Piotr Popiołek
The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow

Naming God: Christian Philosophy of Language, Wierzbicka's Natural Semantic Metalanguage and Intercultural Dialogue

Abstract

Who is He, to Whom we address words God, *Theos, Deus*, etc.? How far goes possibility for adaptation of religious and philosophical language from other (non-Western) cultures? Do people, by using certain words and terms, denote being of God, or are they just conventional names? Those questions were raised quite early in theological debates in early stages of Christianity, and answers were given by such prominent Church Fathers as Gregory of Nyssa and Basil the Great. The problem resurfaced millennium later, when Western missionaries encountered nations and people whose religious and philosophical concepts were far different from their own. Should they accommodate local terms to fit the Christian concept of God, or should they introduce Western terminology? This translational and linguistic problem leads to the question: are there universal concepts which (despite of cultural affiliation, based on the common human experience) could communicate the Christian idea of God? Findings of Wierzbicka, and her own claim is: yes – there are semantic primes, through which we can translate our ideas (with minor imperfections). But this last question goes beyond the reach of mere secular linguistics, and enters the domain of theology. For it is theological claim that in our human nature we are capable of addressing Triune God.

In his speech on Areopagus the Apostle Paul said to the crowd, that he sees that they are religious people, and that they have even erected pedestal dedicated to "Unknown God" (*agnosto theo*). He continues to say: "To Whom then, you are ignorantly devout, This One am I announcing to you" (Acts 17:23). We can say, therefore, that Paul was not attached strictly to the terminology of naming God, when he was spreading the teaching of Jesus Christ. The pagan devotees may be potentially, unknowingly, giving honour to the one and real God. Charles M. Stang considers that Paul may be anticipating Dionysian notion "that the unknown and unknowable God can only be properly known through unknowing."[1] In the Apostle's statement we can find the dominant Christian idea that language, words, do not precisely correspond with metaphysical reality. They are, to some degree, relative. The concept of God is fundamental for explaining the Christian doctrine. Without it, it is obviously impossible to explain fundamentals of Christianity: the Trinity, Christ, Revelation, protology, eschatology etc. If there is no basic understanding of the concept of God everything falls apart. The predominant opinion was that in every culture there is some rudimentary even primitive concept of God, which can serve as *preparatio evangelica*. This seemed to work for the first ages of Christianity when missionaries, following Paul, were not arguing with basic linguistic concepts.

Anna Wierzbicka, world-renowned Polish linguist, in her work *Jak można mówić o Trójcy Świętej w słowach prostych i uniwersalnych* [*How can one talk about the Holy Trinity in simple and universal words?*] states that today the problem of language for theologians is one of the greatest

---

[1]   He continues: "Paul therefore emerges from this speech as the very first advocate of Dionysian unknowing, the authoritative apostolic witness to the goal of all saying and unsaying." Ch. M. Stang, *Apophasis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: "No longer I"*, Oxford 2012, p. 142.

challenges.[2] This is why she decided to translate traditional theological concepts so that they can be universally understood. For that purpose she uses Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM),[3] consisting of semantic primes, irreducible language concepts, common to all human experience. Wierzbicka recognizes the plurality of human languages and its correlation with human ways of thinking. This is why NSM situates itself on the side of linguistic relativism.[4]

This undertaking is, without a doubt, controversial and daring. In the history of Christianity we can see that many of the doctrinal conflicts, if not most of them, were in fact the aftermath of problems with language, translations, usage specific words. This is why we can trace the Christian debate on language to the first centuries. One of the first serious debates involved the Cappadocian Fathers and Eunomians. Eunomius adopted the rule of strict correspondence between the structure of being and structure of language. Basil the Great in tractatus *De Spiritu Sancto* wrote about their theory:

> They have an old sophism, invented by Aetius, the champion of this heresy, in one of whose Letters there is a passage to the effect that things naturally unlike are expressed in unlike terms, and, conversely, that things expressed in unlike terms are naturally unlike.[5]

---

2   Cf. A. Wierzbicka, *Jak można mówić o Trójcy Świętej w słowach prostych i uniwersalnych*, Lublin 2004, p. 9.

3   NSM was developed by Wierzbicka and Cliff Goddard, but the origin of this concept can be dated as far as 17th century. Both authors write: "As 17th-century philosophers like Arnauld, Descartes, Locke, Pascal, and Leibniz saw clearly, the only way to immunize the metalanguage of semantic description against circularity and/or infinite regress is to base it on a finite inventory of primitive terms." And only Leibniz, they explain, had required methodology – analysing extremely large number of definitions, to find out which of the words could be "elementary building blocks" from which all complex concepts can be built. The project was taken up in 1960s by Polish semanticist Andrzej Bogusławski. C. Goddard, A. Wierzbicka, *Lexical Semantics Across Domains, Languages and Cultures*, Oxford 2014, p. 11.

4   Cf. P. Blumczyński, *Turning the Tide: A Critique of Natural Semantic Metalanguage from a Translation Studies Perspective*, Translation Studies 6 (2013) no. 3, p. 263.

5   Basil the Great, *De Spiritu Sancto*, II, 4, in: Ph. Schaff, H. Wace (eds.), *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church [Second Series]*, vol. 8: *Basil: Letters and Selected Works*, trans. rev. B. Jackson, Peabody 1995, p. 4.

The problem of language is fundamental for theologians, and although Wierzbicka states that today it is specifically current, it was always inscribed in theological deliberations. There is no doubt that in contemporary globalized world the problem of language occurs with greater intensity than before, on an unprecedented scale.

Is it possible to speak about Christian God using universal categories – semantic primes? In her work she gives translation of Catholic Credo into the language of semantic primes. I consider this the point where theology specifically meets linguistics. Are the categories and formulas used by Wierzbicka sufficient, and are they even possible to communicate such complex concepts as God? I argue that this is not merely linguistic question but theological and metaphysical. If we look at the sources of Christian doctrinal debates we can see that the question of language, its sufficiency to describe theological concepts, was very often, at the very least, implicitly at the centre of those debates.

Language of Christianity

There are many languages in which there is no corresponding words for which are found in Christian terminology. Wierzbicka lists few of them: Trinity, sacrifice, mercy, neighbour, sin, grace.[6] This is of course just a small part of the rich theological language. We could extend this list almost indefinitely, adding concepts like: God, spirit, person, being, omnipotence, etc. Those concepts seem to be crucial for the understanding of Christian doctrine as they are present in the synodical formulas.

In Christianity there is no sacred language. There is no one chosen language for revelation as there is for example in Islam, where the Quran was revealed in Arabic, and every translation of the revelation is considered a mere paraphrase of the original sacred script.[7] In Christian Revelation there is only one Word – who is the living Christ. This

---

6   Cf. A. Wierzbicka, *Jak można mówić o Trójcy Świętej*, p. 8.

7   "The Quranic revelation in a sense 'shattered' the Arabic language and transformed it into the sacred language that it is for Muslims. It created a work whose language is inimitable and considered miraculous, a book that is believed to be untranslatable. The sacred presence and theophanic reality of the Quran as well as the levels of meaning contained in its verses cannot be rendered into another language, even Persian and other Islamic languages that were themselves deeply influenced by the

is why Christianity is so fertile when it comes to intercultural encounters. All humanity is called to communion with God, and no language or culture in itself is a barrier for this vocation, for they are product of man's nature. There shouldn't be any inherent cognitive impossibility to receive the Word of God. In the ancient Church there was a presupposition, mostly biblical, that there is no nation that could not worship God. John Paul II in *Slavorum Apostoli* wrote that this "vision of catholicity of the Church [is] like a symphony of the various liturgies in all the world's languages united in one single liturgy."[8]

Theological terminology is formed in specific cultural and historical context. Specific theological concepts have their own *Sitz im Leben*. Many of theological terms and concepts are taken from everyday life. Although with time this language becomes formalized and rigid. Some of the terms become sanctioned and are regarded authoritative over others. This process takes places during numerous theological debates and is verified throughout synodical teaching, and the authority of prominent theologians and saints. After centuries some elements of this language may seem inaccurate, obsolete or anachronistic. Many of the key concepts lose their original meaning becoming unintelligible in a new milieu. Taking for example the concept of "person," which is fundamental for understanding the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and Christology, its popular meaning nowadays is very different. Polish theologian Grzegorz Strzelczyk remarked that contemporary concept of person indicates individual being, which possess self-consciousness and freedom.[9] Therefore, this understanding of the person is considerably quite different than that which dominated when the dogmatic definitions were taking shape. A person wasn't understood only individualistically, which is what is stressed nowadays in the dominant liberal discourse. It was characterized by its relational and communal significance (The aspect which is specifically important when it comes to defining the trinitarian relations between Divine Hypostasis/Persons). Consequently there is a situation where concept of the person used in theology is mostly different than the concept of person which is used in popular discourse and colloquial language.

Quranic Arabic." S. Hossein Nasr et al. (eds.), *The Study Quran: New Translation and Commentary*, New York 2015, p. 55.

8   John Paul II, *Slavorum Apostoli*, Rome 1985, v, 17.

9   G. Strzelczyk, *Teraz Jezus: na tropach żywej chrystologii*, Warszawa 2007, p. 114.

CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

Let us consider one of the first linguistic conflicts in early Christianity. Debating with Eunomians, who could be called the "linguistic universalists" of the IV century, Gregory of Nyssa in his *Letter to Eustathius* draws attention to the insufficiency of names when naming reality, and especially God. He notes that the Eunomians "bring the appellation of Godhead to be an indication of nature."[10] "But the Divine nature itself, as it is, remains unexpressed by all the names that are conceived for it, as our doctrine declares."[11]

He shows that it is impossible for the names to indicate a different nature accordingly. It would mean that to each of God's attributes: beneficent, judge, good, just, there would be different definition which would mean each distinct nature. Gregory states that: "Indeed the substance is one thing which no definition has been found to express, and the significance of the names employed concerning it varies, as the names are given from some operation or accident."[12]

According to Gregory, the Godhead is a name "derived from operation," but the appellation of Godhead is not necessarily indications of nature. He uses scriptural argument by referring to Exodus 7:1 when it says that Moses is "as a god to Pharaoh." If we had to use Eunomian logic, that would mean that the Moses's very nature is divine. This is why the Godhead should be derived from action. Godhead is undefinable in its nature. In his letter to Ablabius he gives etymology of the name God – θεός, being the name of three divine Hypostasis. Accordingly the name God derives from "one of these that operation of surveying and inspection, or, as one might call it, beholding, whereby He surveys all things and overlooks them all, discerning our thoughts, and even entering by His power of contemplation into those things which are not visible."[13] Godhead, or θεότης, therefore "is so called from

---

10   Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Holy Trinity*, in: Ph. Schaff, H. Wace (eds.), *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church [Second Series]*, vol. 5: *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, etc.*, trans. W. Moore, H. Austin Wilson, Peabody 1995, p. 329.

11   Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Holy Trinity*, p. 329.

12   Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Holy Trinity*, p. 329.

13   Gregory of Nyssa, *On "Not Three Gods"*, in: Ph. Schaff, H. Wace (eds.), *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church [Second Series]*, vol. 5, p. 333.

θέα, or beholding, and that He who is our θεατής or beholder."[14] Tomasz Grodecki notes that "the term *God* is a purely human creation and has a basis in God only as long as He gives us the knowledge of his actions."[15] The names are purely conventional, and are not indicative of the true nature of things they are referring to. Those names sometimes can be abstract and made up – it is a matter of convention. This is the essence of Gregory's "philosophy of language." The names do not imply the ontological status of beings. Grodecki writes that:

> Man having the power (*dynamis*) of the reason, which he can use according to his will (*exousia*) performs the activity (*energeia*) of naming things. All the names are therefore conventional terms, words describing some particular subject. Their origin is, however, purely human, they are constructs of human reason and of human cognition of things, and express the essence of certain things, as long, as man can know it. They are, therefore, not their specific names, but names given to them by people. Moreover, they do not necessarily have anything to do with the nature of things. Words signify things not so much defining them, but rather being their symbols, signs directing the thought of man towards them.[16]

It does not mean, that this kind of linguistic relativism was and is widely accepted in the Church. From *Contra Celsum* we know, that Celsus was himself radical advocate of linguistic relativism. In book 1, Origen cites Celsus: "It makes no difference whether the God who is over all things be called by the name of Zeus, which is current among the Greeks, or by that, e.g., which is in use among the Indians or Egyptians."[17] (1, 24). Origen argues against Celsus, stating that the names, depending in which language they are pronounced, correspond to a certain reality – it is due to magical practices, rituals and liturgy. Names, according to him, "possess the great power": "He, therefore,

---

14 Gregory of Nyssa, *On "Not Three Gods"*.

15 T. Grodecki, *Wprowadzenie*, in: Grzegorz z Nyssy, *Drobne pisma trynitarne*, Kraków 2004, p. 20.

16 T. Grodecki, *Wprowadzenie*, p. 20–21.

17 Origen, *Against Celsus*, II. 4, trans. Rev. F. Crombie, D.D., in: Ph. Schaff, H. Wace (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, vol. 4: *Tertullian, part fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, parts first and second*, Peabody 1995, p. 406.

who has a nobler idea, however small, of these matters, will be careful not to apply differing names to different things."[18]

The Greek term *Theos* indicated a predicate, but not a specific individual.[19] There was no question of adapting this term for Christian discourse. Although Gregory stated that language is conventional and that terms do not indicate the nature of named things, sometimes the Church maintained more universalistic view on language. Especially when some terms from the theological vocabulary became solidified, becoming much more difficult to change and translate.

Christian Concept of God – Dialogue with the Far East

This problem became visible particularly from the 16th century, when Catholic missionaries came into contact with new cultures and nations, who had not encountered Christianity until then. That was a challenge for missionaries, who had to explain new concepts in totally different cultural, linguistic, and intellectual environment. The question arose of possibilities of the adaptation of local terms. In China Matteo Ricci tried to appropriate name *Tianzhu*, Lord of Heaven, and *Shangdi*, Lord of High. The term *Tian*, Heaven, was too semantically burdened to be used. The term *Shangdi* was dismissed as well, and missionaries had stuck to *Tianzhu*, which was an original name, not used in Chinese classical and religious literature. This term originated from Michele Ruggieri, and Ricci kept it in use. This term, which is still in use today among Chinese Catholics, was still a matter of discussion and Franciscans and Dominicans were opposed to using native terminologies. They maintained that Chinese names for God, as well as Chinese rites honouring the ancestors were against the Catholic teaching. It was proposed to use the Latin transliteration instead as a safe solution to the problem[20]. A similar strategy was presumably used by first Christian missionaries to China from Eastern Assyrian Church, commonly called the Nestorian Church. From scarce sources,

---

18   Origen, *Against Celsus*, II. 4, p. 406.
19   T. Grodecki, *Wprowadzenie*, p. 19f.
20   Cf. A. C. Hosne, *The Jesuit Missions to China and Peru, 1570–1610: Expectations and Appraisals of Expansionism*, New York 2013, p. 154.

like the Nestorian Stele from Chang'an we know that for the term for God was used phonetic transcription of Syriac *Elohim* in Chinese characters: *A-luo-he*. What is interesting, the first two characters, *a-luo*, were also used in Buddhist terminology: *a-luo-han*, which meant Arhat [someone who has attained the goal of religious life].[21]

In Japan in 16th century, as we have mentioned, there was a problem similar to that in China. First, there was a problem of terminological misconception when Francis Xavier first visited Japan and used name Dainichi as the equivalent of Christian God. It created the false conviction among the Japanese that Christianity was but another Buddhist sect due to that Dainichi Nyorai was Buddha Mahavairocana of the Shingon sect.[22] In 1555 Melchor Nunes Barreto, Jesuit provincial to India and Japan issued policy to use Latin and Portuguese languages for Christian names. But as Ikuo Higashibaba notes it did not totally exclude the use of native names, e.g. *Tentō* (The Heavenly Way).[23] *Tentō* was popular Confucian term used as an alternative for Deus. Moreover Latin-Portuguese-Japanese dictionary published in 1603 listed also names as *Tenson: Word used in churches for Deos that is, the Lord of Heaven* and *Tentei: T no micado. King. Also, Deos.*[24] The Christian concept of God introduced the original idea of the one creator unknown in local thought. This idea of creator of the world was unique and difficult to understand for the Japanese, as Higashibaba noted.[25] This originality of Christian idea of God was the reason why cautious missionaries preferred not to mingle the Christian concept with the native ones. The term *Deusu* became commonly used among Japanese Christians (called *kirishitan*), so that it was even used in anti-Christian literature of early-modern Japan. The name was also deliberately distorted and became *dai uso* – "the great lie."[26]

---

21 Cf. P. Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument in China*, London–New York–Toronto 1928, p. 188.

22 G. Elison, *Deus Destroyed: The Image of Christianity in Early Modern Japan*, Harvard University 1988, p. 33.

23 Cf. I. Higashibaba, *Christianity in Early Modern Japan: Kirishitan Belief and Practice*, Boston–Leiden–Köln 2001, p. 39.

24 Doi Tadao et al. (ed. and trans.), *Hōyaku Nippo jisho*, Tokyo 1980, p. 647 cited in I. Higashibaba, *Christianity in Early Modern Japan*, p. 87.

25 Cf. I. Higashibaba, *Christianity in Early Modern Japan*, p. 88.

26 G. Elison, *Deus Destroyed*, p. 36.

The dominant idea became that some terminology can't be accommodated. It showed that there are concepts which cannot be substituted with native names because their definitions are too far apart. We can see why missionaries decided to keep the phonetic notation of the Western terms. This strategy took over whole theological discourse, so that other crucial concepts were in this way "translated" to Japanese: *anima*, *spiritus*, *baptismo*, *inferno*, *paraiso*, etc. This may seem as a linguistic capitulation and a testament to the missionary inability to use the full potential of newly learned languages. In contrast to the genius of Ricci, who himself stated: "rather than attacking what they [the Chinese] say, we prefer to twist it around so it will fit the idea of God,"[27] their capabilities to accommodate foreign language for the need of spreading Christianity seem to be totally fallow.

God – Seeking for the Semantic Primes

For two millennia of Christianity there were many debates regarding the concept of God and proper way of addressing Him. Contrary to some theories, like that of Wilhelm Schmidt's "primitive monotheism" maintaining that the concept of one powerful being is common for the all tribal peoples, the idea of Christian God is sometimes so distant that the accommodation of existing native terms is considered troublesome for theologians.

Anna Wierzbicka tries to overcome this problem. Based on her longstanding semantic research she claims that there is a basic set of universal concepts present in all languages and cultures. All other concepts can be reduced to those fundamentals, semantic primes. Those are irreducible to any other primes, and can't be described by them. This is why they are considered to be universal for human language. This set of sixty words and terms was collected and listed by Wierzbicka and Goddard in the *Meaning and Universal Grammar Theory and Empirical Findings* in 2002. The list below presents English translation of those concepts.

1.   substantives: i, you, someone, people, something/thing, body
2.   determiners: this, the same, other

27   Quoted in: A. C. Hosne, *The Jesuit Missions to China and Peru*, p. 152.

3. quantifiers: ONE, TWO, MUCH/MANY, SOME, ALL
4. evaluators and descriptors: GOOD, BAD, BIG, SMALL
5. mental predicates: THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
6. speech: SAY, WORDS, TRUE
7. actions, events, movement: DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
8. existence, possession: THERE IS, HAVE
9. life and death: LIVE, DIE
10. logical concepts: NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF
11. time: WHEN/TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT
12. space: WHERE/PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE
13. intensifier and augmentor: VERY, MORE
14. taxonomy and partonomy: KIND OF, PART
15. similarity: LIKE

This undertaking may indeed seem utopian. Umberto Eco in his work *The Search for Perfect Language* describes the history of attempts to create a universal language that could be used by all people of different cultures.[28] These artificial, *a posteriori* languages, such as Esperanto or Volapük, called the International Auxiliary Languages, usually died in the process which Eco calls "Babelization," that is, breaking down of this language into local language subgroups as a result of attempts to update and improve it.[29] All these undertakings, however, relied on the creation of a universal language that could be used by all of humanity, ignoring the fact that they were created in a European context. What Wierzbicka does is not such a naive undertaking. The board of universal concepts she co-created as an auxiliary tool is meant to be a kind of Rosetta Stone, allowing to bring down certain names, words that exist in a given language of culture, let's say "A" to the basic words, and from them back to another language natural "B". Moreover, the selection of semantic primes was preceded by thorough linguistic research and language analysis. It is not *a posteriori* language. Eco doubts the existence of such a parameter language which would allow *tertium comparationis*.[30] Wierzbicka's overwhelming advantage is that she does not try to create a universal *a posteriori* language, but creates

---

28 U. Eco, *The Search for Perfect Language*, trans. J. Fentress, Oxford 1995.
29 Cf. U. Eco, *The Search for Perfect Language*, p. 319.
30 Cf. U. Eco, *The Search for Perfect Language*, p. 346.

a small dictionary of universal concepts, based on empirical research and the analysis of a large number of natural languages.

Let us now return to the main point of our interest: the Christian concept of God, which could be expressed in universal metalanguage. The definition is constructed based on the semantic primes mentioned previously:[31]

GOD

is someone not someone like people
this someone is someone good
if this someone wants something to happen, it is something good
if this someone wants something to do, it is something good
if this someone wants something to do, this someone can do it
all things there are, because this someone wants it to be
there are people, because this someone wants them to be
this someone wants people to be, because this someone wants to do good things to people
there is one this someone, there are no more this someone

The first problem with this definition constructed in NSM is question of its universality.[32] Wierzbicka knows that *every* translation is in some way a betrayal.[33] No translation is perfect, and every transition of certain concepts to another language is burdened with marginal mistakes. As the example of the problem of acculturation of Christianity in East Asia showed, some translations bear heavy consequences. It is impossible to ignore cultural context and using dead dictionary definitions to translate complicated ideas – like the idea of one, omnipotent God and Creator. The most obvious equivalents can may be in fact dangerously misleading. On the other hand, holding on to foreign,

---

31 Cf. A. Wierzbicka, *Jak można mówić o Trójcy Świętej*, p. 17. Similar attempt is seen in her work *What Did Jesus Mean? Explaining the Sermon on the Mount and The Parables in Simple and Universal Human Concepts*, New York 2001, p. 20–21, where she outlines the idea of God which is seen in the Jesus' Sermon on the mount.

32 Piotr Blumczyński briefly address this problem: "The difficulty of handling complex concepts in translation and the practical inadequacy of context-free dictionary equivalents in actual texts are so commonly recognised that they do not deserve any elaboration." P. Blumczyński, *Turning the Tide*, p. 264.

33 A. Wierzbicka, *Semantics, Culture, and Cognition: Universal Human Concepts in Culture-Specific Configurations*, New York–Oxford 1992, p. 7.

abstract terms may lead to misunderstandings, giving the impression of its enigmatic and secretive nature[34] – as it was with Latin and Portuguese words transliterated phonetically to Japanese. In long run it led to incomprehensibility of this terms by the local Christians, *Kirishitan*, who, after the expulsion of Christian missionaries, maintained the practice of praying in those languages, but were unaware of their meaning, as well as of the concept of *Deusu*, *Santa Maria*, etc.[35] This shows that attachment to certain words and definitions representing the concepts may bear the cost of their comprehension, when the context is lost (in the sense of geography or diachronically, when cultural shifts happen over time). NSM tries to omit many of those problems. By reducing definition of God to the universal primes Wierzbicka tries to minimize the backlash of translational "betrayal," reducing misunderstanding to a minimum. Language reflects human interpretation of the world, how they see the world, not reality itself – this position is in accord with predominant orthodox Christian view on the nature of language. Eunomian ultra-realism, stating that language reflects reality, indicating the substance of things, was found to be heretical. If we agree that language is conventional construct and it reflects "human conceptualization, human interpretation of the world" we must further ask, after Blumczyński, "Does conceptualization vary from one speaker to another, from one human conceptualizer to another?"[36] Answer is obviously – yes. Every speaker, even of the same language, using the same word may be referring to a different concept. This is why context of the spoken language is crucial. This is no more a matter of text but also of lived situations. Defining complex concepts through dictionary terminology is not sufficient. Christianity, as it was stated before, is not based on text, it is not "religion of the Book," rather a religion of the Living Word – a God-man Jesus called Christ. It is religion of personal relationship with this Person together with His Father through

---

34 Further reading on this topic: P. Nosco, *Secrecy and the Transmission of Tradition: Issues in the Study of the "Underground" Christians*, Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 20 (2003) no. 1, p. 3–29.

35 See: I. Higashibaba, *Christianity in Early Modern Japan*; S. Turnbull, *Kakure Kirishitan of Japan: A Study of Their Development, Beliefs and Rituals to the Present Day*, London–New York 1998; P. Nosco, *Secrecy and the Transmission of Tradition*; Ch. Whelan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth: The Sacred Book of Japan's Hidden Christians*, Honolulu 1996.

36 P. Blumczyński, *Turning the Tide*, p. 265.

the Holy Spirit. This is why a simple translation of the fundamental Christian concepts will be in vain, if they will not be experienced in the community of Church. Some ideas, e.g. as the one of the God – the one creator can be difficult to grasp even if explained precisely. What enables someone to share the same view of the world, of understanding these concepts is not mere being part of community speaking one language, but a way of living.

Conclusions

Getting back to the fundamental question: what does the word "God" mean? We know that different communities have different concepts of "God," "gods," which are not necessarily translatable. There is always to some extent "betrayal" of those concepts, a lack of clarity outside of a particular milieu of shared community. The concept of this "someone" is not limited to "who He is," but rather how does He affect your life, and what is your response. In this speculations there is very thin border between linguistics and theology, because language, from a theological perspective is not a purely secular domain. In this manner, theologically speaking, it should be assumed that all human languages are in some way preconditioned to be able to embrace the Christian concept of God. A concept which is not mere theoretical and philosophical construct, but which is immersed in a very specific history.

Literature

Basil the Great, *De Spiritu Sancto,* in: Ph. Schaff, H. Wace (eds.), *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church [Second Series],* vol. 8: *Basil: Letters and Selected Works*, trans. rev. B. Jackson, Peabody 1995, p. 1–50.

Blumczyński P., *Turning the Tide: A Critique of Natural Semantic Metalanguage from a Translation Studies Perspective*, Translation Studies 6 (2013) no. 3, p. 261–276.

Eco U., *The search for perfect language*, trans. J. Fentress, Oxford 1995.

Elison G., *Deus Destroyed: The Image of Christianity in Early Modern Japan*, Cambridge–London 1988.

Gregory of Nyssa, *On "Not Three Gods"*, in: Ph. Schaff, H. Wace (eds.), *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church [Second Series]*, vol. 5: *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, etc.*, trans. W. Moore, H. Austin Wilson, Peabody 1995, p. 331–336.

Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Holy Trinity*, in: Ph. Schaff, H. Wace (eds.), *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church [Second Series]*, vol. 5: *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, etc.*, trans. by W. Moore, H. Austin Wilson, Peabody 1995, p. 326–330.

Grodecki T., *Wprowadzenie*, in: Grzegorz z Nyssy, *Drobne pisma trynitarne*, Kraków 2004.

Higashibaba I., *Christianity in Early Modern Japan: Kirishitan Belief and Practice*, Boston–Leiden–Köln 2001.

Hosne A. C., *The Jesuit Missions to China and Peru, 1570–1610: Expectations and Appraisals of Expansionism*, New York 2013.

Hossein Nasr S. et al. (eds.), *The Study Quran: New Translation and Commentary*, New York 2015.

John Paul II, *Slavorum Apostoli*, Rome 1985.

Nosco P., *Secrecy and the Transmission of Tradition: Issues in the Study of the "Underground" Christians*, Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 20 (2003) no. 1, p. 3–29.

Origen, *Against Celsus*, II. 4, trans. rev. F. Crombie, D.D. in: Ph. Schaff, H. Wace (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, vol. 4: *Tertullian, part fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, parts first and second*, Peabody 1995, p. 395–669.

Saeki P. Y., *The Nestorian Monument in China*, London–New York–Toronto 1928.

Stang C. M., *Apophasis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: "No longer I"*, Oxford 2012.

Strzelczyk G., *Teraz Jezus: na tropach żywej chrystologii*, Warszawa 2007.

Turnbull S., *Kakure Kirishitan of Japan: A Study of Their Development, Beliefs and Rituals to the Present Day*, London–New York 1998.

Whelan C., *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth: The Sacred Book of Japan's Hidden Christians*, Honolulu 1996.

Wierzbicka A., Goddard C., *Lexical Semantics Across Domains, Languages and Cultures*, Oxford 2014.

Wierzbicka A., *Jak można mówić o Trójcy Świętej w słowach prostych i uniwersalnych*, Lublin 2004.

Wierzbicka A., *Semantics, Culture, and Cognition: Universal Human Concepts in Culture-Specific Configurations*, New York–Oxford 1992.

Wierzbicka A., *What Did Jesus Mean? Explaining the Sermon on the Mount and The Parables in Simple and Universal Human Concepts*, New York 2001.