

**‘Mapping Mission as Translation with Reference to
Michael Polanyi’s Heuristic Philosophy’**

Richard L. Haney

OCMS, PhD

ABSTRACT

My thesis proposes a theological conceptualisation for understanding gospel and culture relationships in the field of Christian mission.

I begin by investigating whether the missiological categories of contextualisation and inculturation are adequate for describing how the Christian gospel is offered from one culture to another. Can the categorical metaphor, ‘translation,’ construed conceptually rather than linguistically, add a more fruitful and comprehensive way of understanding how the Christian message is transmitted across cultures? I contend that ‘mission as translation’ incorporates numerous features of contextualisation and inculturation, yet avoids weaknesses of those two interpretations. The incipient theory of mission as translation has been articulated by mission historians, Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh, and theologian Kwame Bediako. I use reading of key texts of these scholars to build a conceptual approach to mission as translation. I contrast their translation principles with the work of two Roman Catholic missiologists, Stephen Bevans and Robert Schreiter, proponents of mission as contextualisation.

In developing the argument for my thesis, I explore insights gleaned from studying linguistics, hermeneutics and translation studies. I go on to identify three ‘linguistic translation’ features: similarity and difference, transformation, and multiplicity, and then apply Eugene Nida’s communication theory to missional translation. Drawing on heuristic insights from Michael Polanyi, I take Nida’s translation theory further and suggest that relevance theory, interpreted by Ernst-August Gutt, provides a way forward in translation studies. I argue that Polanyi’s notions of discovery and indwelling offer methodological categories to describe how a mission translator pays attention to cultural particulars and integrates them into perceived meaningful patterns. I use Polanyi’s notion of the tacit dimension as the primary hermeneutical tool in understanding mission as translation.

Finally, I test mission as translation by applying it to three case studies and conclude by discussing the three ‘linguistic translation’ features in light of Christian mission.