Editorial

Thanks be to 하나님, Dios, याहे, God, 上帝, Awurade—and to Prof. Bediako

J. Nelson Jennings

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First and foremost, in this editorial I want to thank the triune God for graciously drawing close to stubborn, wayward, yet marvelously created communities of people like yours and mine. God has always done that: in the Garden, in the Old Covenant tabernacle and temple, in the Incarnation, in his New Covenant people. Yes, God reigns in heaven with the earth as his footstool, but he also looks to those who are "humble and contrite in spirit and tremble at his word" (Isaiah 66:1-2). In the contextualized language of Western philosophical categories, God is both transcendent and immanent. It is for his immanent presence, the personal relationships he cultivates with his people collectively and individually, that I wish here to express deep, heartfelt thanks.

A central feature of how God graciously draws close to people is how he relates to us in our own languages. In turn, we can relate to each other within (and across) our pockets of shared languages—thus collectively making up the mind-boggling linguistic tapestry of the great multitude of worshippers described in Revelation 7:9-10. Jokes about "the language of heaven" notwithstanding, there is no favored language that God requires people to know in order to belong to him. Salvation is by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, not by any linguistic proficiency. That multilingual trait of the Christian faith enables worship, fellowship, daily life, research, and journals like *Global Missiology* to function among the panoply of human languages.

Many readers will appreciatively know of the seminal writings of Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh on Christianity's translatability. Their teaching and published works have guided many mission thinkers in developing a framework for understanding the Christian faith as both one, unified religion and a multiplicity of diverse traditions due its various cultural expressions. The Christian gospel—indeed the very Word of God, the Bible—is translatable into all linguistic contexts. God graciously draws close to all people in our own mother tongues instead of culturally unifying us through requiring proficiency in a specially anointed religious language.

The title of this editorial attempts to exemplify both divine unity and relational diversity in how people linguistically identify him. The six divine labels/names in the title—in Korean, Spanish, Hindi, English, Chinese, and Twi—are used by Christians who speak those languages. The same triune God has graciously drawn close in relating to us in languages we already know. Walls points out how the Christian faith thus "comes home" in our linguistic contexts. Sanneh, in particular reference to Africans and Bible translations within the Modern Missions Movement, notes how communities received the Bible translated into their own languages. For Africans and for all human communities, hearing God speak in our respective languages provides assurance that this God and faith are "ours," not simply an exotic religion imported by foreign missionaries.

While Walls's and Sanneh's publications have been widely circulated, not as many readers worldwide will be as familiar with the writings of the Ghanaian Kwame Bediako. Having known all three of them personally as well as sat under each professor's lectures, I can attest that Bediako, Walls, and Sanneh were close acquaintances who held each other in high esteem. They rowed their missiological boats in a similar direction of Christianity's translatability. In Bediako's case, one of his most valuable emphases (the one for which I wish to express particular thanks here, as

indicated in the editorial title) concerns the transforming implications of the Christian faith being understood, believed, and lived in vernacular languages. God has not remained distant, exclusively discussed religio-philosophically in some esoteric religious tongue: rather, he has come close so as to transform normal, daily life, thought, and communication—including accepted religiosity—by his unavoidable presence in everyday, inherited human thought and speech.

Bediako's fluency in several African and European languages shaped his relationship with God through a kaleidoscope of linguistic nuances, accents, and insights. Having been brought from the darkness of atheism into the light of Jesus Christ, Bediako experienced and explored how (as he often described it) Jesus "shoulders his way" into various cultural and linguistic contexts. Communities of Jesus's followers, then, must always wrestle with the transforming effects of Jesus's presence by his Spirit and his Word as understood and expressed in each community's vernacular tongue.

Examples that Bediako cited illustrate well the point of Christianity's transforming power in vernacular languages. One example was how much of contemporary African Christianity has features that many etic analysts have labeled as "charismatic," "Pentecostal," and (thus) "shallow." Proclaiming that much of African Christianity, with its preoccupation with spiritual forces rather than growth in "sound biblical theology," is "a mile wide and an inch deep," such outside analysts have used their own descriptive categories rather than understanding from the inside what African Christians encounter in their own languages. In Bediako's southern Ghana, for example, believers functioning in Twi, Ga, Ewe, and other inherited languages must grapple with what the Bible teaches in their own languages. Africans' vernacular Bibles, i.e., God coming close and addressing Africans in their own mother tongues, necessarily address the various spiritual powers that are alive and active in African universes (that are more highly populated than Western scientific universes tend to be). Bediako would thus point out that avoiding spiritual forces would, for most African followers of Jesus Christ, be a failure in gospel application to their lives and contexts. When Jesus "shoulders his way" into cultural settings filled with ancestors and other potent spiritual beings (that others who are scientifically hardwired have supposedly explained away), he and his followers must deal with them in the potency that vernacular languages enable rather than through distant, sanitized, and irrelevant linguistic and conceptual frameworks.

Another striking example Bediako gave involved a Christian community dealing with their "ancestors" (labeled differently in vernacular terms, of course). On one hand, ignoring the ancestors would lead to living parallel lives of Christian piety and inherited patterns of ancestors' central roles in the community. On the other hand, boldly declaring through an imported language (e.g., English) and its accompanying conceptual framework, "Our ancestors are dead and gone," would not adequately touch the reality of the "ancestors" that wield real influence through inherited language and rituals. What one Christian community therefore decided to do was to observe—intentionally as Christians—a traditional ancestral ritual within which the community thanked the "ancestors," explained that Jesus was now among their community and was fully sufficient to meet all their needs for guidance and protection, and bid farewell to the "ancestors" with the assurance that as ones who had passed on before the living community they could henceforth rest in peace. External Christian observers might see such an example as "syncretistic" or "non-biblical." Prof. Bediako would point out, however, that within their vernacular setting—as guided by the Spirit and vernacular Word of God, and despite inevitably being misunderstood by etic analysts unfamiliar with that particular setting—observing that ancestral rite is what that Christian

community decided to do in order to put to rest what otherwise would have been an ongoing conflict within the community's devotion to Jesus and to their traditional "ancestors."

Prof. Bediako's insights regarding Christian faith and vernacular are extremely helpful both for theoretical analysis and for personally following Jesus. On a macro-theoretical level, realizing that God deals with human beings in their own languages buttresses a framework that simultaneously embraces the unshakeable unity and the radical diversity of the Creator-Redeemer's relationships with his followers. On a personal level, praying both in English to "God, our Father in heaven" and in Japanese to 「在天の父なる神様」expands my appreciation for the breadth and the depth of God's gracious and loving dealings with people throughout history and the entire world. Knowing from history that the label "God" has pre-Christian, Germanic etymological roots assures me of Jesus having "shouldered his way" into my own linguistic heritage. Also realizing from history that "Lord" was a more pertinent English translation in feudal times than in today's mostly religiously-confined and video-game usages urges an openness to more biblically faithful and relevant labels (e.g., "Boss"? "King"?) in contemporary English-vernacular settings.

This issue's articles wrestle with implications of how Jesus "shoulders his way" into various communities. Thanks be to "God," and in a secondary way to the late and distinguished Professor Kwame Bediako, for guidance in embracing and coming to grips with the Father, Son, and Spirit's presence among myriad communities.