. How a religious community views itself in relation to other religious or non-religious communities impinges on what is translated and how. This follows directly from the fact that there is no single uncontested view of what constitutes a religion, let alone what comprises its sacred texts or objects, and treated as such. The call to make the choice of “right” from “wrong” is amplified in sacred text
translation, but in some religions more than others, since these translation choices are mostly perceived as either correctly or incorrectly representing the authoritative message of God. Translation in the religious context is faced with a range of ethical choices: which texts are truly sacred? Should texts perceived to be sacred be translated in the first place? For instance, the Qur'an is routinely claimed to be inimitable and untranslatable. Should translations convey the “meanings,” “form and structure,” or “sounds” of a sacred text? Who should translate a sacred text? Is there an ethics of reading a sacred text, specific sacred rituals that allow some individuals and exclude others? Of equal importance is how translators perceive their role and how they view ethical and religious responsibility. This impacts attitudes towards a range of actions and whether their translations are approved or censured. But these considerations direct us to the third issue, that of power within each religious tradition: who holds the power to choose or to interpret a specific choice as acceptable? The question of ethics thus manifests in various configurations in the different religious traditions that are accessible to scholars for academic study.

This chapter addresses the significant debates on ethics in translation studies as they pertain to sacred texts and faith communities. It is important to point out early on that a specific discussion of ethics in or of translation is not always immediately apparent in the existing scholarly literature on translation in many of the religious traditions discussed in this chapter. By far the longest and most substantial discussions directly addressing translation ethics have taken place in the scholarship on Bible translation. For instance, the long-standing emphasis on faithfulness and equivalence in transferring the “meaning” of the biblical text can be read as an ethical concern in preserving its “original” message. This is not to say that translation ethics is not of interest or relevance to the different religious communities discussed here or beyond but that the debate over the translation of sacred materials does not always play out as a deliberation on translation ethics or as articulated using the vocabulary of ethics. This is apparent also in the two relatively recent edited volumes that focus on translation and religion. Although Long’s (2005) examination of sacred text translation in relation to several religious traditions refers to ethical issues and questions of method which could well be discussed within the framework of translation ethics, she does not refer to this category specifically in her introduction. Likewise, Dejonge and Tietz (2015) state that the volume’s focus is on the process of translation, on the extent to which “meaning” can be transferred and whether “certain things [are] untranslatable?” (6) but make no mention of translation ethics. This unusual gap is difficult to account for, since after all, translation ethics in its various aspects informs sacred text translations in several important ways.

Scholarly debates on the translation of sacred texts must therefore be read through the lens of translation ethics to glean indications of what is most pressing or pertinent in each of these traditions. However, rather than attempt to offer a comprehensive review of all issues relating to translation ethics across the religious spectrum, this chapter focuses on translation ethics in relation to translation agents and their agency. This entails an examination of who translates, their status within interpretative communities, and the role of religious and state institutions that have a bearing on sacred text translation. At this point it is pertinent to observe that the category “sacred text” is defined here as any text perceived as sacred or used for any purpose considered sacred by a faith community. This includes both the written and oral text, as well as sacred texts as objects of veneration and so “handled” in special or ritualised ways. Sacred text translation therefore refers to the translation and/or interpreting of any sacred text through any medium or mode of communication. The first section focuses on issues addressed in current scholarly discussions in relation to translators, faith communities as audiences, and institutions that control sacred text translation. The second section offers an in-depth discussion of these aspects in relation to a specific religious and historical context where issues of ethics have been raised in scholarly discussions: Christian missionary translations.
2 Translation agents: translators, readers, and institutions

Translators, their audiences, and the institutions that govern the translation of sacred texts are key “agents” to consider in any discussion of translation ethics in the sacred context. For a translation to be considered successful in a religious context, it should be accepted as “sacred,” however this may be defined, by individuals or faith communities. Such a translation, acknowledged as sacred by a faith community, usually implies that the community “trusts” the translation as ethical and considers the translation as produced through ethical processes. But who can be relied upon to interpret a text for the purpose of translation and who decides which translation is ethical and how do they arrive at this decision? These are important questions to ask in this context as the answers depend very much on the relationships between the translator(s), religious institutions, and the faith community, and especially on relations of power between them. Translations of sacred texts are contested precisely because of their potential as sites for competing interpretation. Each faith community has developed different ways to ensure that the translation process and resulting interpretation is broadly acceptable to the entire community: this may be through formal religious institutions such as the Roman Catholic church or formal translation organisations trusted by the faith community such as the United Bible Societies, the King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur’an, or the Buddhist Text Translation Society. In other cases, individuals may be trusted by faith communities or institutions to deliver the desired translation, with or without checks by way of committees or language experts to check the quality of the translation process as well as the sacred product. The “authorisation” provided by these institutions (see Hermans 2007) is in effect a signal to the community that the translation is ethical from the point of view of the specific religious persuasion concerned. Sacred text translations are therefore inevitably collaborative processes involving individuals, groups, and institutions.

The authorisation and acceptance of a translated text as sacred bears on an important point that is relevant to each of the aspects of ethics discussed in this chapter, with regard to the position of the translator as well as that of the scholar studying a sacred text translation project. Considerations deriving directly from a key discussion in religious studies and anthropology of religion are pertinent to the study of sacred text translation. Scholars of religion such as McCutcheon have employed Kenneth Pike’s (1967) differentiation of emic (that is, a participant from within the social group being observed) from etic (an observer positioned outside the social group) perspectives to argue that the study of religions is fundamentally informed by the position of the investigator. There is an on-going debate in the study of religions regarding whether the “insider/outsider” divide is valuable or necessary and what the ethical imperatives to acknowledging the significance of one’s positioning are, including any movement across the divide (Knott 2010, 259). This dovetails well with the increasing critical interest in the intellectual, political, and personal standpoint of translators in (as well as scholars of) translation studies and the awareness that rather than assume neutrality, taking positionality into account is crucial to a critical understanding of translation ethics. The call for greater reflexivity, rather than claim of scientific objectivity, in the study of religion and translation has important implications for the discussion on translation ethics in a religious context. The questions that Knott (2010) poses, “What is the difference between an account of a religion by an insider and one by an outsider? Does translation from one language to another bridge a gap or create a barrier between the person telling the story and the one reading it?” (259) can be extended to other aspects of sacred text translation for a fuller examination of ethics. As the following discussion elaborates, the translator’s as well as the researcher’s location within or outside a religious community is of utmost importance for examining ethics in sacred text translations.
The location of the translator in relation to the faith community determines a number of translation choices and strategies adopted, each with its own ethical implications. For the emic or religious “insider,” translation ethics involves translating according to the principles of the particular theological persuasion of their ingroup and to maintain their grouping through translation. The emic translator therefore usually seeks to best represent in the target language the teachings of the sacred text in order to consolidate, strengthen, and/or expand the group. Similarly, etic or “outsider” translators, such as those undertaken by academics, tend to function as academic or scholarly translations rather than sacred texts and therefore their primary translation ethics may be a commitment to the scholarly study of the sacred text and its appreciation as a valuable literary, philosophical, or cultural text. Williams’s (2011) critical reflection on his role as an academic translator of Rumi’s mystical *Masnavi* from the Persian, for instance, includes ethical questions on the extent to which translators should interfere with sacred texts: “How radically, if at all, does one ‘repair’ a text?” (422). Involving largely different translation choices, academic translations are usually not used in sacred or ritual practices by the faith community although they may value the efforts of the translator. In both cases the translators, although producing very different translations in response to different audiences and demands, will consider themselves to have acted ethically. Translators of one religious group translating the sacred texts of another religious group may also use a range of devices to signal through their translations the “non-sacred” nature of the source text. Either way, emic and etic translators and their immediate audience may not be as willing to trust the other’s translation. Translation ethics in sacred text translation, as in other types of texts, therefore, cannot be separated from the function that the translated sacred text will be put to.

In some cases, however, translators located within a religious community have been willing to challenge elements they perceived as unethical in their sacred narratives and traditions through translation and re-writing, which should come as no surprise. The *Ramayana,* one of the Hindu sacred texts widely accepted as first written down in classical Sanskrit, has been challenged repeatedly for its unethical treatment of gender and social order. Mandakranta Bose (2013) observes, “It is useful to bear in mind that alterations to the *Ramayana* are an index to changing literary, ethical, philosophical and political attitudes” (3). From as far back as the late sixteenth century, Bose argues, women poets such as Candrāvatī, re-writing the *Ramayana* in Bengali, present the sacred narrative from alternative ethical viewpoints. Her version focuses on the female protagonist, on “the ethical issues that [Sita] raises through her self-reflection and memorializing” (39). Bose suggests that Candrāvatī’s version of the sacred narrative presents an alternative, female-centred ethic to the claims of masculine force and violence deployed to rid the world of “evil”:

Instead of glorifying battles the poem mourns the victims. So pervasive is the concern for victims that the poem thrusts into the background even the ethical necessity that is understood in the majority of *Ramayanas* as the motive force of the story, that is, the need to rid the world of [the evil] Ravana.

(32)

Likewise, in the early decades of the twentieth century there were several Telugu poets who contested the social hierarchies entrenched in the Sanskrit *Ramayana* and produced Telugu versions offering a radical ethics, sympathetic or even heroic renderings of Ravana, the chief “villain” of the narrative, as the heroic representative of oppressed castes in India. Pollock (1993) and Richman (2001), amongst others, point out that the *Ramayana* in its many language versions has been as political as devotional, with different groups and individuals using the sacred epic as a point of reference to either endorse or challenge status quo on ethical grounds.
The perception of the translator’s audience plays an equally important role. If a faith community does not perceive the translator to be a trusted representative of the community engaged in translating for the community and its faith, the translation may not be accepted as a sacred text. A translation may be considered “blasphemy” instead of sacred if a faith community believes the translator to be an outsider or an apostate. Equally, translators have used translation to challenge rival groups or even start new communities of faith. Theological interpretation or disputation may often be at the centre of such translation projects, where translation follows a theological reinterpretation or the reinterpretation is exemplified through the process of translation, thus displaying internal divisions and warring sectarian commitments from within a religious community. Perhaps the best-known example of such a translator is Martin Luther whose act of translating the Bible into German in 1534 became central to the project of European Reformation in the sixteenth century. His polemical “Open Letter on Translating” (1530) attacks the Roman Catholic interpretation of the Bible, provides theological justifications for his translation, and shows an acute awareness of detractors who challenged his claim to offer his own authoritative interpretation through translation. His addition of the word “sola” or “alone” to Romans 3:28 in the New Testament, for instance, has been historically controversial, leading to allegations that Luther deliberately changed the meaning of the Christian scriptures through his translation (Jones 2017). Such “reforms” of a religious tradition through translation projects undertaken by polemical religious leaders and critics can be seen in other religious traditions too. Arumuka Navalar, a Tamil scholar and intellectual, translated and published in 1852 a key medieval Saiva (a South India form of Hinduism) text, the Periya Puranam, “from medieval [Tamil] poetry into modern [Tamil] prose” to reform Tamil Saivism and to prevent further conversions to Protestant Christianity (Hudson 1992, 44). Such ethical claims made by or on behalf of a translator come under greater scrutiny during periods of religious schisms.

In other cases, the translation labour of emic translators may be interpreted as ethical acts of “service” to their faith community as well as to God. Siu (2008) has argued in favour of applying the “Buddhist perspective” of dana or “giving” to understand Buddhist sutra translation in China. Siu proposes that “giving,” as an act central to Buddhist teaching, of accruing phala (“merit” or “virtue”), can be used to understand the entire process of sutra translation from commissioning, to financial support, to completion of the translation project. This reading, which places translators, sponsors, and readers within the cycle of “giving” (Sui differentiates between primary, secondary, and tertiary giving) and receiving corresponding “merit” (that is, receiving appropriate rewards for each type of giving) seeks to understand the entire sutra translation project as part of and informed by Buddhist ethics. Here, not only does the translation acquire the status of a “gift” but also the translator’s decisions are justified as ethical because they are in tune with the framework of “dana” – “phala.” In an entirely different religious context, Hokkanen (2012) makes a similar case for the recognition of volunteer church interpreting as “serving rather than volunteering” (299; emphasis original). Hokkanen points out that the faith community itself, in this case the Tampere Pentecostal Church, sees simultaneous interpreting as one of several services that the congregation can potentially provide to both God and fellow members, as a reflection of Christ’s call to serve (303). While this, as seen earlier in Siu’s analysis, can be read as a way of bringing religious ethics (Buddhist or Christian) into the critical discourse on translation and interpreting, Hokkanen also ends with a discussion on a related but pertinent ethical issue, that of “neutrality.” Unlike Siu where this must be inferred, Hokkanen is careful to reveal her own position as an insider, with a “personal commitment to the ideology of the church,” and is conscious of the dangers or “risk of an inability or unwillingness to be critical” in her study of her own experience as an interpreter (306); this is indeed an important aspect to the scholarly investigation of the question of ethics in sacred text translation. While she and other
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translators are trusted by the community to produce “ethical” translations, their very location within the community may be viewed as suspect by others, potentially perceived as resulting in “skewed” translations or scholarship.

The issue of how to represent one’s own sacred texts through translation to an audience outside the religious group raises other kinds of ethical dilemmas. In a recently published article, Moll (2017) has examined the subtitling of Islamic programmes at Iqraa, an Islamic satellite channel based in Egypt. Moll undertakes a critical study of the contradiction in the self-perception of Iqraa translators who see themselves as ‘cultural mediators’ responsible for countering perceived Western stereotypes about Muslims through subtitles” while also acting as “‘preachers by proxy’ transmitting correct and relevant religious knowledge to viewers” (Moll 2017, 334). While translating audiovisual content into English, several Iqraa translators in her study refused either to translate or to “manipulate” Islamic sermon texts that were explicitly critical of other religions or gave, in their estimation, inaccurate interpretations of Qur’anic verses. The translators, who self-identified as pious Muslims, were uncertain whether to translate sermons as they were or to correct and otherwise soften the tone of these sermons. Ethical arguments were given in support of both, one favouring the translation of sermons as they were, thereby giving the audience the opportunity to draw their own conclusions, and the other favouring a translation that presented what they thought was a more acceptable image of Islam to the outsider. For these translators, “translation became, most explicitly, a form of internal critique. Here the fact that translators saw their work as da’wa, a moral responsibility for which God will hold them accountable, is key” (Moll 2017, 355). In this rare examination of ethics in subtitling religious content and the disagreements it generated amongst the translators, the author points to the struggle between competing epistemologies of what comprises moral responsibility or ethical intentions to these translators positioned squarely within a religious community, yet translating for a mixed Muslim and non-Muslim audience simultaneously. Moll too is aware of her ambiguous position, perceived as both a religious insider (therefore, sympathetic?) and outsider (an academic whose professional “objectivity” could be relied upon?) by the Iqraa translators. Both Hokkanen and Moll address ethical concerns regarding their roles as participant/observers, functioning to some extent as a “critical insider” (Knott 2010), and this critical reflexivity regarding their own positionality is an important response to any reservations expressed on ethical grounds regarding sacred text translation research. Such self-reflection is, however, not just within the purview of sacred text translators; there are interesting parallels with ethical concerns in non-religious contexts, in legal translation and literary retranslation, which invite further comparative research into the subject.

In some instances, translators have retranslated sacred texts in order to “restore,” on ethical grounds, what other translations have elided. Attention has been drawn to how the Hebrew Bible has been presented primarily as a “Christian” rather than “Jewish” sacred text in its long history of European-language translations. Barnstone (1993) notes,

the twentieth-century German version by Martin Buber, a Jew, reflects both a paramount aesthetic reform from Luther’s plain-speech translation as well as a major religious orientation in which the Hebrew Bible in translation ceases to speak only to a sectarian Christian reader but, rather, operates as a historical document for Jews and Christians – or anyone – alike.

Barnstone himself translated the New Testament, which he titled The Restored New Testament (2009), where he “restores” Hebrew personal names to redress the effects of previous translation
projects. His point about the translation of personal names, especially the Hebrew “Yehushua” as “Jesus,” has a strong ethical dimension to it:

As a result of the ethnic cleansing of his name through double translation, the name has become absolutely disconnected from its Hebrew original, and indeed his name in Hellenised translations is now so remote from the Hebrew original that were it simply transliterated directly from Hebrew into other languages, that name, Joshua, would for many be apostacy.

(Barnstone 1993, 78)

Meschonnic (2011) in his essay, “Why I am retranslating the Bible,” which he views as central to his discussion on the ethics of translation, similarly claims, “I am retranslating the Bible to make heard what all, yes that is right, all other translations erase” (125).

Some translators have commented on their consciousness of an ethics in reading practices and in their physical handling of sacred texts and their translation. These include preparatory ritual acts such as washing, covering of the head, and the right posture to adopt while reading the sacred text, all of which translators may feel continue to apply while undertaking their translation activity on a daily basis. Nikky Singh (1995, 31), in an introduction to her translation of Sikh scriptures, recalls her training under a scriptural scholar, when she was “reprimanded for having tea during our sessions or for not rinsing my mouth before I resumed after a tea-break.” She wonders if while translating:

should I cover my head as I pick up the texts? Should I be listening to popular music while I work? Should I even have a cup of tea as I hold and read through the sacred poetry? The process of translation has been more than a conversion of a text from one language into another.

(31–32)

Such an awareness of sacrality in the handling of sacred texts as sacred objects can also be noticed in translators at times emphasizing that their readers follow ethical reading practices, that is, obeying the same ritual rules observed when reading the source sacred text. Arumuka Navalar delineated the proper ritual context within which his prose translation of Tamil Saivite verse should be heard:

First, they must have received initiation from a Shaiva ācārya [teacher] and they must have lived in purity by abstaining from meat and liquor, by applying sacred ash daily to their bodies, by using consecrated nudrākṣa beads for reciting the five-syllable mantra, and by worshipping regularly in the temple.

(Hudson 1992, 43)

Finally, institutions, both religious institutions within most organised religions and institutions of the state, have had a role to play in asserting the ethical contours of sacred translation. Both translators and institutions translating for the community usually work under a sense of collective responsibility, that every translation choice made affects the spiritual, social, and political lives of the entire community. The extent to which institutions may be willing to incorporate interpretations from the faith community’s margins indicate where each institution will draw its ethical lines in its role as representing the community through translation.
Religious and state institutions have either worked in conjunction to support a set of translation choices or have arbitrated in competing moves in favour of some but not other translational acts (see also Chapter 30 “Ethics of collaboration and control in literary translation” in this volume). There is a good deal of evidence, for instance, of historic imperial support of sacred text translation in different parts of the world. The translation of Sanskrit and Pali Buddhist sutras into Chinese was accomplished under the patronage of Chinese emperors who set up and funded translation teams. But as the “influence of Buddhism grew,” writes Hung (2005, 88–89), “so did government attention and control.” While support for Buddhism in a divided China was at least partly a political tool wielded by different ruling houses, a reunified China saw greater need for control. Hung observes that although the Sui and Tang dynasties set up a sutra translation academy at court, the increased regulations on translation forums also meant that the number of participants and the role of the forum in Buddhist instruction was severely limited:

The motives of rulers who supported Buddhism were not necessarily spiritual. Some saw it as a cohesive force to unite people of diverse origins, others as a source of supernatural support. Monks credited with magical powers were highly valued by successive rulers. (Note 55, 89)

A more recent instance of the direct involvement of a nation state in the project of translating sacred texts can be seen in twentieth-century Turkish history. This pertains to what came to be seen as controversial translations of sacred texts such as the Ezan, the first call to prayer, and the Qur’an into Turkish authorised in support of a modern nation state. In a keynote lecture delivered at IATIS 2009, Sehnaz Tahir Gürçağlar noted that while both the Arabic and Turkish calls to prayer had been in use before the 1930s, the “Turkification of Islam” project was strengthened under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk only after the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. In 1932, the Turkish Ezan was declared as the standard translation for public use and followed quickly by a ban on the singing of the Ezan in Arabic. This was a controversial move which was not fully supported in Turkey, with the ban later lifted in 1950. However, the singing of the Turkish Ezan continues to be a topic of contentious debate in Turkey according to Gürçağlar. Although this was viewed as an “imposition” by the republican government, Wilson (2014) points out that the impetus for a Turkish version of the Ezan as well as a Turkish translation of the Qur’an had come from late Ottoman intellectuals:

In fact, state involvement in Qur’an translation occurred only after private publishers printed translations of uneven quality in 1924 and ignited considerable controversy. The public outcry over these translations would lead the parliament to sponsor the composition of an officially sanctioned Turkish translation.

These attempts at the Turkification of key Islamic texts were seen as going against the very ethics of Islam, within which the dominant view is that the Qur’an should be read in Arabic and that all translations of the Qur’an can only be accepted as translations of the interpretations of the Qur’an. Clearly, the coming together of religious and political interests in such cases raises ethical questions regarding who sponsors sacred text translations and why.

The overlapping and yet at times competing ethical concerns of translators, their readers, and institutions that govern the translating, reading, and ritual practices of sacred texts are obvious from these examples. It is possible to discern in a number of different religious traditions that ethical concerns in the translation of sacred texts are complex, with multiple pulls. Therefore, translation strategies considered
Ethics of translating sacred texts

ethical in one religio-cultural context may not be considered equally ethical in another. Atti-
tudes regarding the ethics of acknowledging that a text is a translation, ethics of faithfulness or
accuracy or of naming a translator may diversify considerably, as Ricci and Putten (2011) show in
a comparison of translation attitudes towards Islamic textual sources. They point out that in the
twelfth-century Spanish Toledo Project’s translation of Arabic texts into Latin, “a stress on the
individual translator went hand in hand with an idealised preoccupation with fidelity in transla-
tion,” and “the rhetorical stress on accuracy and precision was explicitly employed as part of an
effort to undermine and discredit the Arabic texts’ ‘teachings,’” whereas in Javanese translations
of Islamic texts, translators’ ethics of maintaining anonymity and self-erasure, with “a distancing
from the source in the form of creativity and poetic freedom was part of a powerful array of tools
used to accredit earlier sources and present them as legitimate” (70).

3 Missionary translations of the Bible, institutions, and their audiences

Translation has been a central and conscious focus in the debates, schisms, and theological argu-
ments of Christian communities. In other religions, however, the role of translation is more
hidden because theologians and religious leaders do not explicitly comment on the role of trans-
lation. Since a concern with ethics had been an integral part of the scholarship on the history
of Bible translation, it is not surprising that the transportation of the Bible into new language
and religious cultures by European missionary movements has also engendered much discussion
on the ethical implications of these translation projects. This concern with ethics in relation to
Bible translation has been the focus of scholarly attention in several disciplines besides transla-
tion studies – in sub-disciplines such as linguistic anthropology, anthropology of Christianity,
colonial history, and World Christianity. This section therefore draws on scholarly debates across
these fields to review in some detail the scholarship pertaining to the ethics of translators, their
audiences, and the institutions that have governed Bible translation projects undertaken as part
of European missionary ventures since the early sixteenth century.

Translation in one form or another was a firm feature of the European Christian missionary
enterprise across the denominational spectrum. While fewer missionaries engaged directly with
the translation of written sacred texts, most missionaries engaged in translating the Christian
message through a range of oral, musical, and written textual modes and literatures. Language
learning and translating as well as composing new Christian literatures was part of the fabric of
missionary work. This included the writing of bilingual grammars, catechisms, and dictionar-
ies, all of which entailed translation, accompanied by an evaluation of linguistic and conceptual
presentation of sacred terminology or texts, with far-reaching consequences. But as the editors
of a recent volume on missionary linguistics point out, scholarly interest in this cultural and
linguistic history has not been as concerted or strong in translation studies as in other fields
such as anthropology or missionary linguistics (Zwartjes 2014, 2). While missionary linguistics
is not without its limitations, and this point is expanded on further later, investigating subjects
of common interest with other disciplines will certainly enrich the discussion on ethics from
translation studies perspectives.

By and large, scholarly debates within history, mission studies, and missionary linguistics
on missionary translations of the Bible has been primarily concerned with ethics since the
missionary project has been heavily implicated in the history of colonialism. It is difficult to
delink European missionary movements from the European colonial project, although as has
been pointed out by several historians, the two did not always collude (the historian Andrew
Porter 1992, 1999, 2002, 2004, 2015 has been the strongest proponent of this revisionist his-
tory; Copeland 2006). But it is undeniable that since Christian missions either accompanied,
followed, or in some cases even paved the way for further imperialist conquests, it is impossible to view it entirely independent of colonialism and its concomitant effects. As a result, the ethical argument levelled against European colonialism has usually also been directed at the European Christian missions and their translation projects. This makes a focus on the ethical dimension of missionary translation particularly pertinent to engage with here.

Scholars across the various fields of enquiry can broadly be divided into two categories in their approach to missionary translation history: those who see colonialism and Christian mission as inextricably linked and those who separate Christian mission from the colonial project to argue that missionary translation projects are mainly positive in function and effect, and therefore ethical, unlike colonialism. A good example of the latter is offered by Adrian (2007), who believes that although “Christian missionary activity has been viewed as cultural imperialism, a tool to impose Western values on non-Western societies and destroy indigenous cultures in the process,” what is in fact the case is that “biblical translation movements and Christian missionary activity have served to preserve and enrich native cultures” (289). He affirms, “the principal effect of biblical translation has been to preserve and enrich cultures” (293, 296). With little evidence given to support this claim (except of a ninth-century Slovak translation of the Bible, which was not undertaken in the same historical and economic context as that of nineteenth-century European colonialism), his assertions that missionary Bible translation was entirely ethical holds little weight. In other instances, scholars show little interest in the colonial context when discussing missionary translations, which aligns them more closely with this critical position. In a seventeen-page chapter offering an overview of Bible translation in Africa, Noss (2004, 22) makes only a passing reference to colonialism and merely argues, “Scripture translation . . . establishes languages in written and standardised form,” without considering whether this was necessarily beneficial to the speakers of those languages. The opposite scholarly view is that missionary translators and their translation work colluded with imperial and colonial interests either explicitly or implicitly, and therefore must be viewed as primarily unethical in their translation conceptualisation and practice. As will be apparent from the rest of this section, there are also scholars who argue that while missionary translations were undertaken within the framework of colonial dominance, the faith communities were not mere passive victims but showed various forms of resistance and resilience in their challenging of missionary ethics. These divisions in perspective can be observed whether scholars focus on individual translators, their audiences, or institutions of control (see also the chapter “The ethics of postcolonial translation” in this volume).

It is pertinent to start with how this debate has shaped within translation studies. Writing as a linguist leading the translation programme of the United Bible Societies, Eugene Nida recognised that the framework of formal equivalence under which missionaries had long been labouring was flawed. Instead, he promoted what he called functional or dynamic equivalence (Nida 1964, 1968; Nida, Taber, and United Bible Societies 1969), which he argued would make the Bible meaningful and relevant to new audiences. This emphasis on taking into account the languages and cultures of the target audience moved the focus away from source sacred texts and languages in Bible translation. Although Nida paved the way for what seems to be an increasing and ethical interest in the audience rather than the formal structures of the Bible (a somewhat controversial proposition to his missionary contemporaries), his theory has also come under attack on ethical grounds. His “dynamic” equivalence has been viewed by Venuti (1995) as another form of fluent, “domesticating” translation that is deeply unethical in creating effects of transparency, naturalness, and completeness. As opposed to the “ethnocentric violence” of domesticating translations into English, Venuti favours foreignizing translations as the more ethical option for signalling source-language culture to readers of the English translation (see also...
Chapter 10 “Venuti and the ethics of difference” in this volume). Although this may indeed apply to some translation situations, Venuti’s foreignizing translation would in fact have had the opposite effect on translations out of English or other European languages associated with Christian missions (Latin, Spanish, French, and Portuguese) into languages of the global south. Foreignised Bible translations would have further reified, confirmed, and imposed a Christianity filtered through a Europeanised cultural lens on cultures at the receiving end of translations, therefore negating Venuti’s argument on ethical translations. This prompts the question whether Nida was indeed correct in his recommendations of dynamic equivalence. While it may seem that in the case of Bible translation “domesticating,” dynamic equivalence is not an ethical choice, neither is “foreignising translation,” and the problem lies in another direction. Writing in the post-World War II era when there were few European colonies remaining, Nida neither situates his analysis in the context of the historic links between missionary translation and colonialism nor addresses contemporaneous unequal relations of power between languages (even less unequal cultures and economies). Further, in assuming that the same “effects” can be re-created over and over again, whatever the target language or culture, one of the inevitable consequences, should such a project succeed, is that Nida’s dynamic equivalence seeks to efface cultural differences between the different audiences in the very act of recognising it. The ethical issue lies in the prescriptive assumption (i.e. if a translator follows rules of dynamic equivalence, effects of the source and the target texts will remain the same) that such an endless duplication of source text values and their effects through translation is identical and desirable. Added to this, the persisting cultural and political power imbalances under which Bible translation continues to be carried out makes Nida’s recommendations of dynamic equivalence in Bible translation ethically suspect. Moving beyond the immediate context of Christian mission, this translation strategy may not be viewed as ethical if applied to sacred text translation in other religious contexts either. Abdul-Raof (2005), for instance, while discussing how culture and language “influence our conceptual and ethical judgements,” points out that dynamic equivalence as proposed by Nida for a more ethical Bible translation “robs the Qur’anic text of its distinctive religious character” (163, 172).

There is a similar difference in critical perspective between scholars of missionary linguistics and those of colonial linguistics, reflecting the extent to which each engages with issues of power. Scholars of missionary linguistics treat imperial ideology and colonialism as a backdrop against which missionary translations and linguistic activities take place. By not acknowledging that the logic of colonialism ideologically informed linguistic treatment and by isolating linguistic work from wider cultural networks, missionary linguistics also ignores the relations of power which affect how languages interact. As Stolz and Warnke (2015) point out, “ML [missionary linguistics] is largely a ‘monodisciplinary’ project which aims at determining the impact the linguistic work of missionaries has had on the development of linguistics in general” (12). Colonial linguists, on the other hand,

counts among its tasks (ideally) the entire range of phenomena which interconnect language and colonialism, most of which are irrelevant for the goals of ML. Colonialism in CL [colonial linguistics] therefore is no background phenomenon for an interest in languages but a precondition for linguistic constellations, from language contact through to language politics and finally language analysis and documentation.

(13)

Colonial linguists are interested, for instance, in the phenomenon that Latin invariably served as the main reference point against which all non-European languages were compared, resulting in
the presentation of a “lack” in most languages in terms of vocabulary, grammar, or orthography. Pertinent to a discussion on ethics, colonial linguists such as Mortamet and Amourette (2015) studying bilingual grammars written by four French missionaries point out that the Swahili selected and described by them is a “colonial Swahili,” serving “asymmetric interactions, power and control of the natives” (45).

Some scholars have focused specifically on the ethics of institutions of power that have governed missionary translations. On the Protestant side, scholars have studied the effects of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) that financially and ideologically dominated Bible translation practices from the early nineteenth century. Zemka (1995) has argued that the BFBS was “the quintessential Victorian colonial business, combining commercial organisation with moral conviction” (115) which “based and justified its existence on the belief that the exposure to Holy Scriptures created an abstract Christian subject with similar attributes of behaviour and belief regardless of cultural conditions, material environment, or pre-existing religious beliefs” (104). In her opinion, BFBS’s self-image in its own historiography was based on an unethical representation of the “demand” for translated Bibles from working-class “British” and “Foreign”/colonial audiences.

Mak’s (2010) examination of the role of the BFBS as patrons of the Chinese Union Version in the early decades of the twentieth century reveals that the organisation put the translation committee under pressure to choose the Greek Textus Receptus (TR) as the acceptable “original” New Testament for translation into Chinese, despite the Shanghai Conference of 1890 voting against it. The BFBS hesitated to abandon the Textus Receptus since the BFBS relied heavily on donations from members of the Protestant churches in England for its funding, the latter’s attitude towards the Textus Receptus, which was indeed mainly derived from their reverence for the KJV [King James Version], was instrumental in deciding BFBS’s position.

Mak’s argument that there was a contest between nineteenth-century scholarship (supporting the Codex Sinaiticus as the basis for New Testament translation) and tradition (supporting the continued use of the Textus Receptus despite the many problems associated with it) with stronger influence coming from conservative financial patrons shows the ethical dilemma that sacred text translators can be put under when working with or under institutions.

The work of a number of scholars makes it clear that the translated Bible’s audiences were not always compliant with translation decisions made by translators. To engage with how the response of the faith community, the third aspect of this debate, has been interpreted, it would be pertinent to turn to an on-going debate on the link between Bible translation and colonialism in the African context. One scholar’s work has dominated the debate on African Christianity and Bible translation: Lamin Sanneh ([1989] 2009), theologian and World Christianity scholar with a special interest on West African Christianity, offers a positive account of Bible translation as one that renewed indigenous African languages and cultures. Sanneh’s argument is more subtle, however, than Adrian’s quoted earlier in that Sanneh is strongly critical of those European missionaries with shortsighted and paternalistic attitudes, who were often undone by their own inability to set aside cultural superiority. Nevertheless, Sanneh is equally convinced that the “vernacular translation” of the missionaries “overshadowed colonial assumption and presumptions” and “outdistanced and outlasted the forces of ephemeral colonial rule” (163). He argues that the power and cultural chauvinism of missionaries and of Western Christianity were
dismantled by Christianity’s “force of translatability” which rendered the missionary enterprise ethical in his estimation:

Translation creates a pluralistic environment of incredible variety and possibility, and invests culture with an ethical and qualitative power. That power may be defined as the capacity to participate in intercultural and interpersonal exchange, as the recognition that whatever and however we are doing now, we can do differently and, under certain circumstances, we must do differently in order to live ethically as neighbours. . . . Christianity promotes two sorts of universal appeal in its mission: the universal truth of one God is represented by the ethics of commitment to local specificity.

(242)

The similarities between Sanneh’s and Nida’s positions are clear. Sanneh’s theological interpretation of the politics of Bible translation as an egalitarian process has been welcomed by many Christian theologians for re-orienting critical attention on the peoples and languages of Christianity in the global south. However, his wholehearted celebration of translation in the “African vernaculars” is also based on an acceptance of the claim (unethical, some might say) that these cultures and languages were intrinsically inferior in the first place, needing “religious renewal and indigenous revitalisation” (Sanneh [1989] 2009, 219). This contradiction is echoed in the less nuanced work of other scholars such as Salawu (2007), who states that the “enthusiasm, dedication, and courage of the missionaries who helped to develop local languages to written level are worthy to be emulated to further enrich African languages to an international standard” (33).

By arguing that the “vernacular Bible was the divine imprimatur on otherwise inferior cultures” (Sanneh [1989] 2009, 193), Sanneh offers a theological solution for the assumed inequality and inferiority of African languages, apparently stimulated and renewed by the superior power of Christianity: “There is radical pluralism associated with vernacular translation wherein all languages and cultures are in principle equal in expressing the word of God” (251). Despite his strong reservations, Sanneh draws a picture of (missionary) translators undone by (Bible) translation, that is, although the translators may have taken unethical translation decisions, the biblical message he perceived as ethical always survived untarnished. Sanneh’s Christian ethics dictate that for him meaning is transferred faithfully, where the message of God is preserved intact whatever the choice of the human translators.

It is left to other African theologians to push the ethical argument further. Kwame Bediako (1998), a Ghanian theologian, taking his cue from Sanneh, argues for the increasing need for a “mother-tongue theology” to ensure translation is not based on simple “word equivalents.” He advocates against “theology” shaped by “Western Christian history and experience” that rejects Ghanian idioms and images as inappropriate (110). Kinyua argues that “Bible translation in colonial Africa, though in most cases defended as a neutral, legitimate, and benevolent act of redemption, disguises the colonial power situation” (Kinyua (2013, 58–59). Bringing to attention the work of parallel African translators, whose work was not accepted by the Bible Society, he argues,

translation was not immune to the ambivalence and contradictions of the discourse of colonialism. Like any other colonial discourse, Bible translation betrays instability. By choosing to translate the Bible into the vernacular languages, the colonial church flung wide open the interrogatory interstices where biblical texts, hermeneutics, doctrines, culture, and power could be negotiated, contested, and hybridized.
4 Conclusions

That the subject of translation ethics in sacred text translation is complex, presenting multiple vectors for analysis, is abundantly clear. What is also evident is that there is much further to be investigated regarding translation ethics than the select issues discussed here. In the field of Bible translation alone, there are other significant areas where ethical questions have been raised by theologians and scholars working on the Bible and the Anthropocene,7 Dalit theology,8 and feminist scholars of translation who have critiqued the masculinist slant of most modern translations of the Bible. The issue of ethics, for instance, is central to the controversy over “gender neutral” or “gender inclusive” language that seeks to challenge the tradition of using masculine pronouns to represent both male and female terms. Gender-neutral translations of the Bible such as the New International Version Inclusive Language Edition (1995) have been heavily criticised and rejected by conservative evangelical communities in the US on the grounds that they are unethical distortions of God’s truth. However, both feminist scholars as well as those who do not support a feminist critique or translations have been critical of such translation efforts, arguing that such a translation gives a false impression of the Bible’s attitude to gender (Simon 1996). It is impossible to delve in-depth into the stimulating scholarly discussion each of these areas offer on translation ethics in an article of this length but worth pointing out that there is much scope for further research on Bible translation and ethics.

While the discussion of ethics in relation to sacred text translation has been dominated by Bible translation over a 400-year period of European colonisation, there are other religions operating within other political economies of domination that have also deployed translation to control, influence, or direct the travel of sacred texts. There are hints of this in the existing scholarship; for instance, Hung (2005) records the periods when Buddhist sutra translation was suppressed, the translation bureau dismantled, and Buddhism banned or reinstated by successive Chinese emperors, but this information relegated to an appendix at the end of her chapter could easily be overlooked by the reader not looking specifically for information relating to translation ethics. Without sufficient collaborative investigations into translation ethics in relation to religions other than Christianity, any discussion on ethics in sacred text translation will remain predominantly focused on the recent history of Christianity, as the latter half of this chapter has done.

Further, there is as yet little by way of comparative studies of translation ethics across two or more religious traditions. Do the translation practices and strategies, considered ethical in one religion, hold true in another? Studies examining how ethical debates have manifested across the religions have potential to throw light on both the study of translation ethics and the study of religion.

Related topics in this volume

Translator ethics; Venuti and the ethics of difference; ethics in Berman and Meschonnic; the ethics of postcolonial translation; feminist translation ethics; research ethics in translation and interpreting studies.

Notes

1 This epic poem narrates the story of the prince, Ram, tricked into being banished from his kingdom, living fourteen years in the forests with his wife Sita and younger brother. The evil Ravana abducts Sita and Ram follows to wage a war, accompanied by a monkey army, to rescue her. Although they enjoy a triumphant return to their kingdom Ayodhya, aspersions are later cast on Sita’s chastity during her incarceration in Ravana’s palace and Rama’s solution was to banish her (in some versions, put her through a test of fire).
3 See in particular Andrew Porter (2004) for a book-length discussion on the subject pertaining to all parts of the British empire.
4 See Israel (2011, 226, note 30) for a critique of Venuti’s “domestication-foreignising” dichotomy.
5 This chapter does not discuss other problems presented by Nida’s theory as these do not relate directly to ethics.
6 My thanks to Sara Fretheim for bringing Bediako’s work to my attention.
7 The Green Bible published by Harper Bible in 2008 was the answer to critiques from environmentalists that the Bible is damagingly anthropocentric. Rather than a new translation, it presents the New Revised Standard Version Bible as a “study Bible” with verses referring to the earth or environment in green, to highlight the Bible’s concern for the environment, and includes essays by established theologians supporting the cause. This publishing effort has also been controversial both amongst Christian and non-Christian groups.
8 Dalit theology is a theological movement amongst theologians of South Asia who have developed (from the better known “liberation theology” of South America) what they considered an alternative, more equal theology to redress social difference within the Christian community. Although they have challenged the use of language in many Indian-language translations, they have not yet developed a systematic Dalit translation critique to better reflect their theological position.

References
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Further reading


Although this introductory article does not focus specifically on translation ethics, it offers an excellent overview of how the category “language” intersects with that of “religion” in academic and wider contexts. Its emphasis on the role of institutions and power across a range of religious contexts offers important critical considerations for readers examining translation ethics in religious contexts.


Mandair’s book examines the re-invention of Sikhism as a “world religion” in colonial India through the lens of translation. In doing so, it launches a critical enquiry into the ethics of several intellectual movements and the effects of translations conducted under the inequities of imperial rule.


Niranjana’s chapter offers a postcolonial critique of the translation of medieval Saiva poetry from Kannada into English as part of her wider engagement with the politics of colonial translation.


In particular, the “Introduction” and Chapter 3, “False Friends: Conversion and Translation from Jerome to Luther,” examine Bible translation and the ethics of domesticating translation strategies in the context of historic asymmetrical relations between Jewish and Christian communities.