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Threefold translation of the body of Christ: concepts of the Eucharist and the body translated in the early modern missionary context

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This article tests the usefulness of concepts from translation studies to understand the dynamics and mechanisms of cultural translation. It asks what is happening when people translate. What do they do when they translate? From a historical perspective, we apply translation theories as analytical kit on the cultural translation process created by the Jesuit missionaries teaching the Eucharist in contact zones during early modern times. In a first part, we present the conceptual tool box borrowed from translation studies (Lefevere, Venuti, Nida). In the analytical part, we apply this instrument to Jesuit translation: How did the Jesuits translate the concept of body in the sacrament of Eucharist for a general audience in the multilingual and transcultural missionary contexts? It is generally difficult to transfer knowledge by translation. The translation of the Eucharist is not only difficult regarding the aim of a true translation, its fidelity to the source, but it can become a question of orthodoxy or heresy. The translation of Eucharist concerns the theology of transubstantiation, real presence or a symbolic understanding of the body; a crucial topic in the early modern European context. The semantics of the body are closely related to this theological issue as are the different cultural practices and understanding of them, particularly in non-European cultural settings. In this Jesuit case study, the dynamics of the cultural translation process are unearthed: Which methods and technics did missionaries apply to translate theological concepts? How did they accommodate and negotiate the knowledge transfer with the local cultural grids? How did they create dynamic equivalence in order to be understood? To what degree was the translation adopted by the intended audience? With the developed tool kit we unravel a complex, multi-layered translating process that was influenced by the translator, the audience, the cultural and linguistic context as well as the power asymmetries inherent to the process.

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