



Translating Politics and Religion: A New Model

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Abstract

What is the relationship between (radical) politics and religion? Is it a process of secularisation, in which once theological terms are emptied of their content and replaced with political content?

Is it a relation of absolute source and origin, which thereby continues to determine the nature of political debate (Schmitt 2005 [1922])? Or is religion merely one narrative, one set of terms or language that has its own limits and possibilities? Only to the last question do I offer a positive answer. This answer takes the form of a model of translation for understanding the relations between politics and religion, using the example of party and church (I have dealt elsewhere with revolution and miracle (or grace) and with Marxist history and eschatology). The model has four parts. The first proposes that politics and religion may be seen as languages or codes, with each term constituted by a semantic field. When the fields come into contact, the overlap between them is never complete, for something is always left over. Second, this situation means that translation may enhance the terms in question, but certain senses particular to each field may also be lost. Third, the terms in question also resist complete

absorption by each other. Indeed, the very act of translation fosters resistance and semi-autonomy, so that the terms develop counter meanings. This leads to the fourth point, which concerns dialectical interchange, in which the semantics fields engage, move and back and forth, seek each other out, and yet resist being completely transformed. The argument closes by considering implications for understanding the model of translation, specifically the absence of any absolute claim by either politics or religion, the undermining of a hierarchical relation between these languages, and the ad hoc production of meaning within and between each language.

Keywords

church, party, politics, radical religion, translation

How might the relations between (radical and especially communist) politics and religion be understood? Over against the dominant but troubled models of secularisation and the absolute, determining origin of theology, I would like to propose a modest model of translation. That model has four components, beginning with the step in which politics and religion are understood as languages or codes, where their key terms operate within semantic fields. As those terms come into contact with one another in the process of translation, their semantic fields overlap but are not coterminous. Something is always left over on both sides, not initially part of that overlap. Second, how we deal with what is left over is crucial: it may enrich the intersection, enabling senses that were not possible in the individual semantic fields; or some dimensions may be lost, slipping away from either politics or theology as translation takes place. Third, and against the tendency to confluence thus far, translation does not rest upon some middle, benignly common semantic field; one finds that each term being translated offers resistance, will not allow a complete translation to take place. Fourth, this resistance and semi-autonomy of the two terms means that translation is a dialectical process, a moving back and forth between the terms that is never ready to rest content with the results. All of this reminds us that codes in question are modest, limited affairs, with none being prior or superior to the other, no matter how much they may claim for themselves. In what follows, I elaborate on each of these points.

Before doing so, it is worth noting that I am interested in two dimensions of religion. On the one hand, there is the radical, revolutionary tradition with its own long history. If it is proscribed, it operates as a subversive and even prophetic force, challenging the legitimacy of the powers

that be in the name of an alternative allegiance. However, at times the religion in question (I think mostly of Christianity) gains power and legitimacy, and its alternative hegemony becomes the new one. Now it finds itself in a position where the revolution is past and it must undertake the difficult task of constructing a new framework while trying to remain faithful to its position before the revolution. Here questions of legitimacy, stagnation, renewal, and dangers of replicating old structures of power become foremost. Similar observations may be made concerning radical political movements, for they too must deal with this tension between their positions before and after the revolution. This reality means that my examples of translation between radical politics and religion—especially that of party and church—deal with both dimensions.

Spurs

In order to set the scene for my elaboration, I would like to identify three spurs to my reflections. The first relates to Marxism, specifically to a common but problematic argument: the Marxist schema of history is a secularised version of Jewish and Christian eschatological history. Our current state of sin (alienation and exploitation) awaits a saviour (the working class) who will usher in the millennium, the new age (communism) when the evil ones (the bourgeoisie) will be vanquished.¹ In a close reading of Marx and Engels one soon discovers that this argument has no basis, apart from a thousand repetitions of a speculative thought bubble (Boer 2012a). Equally spurious is the argument that Marxism draws from the formal innovation of the Hebrew scriptures—namely, its linear history over against the cyclical patterns characteristic of ancient Southwest Asia at the time. The origin of this idea is rather unclear, for even a cursory glance at other political myths of the time, such as the famous *Enuma Elish* or the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, reveals linear narratives woven in with cyclical patterns, much like the Hebrew Bible.

¹ The proposal has served various purposes. For instance, in the hands of Nikolai Berdyaev, early a Marxist but later a theologically inspired anti-communist, or indeed in the hands of the equally apostate Leszek Kołakowski, it becomes ammunition in an anti-communist polemic (See Berdyaev 1948 [1937]; Kołakowski 1981). For historians such as Karl Löwith (1949), it becomes a way of negating the challenge of Marxism by including it within a wider sweep of historiographical analysis. And for a philosopher like Alasdair MacIntyre (1971: 111), the assumption becomes an effort to find common ground between his two passions, Christianity and Marxism, for both offer a historical narrative that runs from weakness to strength, with human beings ultimately recovering the moral purity once lost so that we may live once again in a state of grace that transcends historical time. These assumptions continue in more recent work. See for instance (Sharpe 2012–13).

This erroneous proposal is largely a historical one, in which prior forms of—Western—thought influenced those that followed. This framework of course assumes the patterns of cause and effect without which modern historiography could not function. In that light, the suggestion concerning Marxism is but one form of the secularisation narrative, which tells of a long and somewhat bumpy process in which the primary reference to a world beyond is replaced by reference to this age and this world.² A corollary concerns that bogeyman religion: it is either gradually replaced or watches on helplessly as its key terms are emptied of religious content and replaced with political ones. According to this narrative, religion becomes the historical precursor of modern political thought—necessary scaffolding perhaps, that can eventually be dismantled to reveal the true form of political reflection. This narrative has been so troubled of late that it has lost credibility, partly due to the new visibility of religion in the geopolitical sphere, and partly due to the inherent problems with the narrative.³ Yet, no viable model has yet appeared on the horizon to provide an alternative to the relations between religion and politics.

That final statement is not quite true, for one particular proposal has been taken up, apart from the weak term “post-secularism.”⁴ It may be traced back to Carl Schmitt’s oft-cited assertion, “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts” (2005 [1922]: 32). Initially, this might be read as yet another version of the secularisation narrative, but Schmitt completes his sentence by stating that he means not merely historical developments but also the “systematic structure” of political concepts. He moves here beyond historical concerns to ontological ones, with theology providing the absolute source and thereby the inescapable framework of political thought. The use of the term “political theology” is a clear illustration of his agenda, for it demotes politics to an adjectival status and reserves the nominative and central position for theology. As Blumenberg points out, what “political theology” really means is “theology as politics” (1966: 97–98). Many are those who have followed Schmitt’s speculations, especially the systemic or ontological postulate, despite his recourse to the arch-conservative

² Drawing upon the basic sense of *saeculum* and its adjective, *saecularis*, I understand secularism—a word coined by George Holyoake (1860, 1896) in the mid-nineteenth century—as a *system of thought, indeed a way of living that draws its terms purely from this age and from this world*. This positive sense also has an implied negative: secularism does not draw its reference point from beyond this world, whether a god above, or a time in the future, or a sacred text such as the Bible that tells myths about both.

³ For more on this recent debate, see (Hoezl and Ward 2008; Stout 2008; Taylor 2007; De Vries and Sullivan 2006).

⁴ I should add that proclaiming a recycled version of nineteenth century atheism and secularism—by the “new old atheists” Dawkins (2006), Hitchens (2007), or Dennett (2007)—is a rather reactionary and futile exercise.

tradition of Counter-Reformation thought to bolster his argument. For instance, Giorgio Agamben (2011) has recently attempted to show that theology provides the untranscendable horizon (with all its traps) for political thought.⁵ A little earlier, Jacob Taubes (2009 [1947]) tried to locate the origins of Western thought, especially its linear and eschatological narrative, in the Hebrew Bible. Continuing today, various radical orthodox theologians simply assert that all forms of thought and practice are actually theological, a breathtakingly conservative proposal that kowtows to Thomas Aquinas and suggests that all modern developments are the result of heresies that betray the aforesaid divine.⁶ That this is a profoundly regressive, if not unhelpful, proposal should be obvious, for it seeks to lace everything into a rather ethnocentric and imperialist version of Christian theology.

Translation

So what may be done? I would like to suggest a rather simple alternative model or analogy: translation.⁷ In one respect, my task may be seen as an effort to provide rigour to Blumenberg's looser suggestion that the relations between politics and religion operate in terms of analogy and metaphor (Blumenberg 1966: 89–102). For Blumenberg, such a metaphorical process is of a voluntarist nature: the political theorist has a stock of images to hand—above all of the absolute sovereignty of the God-person—which he or she selects as appropriate, thereby revealing more about the nature of a situation and its theorist than the relation of ideas themselves. The value of Blumenberg's approach is that it reduces the absolute claims of both politics and religion, but its limits appear in its voluntarist assumptions and in the lack of explication of how the process of metaphor and analogy really works. In response, I seek to provide a distinct model that draws upon some key items from the theory and practice of translation. What follows inevitably raises the question of which translation theory, or at least which tendency among those theories, I prefer. Rather than deal with those issues here, I leave the question of definition to the conclusion (in the style of Adorno), for then the senses of translation may emerge from my analysis.

⁵ Agamben undermines his own project by beginning with the ancient Greeks, well before Christian theology (and thereby reinforcing the myth of Western Classicism).

⁶ See (Milbank 1990; Žižek and Milbank 2009; Davis, Milbank, and Žižek 2005).

⁷ The initial idea I draw from Fredric Jameson's notion of transcoding. However, I seek to provide a systematic framework that goes beyond Jameson's largely instinctual suggestion and practice (Jameson 1988: viii–ix).

Semantic Fields

I distinguish between four areas within the model of translation that may be useful for our purposes. The first of these concerns semantic fields. If we understand religion and politics as particular languages or codes, then the specific terms within those languages become semantic fields, embracing certain (even unexpected) senses within these fields but also excluding others. As is well known, in the process of translation the semantic fields of the terms in question overlap, but not in a complete and perfect fashion. Even though a translator may search for the best possible words in translation, a word in one language inevitably suggests meanings beyond those in the other language. Overhangs abound, parts that cannot find a place in the common territory that the two semantic fields occupy. I suggest that a comparable situation applies when two terms from religion and politics are brought into contact with one another.

Let me take an example. Elsewhere, I have dealt with the translation between grace and revolution, via Badiou's emphasis on the incalculable, undeserved, and unexpected nature of the event; between miracle and revolution, through Lenin's extensive deployment of miracle to speak of revolutionary action and the construction of communism afterwards; between the biblical category of idolatry and Marx's *Aufhebung* of religion through fetishism, which becomes a central category in his analysis of capitalism; and between the eschaton and the goal of a political project, through a reassessment of the oft-mentioned but factually incorrect suggestion that Marx and Engels developed a secularized form of Christian eschatological history (Boer 2009: 155–80; 2011; 2012a: 177–220; 2013a: 135–74; 2014: 227–35). I do not propose to revisit those discussions here, for there are many other possibilities for translation: the Gospel (*evangelion*) and the ideology of the party;⁸ ontological transcendence and temporal transcendence; the delay of the parousia and the designation of socialism as the transitional phase to communism; the myth of salvation history and political myth; the worship of the saviour and the veneration of the revolutionary leader; the ekklesia (church) and the party; and so on. Since I cannot deal with all of them now, I focus on the one between church and revolutionary political party.⁹ Let me be clear: I do not seek to make the facile argument that the party is a pseudo-church, an organisation that functions like a church—with its rituals, doctrine, and institutional structures, even though it sets out to challenge and debunk the

⁸ Kautsky writes: "Socialism is no message of woe for the proletariat but rather good news, a new gospel [*ein neues Evangelium*]" (1906: 230–31).

⁹ By "party" I mean the revolutionary political parties of the modern era, from the nineteenth century onwards. Parties of course existed earlier, within the church (as Gramsci has discussed) and they also participate in a different way in the processes of bourgeois or liberal democracy. These are not my concern in this study.

church. Rather, by deploying the model of translation, I avoid the traps attendant upon this suggestion.

The semantic fields of both terms—church and party—have obvious overlaps. For instance, like revolutionary groups, the radical church must operate underground, meeting in secret and with clandestine communication (Paul’s letters); it negates the legitimacy of the existing state by giving allegiance to a higher authority; it deploys legal and illegal means of spreading its message; it develops an alternative hegemony; its members are willing to die for the sake of the cause.¹⁰ The message of the new movement may be expressed in Thomas Müntzer’s radical formulation: “It is an article of our creed, and one which we wish to realise, that all things are in common [*omnia sunt communia*], and should be distributed as occasion requires, according to the several necessities of all. Any prince, count or baron who, after being earnestly reminded of this truth, shall be unwilling to accept it, is to be beheaded or hanged” (Kautsky 1897: 130; 1976b [1895–97]: 67).

However, when the party or the church attains power, the difficult task of constructing a new order begins. Now there is the organisation of local parishes/branches, a central executive, the larger meeting of representatives of the parishes/branches, and so on. The church and party also transcend this organisational dimension to be a greater, well-nigh ontological entity. Thus, the church universal is the union of all believers, and the communist international is the union of all communists. Arguments over structure are also points of contact: hierarchical or democratic? Is the leader to be greater than all, precisely through being a servant, or is she or he the first among equals? Should there be a leader at all, or should the organisation be governed by committees or councils? The points of contact between the semantic fields continue: doctrine and party platform, heresy and revisionism, sectarianism and splits. However, the overlap is never complete, for some items remain left over. Most obviously, the focus of allegiance differs: an extra-human referent—a god—versus a purely human focus, in terms of the search for human flourishing. Above all, the major difference is the church has and continues to operate by means of what may be called a universal of exclusion. The church may claim to be universal, but you can be included within that church only if

¹⁰ As Engels outlined, when summarizing his argument concerning early Christianity: “It is now, almost to the year, sixteen centuries since a dangerous party of overthrow was likewise active in the Roman Empire. It undermined religion and all the foundations of the state; it flatly denied that Caesar’s will was the supreme law; it was without a fatherland, was international; it spread over the whole empire, from Gaul to Asia, and beyond the frontiers of the empire. It had long carried on seditious activities underground in secret; for a considerable time, however, it had felt strong enough to come out into the open. This party of overthrow ... was known by the name of Christians” (Engels 1990b [1894–95]: 523).

you agree with its definition of the universal. That is, if the church cannot absorb you, it will crush you. All too often, radical political projects seem to operate by means of a similar universal of exclusion, but it was Gramsci's genius to explore—by means of a close study of the Roman Catholic Church—what a universal of inclusion might mean for the communist movement.¹¹

Gain and Loss

All of this raises the second question concerning the model of translation: what is gained and what is lost? Ideally, the overlap of the semantic fields enables an expansion of meaning. The two semantic fields seek to become one, which then prefers not to leave anything outside its purview. The new field of meaning strives to include the connotations originally outside the common ground. To continue our example, this means that the senses of the party may be enriched by the senses pertaining to the church, with the importance of ritual, the experience of problems and ways of overcoming them, the modes of dealing with institutionalisation, the avoidance of ossification, the means for countering the loss of legitimacy, patterns of renewal and so forth. Since I tend to be an optimist, I would prefer this dimension—the gains of the translation process. Indeed, I would go a step further and suggest that the individual semantic fields may actually hobble the full realisation of their meaning. Only through their translation into one another do they enable a more potent meaning. While the church may be restricted by the constraints of the theological code in which it tends to operate, it may well find a new charge in the release enabled by translation into the party. I would also dare to suggest that the party may discover a new lease of life by drawing upon the opportunities offered through translation into a church.

However, it is too easy to lose out in the process of translation (here my optimism requires curtailment). The richness and peculiar way of expression embodied in one term does not translate so well into another (in the first language I learnt, Dutch, certain modes of expression speak to me as no other language can). This loss may happen in at least two ways. To begin with, in the process of translation, the flaws and limits of one term may make their way into the expanded semantic field of translation. For instance, the tendency of the church to become an aim in itself may translate into the party as the ultimate horizon. The all too common tendency for members of the church to invest their “faith” in the institution itself may make its way into a party that is also reified. Like the church, the party becomes the be-all and end-all, and the revolution or perhaps the

¹¹ For further elaboration, see (Gramsci 1992: Q2.135; 1995 Q7.71; 1996: Q3.164, Q5.17, Q5.34).

construction of new socio-economic life slips far into the background. A second loss may occur with the parts of the semantic fields that are not initially included in the translation process. These overhangs may find themselves drifting away, never to be included. Here I think of the party's criticism of a transcendent referent, a referent (God) that is crucial for the church. The party offers this criticism for very good reason, for the church's transcendent referent quickly becomes a justification for oppressive practices of the church. If this critique is lost in translation, then the party too may erect its own referent, the most notable example being the personality cult.¹² Conversely, from the church's side, the reason for such a transcendent referent may also be lost through translation. By this I mean the ontological reserve¹³ —the way such a referent reminds us of the limitations of human endeavour, of the weaknesses and failures that attend so much of our activity. If this reminder is lost, then human beings begin to believe they can achieve superhuman results. To be sure, the church regularly forgets this function of the transcendent referent as well, placing too much faith in powerful popes, patriarchs, or theological leaders. At this level, the church's own experience may act as a warning for the party.

Irreducibility and Resistance

The question of losses and gains leads me to a further dimension of the model of translation, which is the resistance to complete translation, if not the irreducibility of the terms themselves.¹⁴ My reflections here act as a counter to the impression that may have been generated by my earlier discussion of semantic fields, in which I bordered on a version of the Aristotelian golden mean, a kind of middle ground that seeks to avoid extremes. Thus, over against my initial depiction of overlapping semantic fields, even my optimistic suggestion that those fields may be expanded and enriched in a new united field, one also finds a staunch refusal to be so incorporated. Tension, if not conflict, is also very much part of the translation process.

This resistance indicates the semi- or relative autonomy of the terms in question. Something resists, something holds out in the effort to make the link. In the case of the church, the "absolute without" of its point of reference resists the immanent drive of political translation, or even the

¹² Developing from this point, in a subsequent argument I wish to develop what may be called a materialist doctrine of evil.

¹³ I draw this feature from Latin American liberation theology, where it is both a strength and a weakness. See (Gutiérrez 2001 [1969]; Kee 1990).

¹⁴ My reflections here are indebted to discussions with the communist theologian of Reformed persuasion, Dick Boer (2002, 2009).

effort to shift ontological transcendence to temporal transcendence. This absolutely external referent does not compute in the political project, at least in the way the church frames it. Even more, this external point provides the very reason for the church, much like Lacan's *objet petit a* (thereby opening up another avenue for translation). The church is held together in all its sheer diversity by the fact that it owes allegiance to one that beyond the church. Yet, the party too resists becoming a church in a process of *metabasis eis allo genos*. While the church may be seen as perhaps a "parable of the political party," even an analogy of the party, the party maintains its autonomy. It develops its own traditions, its own rituals, its own structural identity that cannot be equated with or even translated into the church.

In its resistance to the church, the party develops its own traditions. An excellent example is the tradition of the revolutionary martyr, which may be seen as the intentional development of an alternative and counter-tradition to the religious martyr. "Martyr" is neither an exclusively religious term nor is its religious version the origin of all other meanings. If we understand a martyr as someone who holds true to a cause, especially in the face of opposition and death, and who is remembered afterward, often in an embellished narrative, then religious martyrs are but one version of the martyr. So also with political martyrs: Left movements in particular have a long tradition of martyrdom, whether the communist martyrs of Kerala, India, the Tolpuddle Martyrs of nineteenth-century England, or the Haymarket martyrs of 1886 in the United States. In the context of modern left-wing movements, the tradition of the revolutionary martyr begins with Marx and Engels, for whom the Paris Commune was a prime instance of collective martyrdom. However, the crucial moment when the revolutionary martyr emerges as a counter-tradition is with Engels's study of the German Peasant Revolution, especially its leader, Thomas Müntzer (Engels 1978 [1850]). The dialectical twist Engels enacts in this case is important for my argument concerning translation: Engels claims Müntzer as a political martyr from within Christianity precisely because Müntzer was not regarded as a religious martyr. Instead, he was seen as a heretical firebrand, as an aberration best forgotten by both the Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches. In this way, a religious leader who was denied the status of martyr became a political martyr.

This alternative and emerging tradition of the radical political martyr fed into the significant developments of the revolutionary martyr before and during the Russian Revolution. In making this point, I challenge the common assumption that Russian Orthodox rituals of the martyr—veneration, embalming, and martyrologies—provided the source of the revolutionary martyr.¹⁵ Closer inspection reveals that this was not the

¹⁵ As argued, for instance, by Nina Tumarkin (1981, 1997).

case, or rather, that the tradition of the revolutionary martyr consciously established a distinct form over against the church. We can see the careful avoidance of religious dimensions in Lenin's own commemorations of martyrs, which draw on an older tradition that began with Marx and Engels.¹⁶ Many of those Lenin commemorates were not Russian revolutionary martyrs, but significant figures throughout the global socialist movement. Of course, the October Revolution produced a long list of revolutionary martyrs, especially now that Russia was leading the world revolutionary movement. The best example for my purpose is Yakov Sverdlov, who died from influenza during the starving and disease-ridden period of the "civil" war in March 1919.¹⁷

Lenin's funeral speech follows an established generic pattern, with connections to the ancient art of the funeral eulogy, but above all to the revolutionary tradition that was already taking shape. The bulk offers the story of a revolutionary life. Sverdlov was a dedicated revolutionary even from youth, a man who had forsaken his family and given away the comforts of bourgeois society. Devoting himself heart and soul to the cause of revolution, he spent many years passing from prison to exile and to prison yet again. In the process, he cultivated the typical characteristics of revolutionaries, becoming steeled through extensive illegal activity while maintaining close contact with the masses. Such was Sverdlov's intuition as a practical worker, such was his talent as an organizer, such was his absolutely unchallenged prestige (after October 1917 taking sole charge of the largest branches of the All-Russia Central Executive Committee), that he is irreplaceable. Yet, despite his unique abilities, he was very modest, playing down his abilities for the sake of the cause. Lest one elevate the individual above the collective cause, observes Lenin, Sverdlov was also the product of a larger cause. Has not history shown that in the course of great revolutions, great figures arise and develop talents that had formerly seemed impossible? So also will the revolution bring forth new leaders who will be inspired by his example (Lenin 1965a [1919]).

With Lenin himself, the genre of the revolutionary martyr's life gradually gained a distinct form after some trial and error. Initially, the way he was remembered was contested, with regard to his class origins and childhood, whether he loved children or not, or even in terms of his approach

¹⁶ These include Nikolai Ernestovich Bauman (1966a [1905]), Ivan Vasil'evich Babushkin (1963a [1910]), Paul Singer (1963b [1911]), Paul and Laura Lafargue (1963c [1911]), Joseph Dietzgen (1963d [1913]), August Bebel (1963e [1913]), Harry Quelch (1964 [1913]), Eugène Pottier (1966b [1913]), the Left Socialist-Revolutionary, Proshyan (1966c [1918]).

¹⁷ Three of Lenin's speeches have been preserved: one at Sverdlov's grave (1965b [1919]), another at a special session of the All-Russia Central Executive Committee (1965a [1919]), and a third on gramophone record that draws a number of sentences from the speech at the special session (1965c [1919]).

to politics. Eventually, these lives gelled into a generic model, focusing on the importance of Lenin's example, the crucial role of his writings, and, as with earlier revolutionaries, the importance of keeping alive his memory and inspiration. Typically, the revolutionary life was understood within the wider, collective context, for the one remembered embodies the cause (Turton 2007: 7–8, 143–44).

What about the influence of the Russian Orthodox saint on this revolutionary martyrology? Surely, the political saint derived from the religious saint—with bodies believed to be incorruptible, their relics and icons both the recipients of prayers and sources of miracles, accounts of their lives avidly read, pilgrimages undertaken to their last resting place, elaborate theological arguments concerning the relation between the earthly remains and the newly transformed heavenly body. So we find the inevitable connections made between the preservation of Lenin's body and those of the saints who went before him. Although neither a necessary nor sufficient requirement for canonization, popular calls for figures to be declared saints were often made on the basis of supposed incorruptibility. In the popular mind at least, they may have become incorruptible through divine fiat, but Lenin became so through science. The outcome, as some have suggested, is analogous, rendering Lenin a saint in largely traditional terms (Stites 1989: 120; Tumarkin 1997: 5–6). The analogy is strengthened by the popular belief that kings and princes who died before their time became saints purely for these two reasons—an untimely death as a prince—and that they remained protectors of Russia. Yet, significant differences are also manifest. Lenin's body did not become a magnet for prayers, not even for Soviet success in battle, industrial expansion, or peace in a hostile world. Neither his body nor his image (which occasionally drew upon the artistic traditions of iconography) was identified as the source of miracles, at least in the sense that the saints managed the stupendous feats of curing sore toes and strange discharges.¹⁸ Apart from an absence of miracles, Lenin's body was not regarded in terms of a connection between the saint's earthly body and the physical, heavenly body. Lenin's singular body remained very much here on earth, inside the gates of Red Square and close by the Kremlin wall. Indeed, precisely when Lenin was ailing and then after his death, the new government was waging a sustained campaign against those very saintly relics that are supposed by some to have provided the primary basis for the embalment of Lenin (Stites 1989: 92–109; Gabel 2005). As Lenin was carefully being prepared for permanent and open display, saints' tombs were opened and the "incorruptible" bones or wax effigies revealed for what they were. Rather than a convergence between Lenin and the Russian saints, we are faced

¹⁸ As Lenin writes, "An icon is something you pray to, something you cross yourself before, something you bow down to; but an icon has no effect on practical life and practical politics." (1965d [1920]: 356).

with a somewhat different conclusion: this campaign generated significant differences between the communists and the church. The observation of Boris Zbarsky, a biochemist directly involved in the process of embalming Lenin's body, sums up these differences very well:

The Russian Church had claimed that it was a miracle that its saints' bodies endured and were incorruptible. But we have performed a feat unknown to modern science [...] We worked for four months and we used certain chemicals known to science. There was nothing miraculous about it (Quoted in Tumarkin 1997: 194).

The traditions of the revolutionary martyr and veneration took place in a contested field, for the church sought to maintain its hold on both. So the church began to commemorate reactionary religious leaders who had suffered for opposing the communists. These were the "new martyrs" (*no-vomucheniki*), drawn mostly from the ruling class: Tsar Nicholas II and the Tsarina, Alexandra Feodorovna, Grand Duchess Elizaveta Feodorovna, and church leaders such as Vladimir of Kiev, archpriest Ioann Kochurov, bishop Germogen, and Metropolitan Veniamin of Petrograd (Polsky 2002). Of course, the "red priests" who established the Renovatianist Orthodox Church (under the leadership of the fascinating Metropolitan of Moscow, Alexander Vvedensky) are difficult to find in the list of such martyrs (Roslov 2002). By contrast, the veneration of revolutionary martyrs sought to claim a distinct space, commemorating not royals and church leaders, but ordinary revolutionaries.

Here, then, is an excellent example of the way two items in the process of translation also maintain an opposition to the other, a resistance to translation and even a distinct untranslatability. Of course, the very possibility of doing so is predicated on the fact that they have encountered one another, that a situation of translation has opened up. This example should make it clear that the party is far from being a quasi-church, or perhaps a secularised version of the church. It is not for nothing that historically party and church have been at loggerheads—and here "church" may designate also mosque or temple. Yet, I have now reached a point where my initial model of translation may seem to be breaking down. Will the effort at making a connection ultimately fail? The old phrase *omnis traductor traditor* (every translator is a traitor; or Italian *tradittore-traduttore*) captures this sense.

Dialectic

These two contrary tendencies may be brought together by giving my model a dialectical touch. This dialectic operates at two levels, the first between the actual terms engaged in the perpetual process of translation,

and the second in terms of my initial effort at bringing the two semantic fields together and then the subsequent exploration of their resistance to the process of translation. As far as this second level is concerned, the dialectic involves keeping both aspects in tension. That is, the possibility of the two terms encountering one another in the moment of translation is enabled by their mutual suspicion and opposition; conversely, that opposition takes place only through the common ground of translation. All of this is generated by the act of translation, of bringing the two semantic fields from radical political thought and religion into touch with each other.

So translation is a dialectical process, a constant moving back and forth between the terms. Their very difference means that we continually seek to deal with the difficulties and shortcomings in translation, returning now to one and now to the other semantic field. Thus, the common ground of the linked semantic fields is always contested, a process rather than a result. To return to the party and church, the party may explore what can be learnt from the church, seeking to learn from its long success while at the same time identifying its shortcomings. For this reason, Gramsci was fascinated by the Roman Catholic Church, its various factions and struggles, its priests (spurring on his thoughts concerning the organic intellectual), and its various strategies for furthering its own interests. He was well aware of its shortcomings, so he sought to discern how the experience of this universal organisation might benefit the party and how the party could avoid its traps (Boer 2007: 215–74). So, also following Engels's guide, Karl Kautsky sought to learn from the rich revolutionary tradition of Christianity, tracing over his multi-volume *Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus* how various forms of radical Christianity—from the Middle Ages onwards¹⁹—both challenged the mainstream churches and redefined what “church” actually meant (Kautsky 1976a [1895–97]; 1976b [1895–97]; Kautsky and Lafargue 1977 [1922]; Lindemann and Hillquit 1977 [1922]). Even within this work, Kautsky reveals the dialectical tension I am tracing, since he attempted to establish a pre-Marxist tradition of revolutions, while marking off Marxism as distinct from that tradition.

Similarly, the church may find itself challenged by the party, for both church and party aspire to the allegiance of common workers and farmers. So the church adapts its mechanisms and structures in response to the party, appropriating and developing the new strategies it has learnt, so much so that the form of the church's teaching and practice cannot be understood without the challenge of the party (as I argued above in relation to the revolution tradition of martyrdom and the Russian Orthodox

¹⁹ In fact, in *Foundations of Christianity* (2007 [1908]) he goes back to the roots of Christianity, elaborating upon an argument first made by Engels in his essay “On the History of Early Christianity” (1990a [1894–95]).

Church). This has particularly been the case during periods of political upheaval and revolution. A clear instance of this process appears with the emergence of Roman Catholic social teaching. From *Rerum Novarum* (1891) onwards, each encyclical that constructed this tradition responded directly to periods of political and social unrest and the increasing appeal of socialism: the encyclicals of the 1890s, 1930s, and 1960s clearly appear in such contexts, as also in the first decade of the twenty-first century.²⁰ In other words, the very condition of this tradition of teaching was that of the communist party. Notably, while the encyclicals heard the voice of the party and sought to put limits on capitalism and the “free market,” they were also resolutely opposed to any form of socialism. At times too, church and party may find themselves allies for a while, focused on a common enemy. Or, at least, elements within both may see the distinct benefit of such alliances, whether the Renovators of the Orthodox Church in Russia after the Russian Revolution, or liberation theologians in Latin America and elsewhere in the 1970s and 1980s, or Christian communists today.

Conclusion: On the Meaning of Translation

Much more may be said concerning the model I have proposed, for here I have provided a bare outline. However, I have deliberately not defined my approach to translation thus far, preferring to let such a definition emerge from the argument. I would like to close with some comments on what has emerged. To begin with, translation does not attribute any ontological priority or absolutism to one or other of the terms. The tendency to absolutism is more common for theology, which is seen as the *fons et origo* of modern political thought—a position common to, among others, the motley crew of radical orthodoxy, the counter-Reformation thought of Schmitt, and curiously also to Agamben (see my opening comments). Instead, the languages of both religion and politics become limited and relativised affairs. They may provide potential gains for understanding a term, but they also have distinct limitations and shortcomings. I would go further in this case and argue that the process of translation may release a specific term from the constraints of its language, thereby unleashing it to realise a greater potential. For instance, the materialist

²⁰ *Rerum Novarum* (1891), *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), *Mater et Magistra* (1961), *Pacem in Terris* (1963), *Dignitatis Humanae* and *Gaudium et Spes* (1965—conciliar documents from the Second Vatican Council), *Populorum Progressio* (1967), *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), *Laborem Exercens* (1981), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), *Centesimus Annus* (1991), *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), and *Deus Caritas Est* (2005). Those of 1987, 1991, and 1995 may be seen in a slightly different way, as part of the effort to “roll back” communism in Eastern Europe. See further, Boer (2013b).

translation of the church into the party releases the church from the confines of theology, where it under-performs. But translated into the revolutionary form of the party, it becomes full of explosive political change and overthrow.

This process of limiting absolute claims also means that translation does not operate with a hierarchy of languages. Thus, there is no primary language, no original to which the secondary or derivative language relates. On this matter, the assumption that a translator should work into his or her native language rather than from it and into a foreign tongue, undermines the assumption of an original and a secondary, target language. Now, the original becomes a secondary, foreign language, while the target language becomes the focus. In this switching of roles, the patterns of hierarchy dissipate.

Finally, there is no meaning that transcends the particularity of the languages in question. The ideas or meanings do not float free of these languages, which are then seen as expressions of those ideas—much like containers for a transcendent meaning.²¹ Instead, each meaning is an ad hoc construction, produced within a particular linguistic and institutional context, perpetually contested and reworked. Translation is, therefore, another and crucial element in that process of struggle and redefinition.

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²¹ This gnostic position is particularly virulent in the translation theory known as "dynamic equivalence" or "meaning-based" translation. With its origins in evangelical missionary translation, fostered by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (now the Nida Institute), it has colonized assumptions concerning translation well outside biblical translation. For a critique, see (Boer 2012b).

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