

Diversity and Translation in Christian Mission: Andrew Walls on Contextualisation

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Andrew Walls, after training at Oxford, served as a missionary in Sierra Leone and Nigeria (lecturing on church history and preaching in local churches) before returning to his native Scotland where he taught church history at the University of Aberdeen and then Edinburgh.

The range of Andrew Walls' scholarly interests is illustrated by the structure of the two collections of his essays, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* and *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, published in 1996 and 2002 respectively. In each collection the essays are grouped into three sections, dealing with the transmission of Christian faith, Africa's place in Christian history and the modern Western missionary movement.

Andrew Walls' scholarship is significant for a number of reasons, not least his understanding of the importance of non-Western forms of Christianity (particularly Africa) in past and future Christian history. Of particular interest, however, for this paper is his work on Christianity and culture. Referring to the sheer diversity of cultural expressions of Christianity, Walls argues that the Christian faith is 'infinitely translatable' and its history is a history of diffusion across cultural boundaries and its appropriation by new cultures.

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In this paper, I will begin by noting some observations that Walls makes from Christian history that have a bearing on the relationship between Christianity and culture. I will then outline some of Walls' theological explorations about how Christianity translates into new cultures. It should be noted that Walls has not written systematically on these topics; his only published works are the two collections of essays mentioned above. This means that his key ideas are scattered across his writings.

Diversity and Expansion in Christian History

Firstly, Walls notes 'the sheer diversity of forms that the Christian faith has taken throughout Christian history'. In *The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture*, Walls imagines an alien scholar who has chosen to study the Christian religion of planet Earth, and whose sampling method consists in visiting the planet for data every few centuries or so. Over his five visits our esteemed extraterrestrial of letters observes five Christianities – 'observant Pharisaic Jews of the post-Pentecost period, Greek theologians at Nicea, wild Irish ascetic monks, zealous Victorian supporters of missions, and white-robed Nigerian congregations chanting in the streets

about the power of the Spirit¹ - representative of their times, which are not only astonishingly diverse but also seemingly mutually incompatible.

A second observation that Walls makes is that 'the history of Christianity is marked by serial expansion not progressive expansion'. Walls, following the famous historian Latourette, notes that Christian expansion has been a history of gains and losses, and that what were in one generation Christian heartlands (first century Jerusalem, North Africa, Scotland!) became Christian wastelands in a later one. In a number of instances, what has happened is that as the heartland of Christianity has crumbled, a new centre has appeared on the periphery².

But this is more than a geographical shift: the gospel has been translated into a new culture, thus taking 'an impress from that culture'³ and creating new questions that had not been asked before. The process of translation of the Christian faith into new cultures has occurred many times, but there have been certain key moments of transition which Walls identifies as the first-century shift from an essentially Jewish Christianity to a Hellenistic-Roman Christianity, the shift from the Hellenistic-Roman form to a barbarian (northern European) Christianity after the collapse of the Roman Empire⁴ and our current moment in which the centre of gravity of the Christian world is moving from North to South. To be sure, at certain times, Christianity has become closely wedded to a particular cultural expression of it, but the remarkable thing is that just when that very culture (and therefore the form of Christianity associated with it) has been threatened by extinction, the centre of Christian faith has shifted across to, and found new expression in a different culture.

The contrast with Islam is instructive. Islamic expansion has been progressive, moving out from its historic centre and rarely conceding territorial gains once made⁵. Islam, unlike Christianity, has a fixed culture and civilisation recognisable, more or less, from Morocco to Indonesia. The untranslatability of the Qu'ran explains this single Islamic culture. Christianity, on the other hand, 'has no culturally fixed element'⁶ and is characterised by 'infinite transferability'⁷.

The key question, then, that arises from these observations is what is it about the Christian faith that makes it able to cross cultural boundaries so freely and create such a diversity of expressions? We now turn to Walls' theological explorations about the relationship between Christianity and culture.

Christian Diversity and the Particularity of Israel

To survey the diversity of Christianities across time and space leads Walls to ask if they have anything in common at all. Is there an irreducible core of Christian belief and practice that would enable us to recognise ascetic Irish monks, wordy Greek theologians and white-robed Nigerians as belonging to the same family? The issue is complicated by the fact that 'what appears of utmost importance to one group may appear intolerable, even blasphemous, to another'⁸. Nevertheless, Walls believes he can identify four simple convictions that all Christian traditions would affirm, namely 1) the worship of the God of Israel, 2) the ultimate significance of

¹ Andrew Walls, 'Introduction' in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, p. xv.

² See especially *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* ch. 1 where Walls considers Latourette's historical work and *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* ch. 2.

³ *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, ch. 1 p. 16.

⁴ One of the consequences was the birth of the Christendom idea because of the translation of Christianity into a culture where territory was bound up with communal identity. See 'Christianity in the Non-Western World', *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, ch. 3.

⁵ *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, ch. 1, p. 13; ch. 2, pp. 29-30; ch. 3, pp. 66-67.

⁶ *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, ch. 1, p. 13.

⁷ *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, ch. 2, p. 22.

⁸ *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, ch. 2, p. 23.

Jesus of Nazareth, 3) that God is active where believers are and 4) that believers constitute a people of God transcending time and space.

Leaving aside questions of what such a minimal definition of Christianity may raise, the first and second characteristics – the significance of Israel and, ultimately, of Jesus – lead us immediately into questions of particularity: Israel was a particular culture, and Jesus a man born into that same particular culture. If the worship of God was so tightly bound up with one particular culture, how could it become the religion of many cultures? To be sure, people from other nations could become Jewish proselytes, *joining* the nation of Israel by renouncing their own. But Christianity is more than that: it is no longer bound to one cultural expression. Paradoxically, Walls finds within the very particularity of Israel and of Jesus, part of the explanation for this cultural transferability.

Initially, Christianity was an incredibly Jewish affair until unknown Jewish believers from Greece and Cyprus ‘decided that Jesus had something to do with their Greek-speaking pagan neighbours in Antioch’⁹. What followed a short time after at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 had monumental implications for subsequent Christian history, namely the decision that pagans ‘might enter Israel without becoming Jews’¹⁰. Thus, for the first time Christianity was translated into a new cultural setting. For a time – until the flood of Gentiles putting their faith in Christ and the destruction of Jerusalem led in time to a new (Hellenistic-Roman) monocultural form of Christianity – the church lived an authentic, what Walls called, ‘Ephesian moment’¹¹, that is a church compromised equally of two very different cultural expressions of Christianity. Not two Christian communities – a Jewish church and a Gentile church, but *one* unified body of two cultures and lifestyles.

This, Walls argues, is what it means for the church to ‘attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.’ (Ephesians 4.13). ‘The church must be diverse because humanity is diverse; it must be one because Christ is one.’¹² The transmission and appropriation of Christian faith into new cultures raises questions and leads to a deeper understanding of Christ- Christ is manifested in culture but is also seen to be ever greater than culture: ‘It is though Christ himself actually grows through the work of mission.’¹³

Returning to the observation that the worship of the God of Israel is common to all forms of Christianity, Walls argues that the particularity of Israel ensures the universality of the gospel. Christian history is necessarily rooted in the history of Israel, and this ensures that each culture penetrated by the gospel essentially looks back to ‘several millennia of someone else’s history.’ This prevents any single culture claiming a monopoly on the historical heritage of the Christian faith and creates a referent point that unites all cultural expressions of Christianity. Thus ‘the adoption into Israel becomes a ‘universalizing’ factor’¹⁴. Perhaps this is in part the mystery of the hardening of Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles is attained¹⁵.

The Transmission of the Gospel across Cultures: Incarnation, Translation and Conversion

Ultimately, however, Christians’ primary identity derives not from Israel but from Christ. It is something in the very nature of Christ Himself, not Israel, that triggered that first cross-cultural diffusion. Walls observes that

⁹ *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, ch. 2, p. 33.

¹⁰ *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, ch. 2, p. 16.

¹¹ ‘The Ephesian Moment’ in *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, ch. 4.

¹² *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, ch. 4, p. 77.

¹³ ‘Introduction,’ in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, p. xvii.

¹⁴ *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, ch. 1, p. 9.

¹⁵ Romans 11.25. The last sentence is my idea, not Walls.

the paradox of Christ not only is in his divinity and humanity, but also in the ‘utter Jewishness of Jesus and the boundless universality of the Divine Son.’ The translation of the Christian faith from one culture to another follows logically from the Incarnation. For ‘Incarnation is translation. When God in Christ became man, Divinity was translated into humanity, as though humanity were a receptor language’¹⁶. Language is, of course, always a particular language, and the incarnation could not be other than into a particular culture. But that first translation was to be followed by more translations as ‘Christ, God’s translated speech, is re-translated from the Palestinian Jewish original’¹⁷.

As the Christian faith is translated into a new culture (and thus becomes something new, although its link with the original ensures that coherence between the diverse expressions of Christianity is maintained), so the receptor culture is – to the extent it is impacted by the gospel – changed. Translation is related to *conversion*, which means not *substitution*, the replacement of the old by the new, but *turning* – taking what is already there in the culture and re-orientating it Godwards. Conversion is transformation of already existing cultural structures. These principles of translation and conversion lead to a new and authentic expression of Christian faith in a new culture.

This point is very important for Walls. In cross-cultural mission, it is not that the evangelising person or group dumps his own cultural expression of Christianity on the receptor culture so that their own cultural forms are simply replaced by someone else’s cultural forms. Of course, that happens, but it shouldn’t! It is impossible, says Walls, to understand new ideas except in terms of ideas already held. Thus authentic conversion turns Godward what is already there.

Let’s explore the logic of this further. The way we perceive the world is created by a complex mix of factors clustered around our experiences and our relationships. The specific mix is infinitely variable, which means that we all perceive the world in different ways. But my life with its particular experiences and relationships is the particular life that Christ wants to transform. And thus Walls derives at the paradoxical conclusion: ‘the very universality of the Gospel, the fact that it is for *everyone*, leads to a variety of perceptions and applications of it.’¹⁸ Cultural diversity is an implication of the Lordship of Christ.

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Furthermore, conversion is more than of the individual. Indeed Christ’s Great Commission is to disciple the nations, not to make some disciples in each nation. But the individual is not the autonomous self of the western imagination; ‘self-in-relationship’ would be a better description. The conversion of the individual will inevitably have effects in the community. And the community, or indeed nation, with its shared experiences and relationships is also to be transformed by the gospel.

The Word is to pass into all those distinctive ways of thought, those networks of kinship, those special ways of doing things, that give the nation its commonality, its coherence, its identity. It has to travel through the shared mental and moral processes of a community, the way decisions are made in

¹⁶ *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, ch. 3, p. 27.

¹⁷ *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, ch. 3, p. 27.

¹⁸ *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, ch. 4, p. 46.

that community... Conversion to Christ does not produce a bland universal citizenship: it produces distinctive discipleships, as diverse and variegated as human life itself.¹⁹

One of the implications is that the transformation of a culture by the gospel is a long process – generations. Another is that as the gospel encounters ever more cultures, Christ’s word is constantly ‘penetrating new realms of human reality’²⁰ because of the distinctives of each culture, and thus Christ’s greatness is magnified.

The Indigenising Principle and the Pilgrim Principle

This idea that the Christian gospel ‘transforms what is there’ highlights a phenomenon which Walls sees as the tension between the indigenising principle and the pilgrim principle, a phenomenon evident throughout Christian history, two almost opposite tendencies equally necessary and, indeed, equally springing out of the gospel itself²¹. The indigenising principle springs from the fact that God accepts us as we are, on the basis of the work of Christ alone. We do not have to become someone else first but convert by receiving his grace. But ‘as we are’ means ‘as we are along with all the relations and experiences that constitute our identity’. This creates the desire to live as a Christian and a member of one’s own society, and for the church to be *at home* in the culture.

The indigenising principle is in tension with the pilgrim principle, which tells the Christian that while God takes him or her as they are, he wants to transform them too! We do not have an abiding home here, but are pilgrims, looking for another city.

The indigenising and pilgrim principles together create the diversity of authentic expressions of Christian faith in particular cultures and a transcendent commonality shared across the diversity. ‘It is a delightful paradox that the more Christ is translated into the various thought forms and life systems which form our various national identities, the richer all of us will be in our common Christian identity.’²²

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Conclusion

To sum up, Walls makes a case that Christianity is necessarily culturally diverse, and that that diversity leads to a fuller appreciation of the person of Christ. The gospel is not fixed to one cultural form, but is to be translated into every culture, re-orientating each one Godwards. The particularity of Israel, into whose history each new cultural expression of Christianity is grafted, ensures that no culture may claim a monopoly on the gospel and provides a common identity across Christian diversity. The particularity of Jesus is the first translation of God into a particular human culture, showing that Christ is to be re-translated into every other particular culture.

The purpose of examining Walls’ work on Christianity and culture is to help us reflect on the nature of our own missional task. The key application question is to do with the complex area of contextualisation: how are we, in detail, to translate the gospel into the context within which we are working?

¹⁹ *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, ch. 4, pp. 50-51.

²⁰ *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, ch. 4, p. 51.

²¹ See *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, ch. 1, pp. 7-9 and *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, ch. 4, pp. 53-54.

²² *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, ch. 4, p. 54,

Or, if Tim Stafford is right in concluding that therefore ‘mission is not so much a matter of contextualizing the gospel as learning its truth through an entirely new way of life and thought’²³, how are we to learn the gospel and see it fleshed out in our own life and thought?

Discussion Questions

1. Walls’ definition of core convictions common across all kinds of Christianity does not provide sufficient precision to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic expressions of Christianity. What is the irreducible core of the gospel that must be translated into a new culture? How does one distinguish between orthodoxy and heresy and how can syncretism be discerned?
2. How does one go about identifying one’s own cultural expressions of the gospel that should not be translated across as they stand into a new culture?
3. Is it theologically helpful to talk about Christ being incarnated afresh when the gospel enters a new culture?
4. What are the implications of the current diversity of world Christianity and the shift from North to South? What re-thinking should we do as Western evangelicals about things we cherish? For example, is our valuing of expository preaching and grammatico-historical interpretation a Western phenomenon that we should be careful about replicating in other cultures?
5. What are the implications of the continued prominence of English as the lingua franca of theological discourse?
6. What does it mean for the gospel to be translated into the multiple sub-cultures of our own cities, and into postmodern culture (whatever that is)?
7. What would an authentically gospel-transformed Spanish-Catalan* culture look like? What would authentically gospel-transformed Spanish-Catalan Christians look like? [*Insert your own cultural context here.]
8. When is, say, an Englishman’s critique of certain Spanish or Christian cultural practices an Englishman’s critique and when is it a gospel-based critique?

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²³ Tim Stafford, ‘Historian Ahead of His Time’.

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