Andrew Walls has been a world leader in arguing for the “infinite translatability of the Christian faith.” Samuel Escobar writes, “[Because of Walls], we...see through the centuries different models of Christian life that were shaped by dynamic interaction between the Christian faith and the cultural environment in which it was planted.”

In contrast to other monocultural faiths like Hinduism or Islam, Walls argues that Christianity can enter into all cultures through a culture-affirming “indigenizing principle” and a culture-challenging “pilgrim principle.” In this paper, I will argue for the “infinite translatability of the Christian faith” through biblical, theological, and historical evidence. Then, I will locate this understanding in the regions of Africa and Latin America. My thesis is that infinite translatability is a true characteristic of the Christian faith that allows for the spread of Christianity into all cultures of the world.

Walls looks to Jesus Christ as the supreme theological evidence for infinite translatability. Timothy Tennent, in his writing on the Son as the “embodiment of the missio dei,” argues for the idea of “incarnation as translation.” Tennent quotes Walls, who writes, “When God in Christ became man, divinity was translated into humanity, as though humanity were a receptor language.”

God’s translation from Word into flesh in a particular location, culture, and time period, forms the basis for this paper’s argument. Walls writes, “The Christian faith is translatable because the Christian God first translated himself.” The result, then, is Christian diversity. Walls reveals, “the first divine act of translation into humanity thus gives rise

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4 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
to a constant succession of new translations...Christian diversity is the necessary product of the Incarnation.”

As we see the New Testament reach its cross-cultural peak in the translation of “God in human flesh,” there is other biblical evidence for the infinite translatability of Christianity. A foundational passage is found in the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. David and Cynthia Strong describe this agreement that Gentiles need not become Jews to be followers of Jesus as a “globalizing hermeneutic.” The theme of translatability into all cultures is also found in Galatians and Romans as well as Jesus’ encounters with Gentiles throughout the Gospels. Earlier in Acts, we also see the receiving of the Holy Spirit by Jews from all the nations at Pentecost, where God was praised in numerous languages. This passage alone has given weight to the justification and importance of the contextualization and translation of the Scriptures. In addition, in Acts 11 we see the Cypriot and Cyrenean group applying the Greek understanding of kyrios to declare “Jesus as Lord” to the Greeks in Antioch. Finally, the heavenly, multi-national vision in Revelation 7:9-12 serves as a strong basis for the translatability of the Christian faith.

Historically, Christianity has looked vastly different in various time periods and cultures. Walls points to six different epochs in history that reveal the translatability of Christianity in radically diverse cultures. One example is the fourth century, when Greek philosophy was relied upon for the church to understand the gospel. A supporter of Walls, William Dyrness points to Clifford Geertz, a pioneering anthropologist, who sees culture as “webs of meaning” in which

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7 Ibid., 27-8.
10 Walls, Missionary, 4.
people “locate themselves.” Bosch adds to this point through his argument for inculturation, which “consciously follows the model of incarnation...the church being born anew in each new context and culture.” Noll gives credit to the “indigenizing” and “pilgrim” principles of Walls for explaining the way Christianity translates into cultures. He writes, “When Christianity is rooted in someplace new, it also challenges, reforms and humanizes the cultural values of that new place.” Noll gives further evidence for the growth of World Christianity in the twentieth century by revealing the Bible’s availability in 2,300 languages in 2000, compared to 700 languages in 1900.

Moving into the geographic region of Africa, I want to reveal the important scholarship of Lamin Sanneh as well as specific examples of on-the-ground evidence for Christianity’s infinite translatability. Sanneh, a native of Gambia, has been a world-leading voice for the Gospel’s impact beyond the West, especially in its interaction with native languages and traditional religions. Sanneh notes the compatibility of Christianity with traditional African religions. He writes, “Africans responded best where African religions were strongest, not weakest.” Similarly, Walls has found “Africans have responded to the gospel where they were, not from where the missionaries were: they have responded to the Christian message as they heard it, not the missionaries’ experience of the message.” This can be underscored by Kwame Bediako, a Ghanaian historian, who brings to light the idea that God has been at work in a

14 Ibid.
16 Walls, *Missionary*, 100.
culture’s “pre-Christian tradition.” Examples of these ideas coalescing can be found in Samuel Ajayi Crowther, whose indigenous leadership and ability to speak the language of the Muslim Yoruba people allowed for a powerful and coherent contextualization of the gospel.

In Latin America, twentieth century theologian Orlando Costas reveals how Christology allows for translatability. He writes, “Humankind discovers its authentic identity in Jesus Christ and comes to know the true God through him...The incarnation turns theology proper and anthropology into a Christological issue.” In the 1960’s, Liberation Theology emerged in Latin America as Jesus Christ became a liberator of the poor. This liberation theology called for “a contextualization of the gospel in their cultures.” As a result, the Protestant Evangelical Fellowship of Latin American Theologians began in 1970 in order to contextualize the gospel for Latin America. Alongside this movement has also been the fruit of Vatican II allowing the Bible and mass in the vernacular while also promoting the priesthood of all believers. The result of this contextualization has been an explosion of Catholic and Protestant Christianity in Latin America, in addition to the Pentecostal movement that has been able to address local needs as well.

In conclusion, the “infinite translatability of the Christian faith” affirms and calls for diverse expressions of Christianity. Walls sees this truth as a way for Christianity to thrive and survive. Sanneh says,

Christianity is not a garment made to specifications of a bygone golden age, nor is it an add-on whimsical patchwork rigged up without regard to the overall design. Rather, Christianity is a multicolored fabric where each new thread, chosen and refined at the Designer’s hand, adds lustre and strength to the whole.

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17 Tennent, Invitation, 70.
18 Costas, Outside, 12.
19 Ibid.
20 Sanneh, Whose, 56.
In this way, the infinite translatability of the Christian faith will lead us towards a world that emulates Revelation 7:9-12.
Bibliography


