Templeton Prize speech
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Paris, 27 November 2007

It's said that there are three things even polyglots do in their own mother tongue – count, curse and pray. Count – anyone who has tried to do mental arithmetic with four-digit numbers knows how difficult this can be without doing it in a foreign language. Curse – our unguarded outbursts show how deeply our emotions can be linked to certain terms we've learned to express them. Pray – religion challenges both the rational and the emotional sides of our being – sometimes in ways we cannot express even in our own language. No wonder it's such a complex subject.

The way that religious beliefs are expressed by those who hold them and described by those who report on them is a central one for our work at Reuters. We are an international news agency. We have 2,400 editorial staff around the world and report from over 200 countries. We publish news in 18 different languages. Our main language is English, the most widely spoken language in the world, but many reports are written first in English and then translated by the other language services.

This opens up an important question for religion reporting. Unless I am speaking with another native English speaker, I am always dealing with translations. Either I am translating something into English that someone told me in another language, or the people I speak to are translating from their languages into English or another language for me. The three articles submitted for this prize illustrate the problem well. The interview with cartoonist René Pétillon about his book "The Headscarf Affair" was in French. With the Vienna imam Sheikh Adnan Ibrahim, the conversation was mediated by a German-Arabic interpreter. In Istanbul, I only spoke to Turks who were fluent in English.

We often see in our own countries how misunderstandings about religious beliefs or terms can arise even when everyone speaks the same language. What happens when we cross linguistic frontiers? Do the terms mean the same thing? Are we correctly explaining the concept or belief behind a term in language A when we translate it into language B? And a further question would be – does the dominance of English on the Internet and satellite

television add to understanding or misunderstanding of concepts from other cultures?

Being in France, let me start with the classic example of the untranslatable word – *laïcité*. There is no way I can put this word into English precisely. *Laity* might seem to be an equivalent, but it only means *les laïcs.* The word *lay* is almost only used in a religious context in English. So we have to turn to alternatives such as *separation of church and state* or *secularism*. But they convey just a pale shadow of the strong spirit of *laïcité*. There is a constitutional separation of church and state in the United States, for example, and it is sometimes more clearly defined and enforced than in France – a fact some French I know refuse to believe. What is missing in the U.S. context is the militant *laïcité* born of historical conflicts that have deeply coloured the issue in France.

History has also given a different thrust to the idea of separating church and state in different countries. In France, *laïcité* implies a separation that protects the state from a powerful church. Americans approached the issue the other way around, seeing the problem as protecting multiple churches from a powerful state. The separation is less clear in Britain, where there is an established religion but little emphasis on it, or in Germany, which treats the established churches as important partners among others in society.

Speaking of Germany, I interviewed Bishop Wolfgang Huber in Berlin two years ago and he used a very expressive German term he had coined to describe current relations among Christian churches. He spoke of an *Ökumene der Profile* – an "ecumenism of profiles." It was one of those terms that immediately opens your eyes to a problem. But when I tried to translate it into English, it lost all its power. Like *laïcité,* it depends on a context. English speakers hearing the phrase "ecumenism of profiles" might imagine faces seen only from one side – and they not know what to make of this. Americans might think of the term "racial profiling" and wonder what prejudicial police practices have to do with Christian dialogue.

It turns out that Germans use the word *Profil* to mean an image or identity, especially in the context of politicians trying to distinguish themselves from their rivals. An "ecumenism of profiles" describes a trend for all churches involved in dialogue to stress their own identities more than before. I've just come back from Rome, where I saw Pope Benedict XVI presiding over a consistory wearing ornate vestments more than a century old rather than the

more modern ones Pope John Paul II used to wear. His doctrinal department recently reasserted the historic primacy of the Roman Catholic Church. At the same time, he says that ecumenism is one of his top priorities. I have tried describing this as "an ecumenism of high profiles" or "an ecumenism of strong personalities," but neither says it as well as Bishop Huber's *Ökumene der Profile.*

Even if journalists don't work in foreign languages, they find them impinging on their work in these days. Our vocabularies are gradually integrating Arabic terms for Islamic ideas or objects that have no precise equivalent in European languages. The most obvious one is *hijab*. A common translation is *veil*, but this often implies something that covers the whole face. We also say *headscarf*, but that could also apply to a silk Hermès fashion accessory. The ambiguity in these words has meant that European languages need to take *hijab* into their vocabularies to be more precise. *Niqab*, the veil that leaves only a woman's eyes uncovered, has also started to be used in European media, too, especially in Britain. This usually helps precision and understanding, but not always. In Belgium and the Netherlands, there is a "ban the burqa" movement which uses the word to refer to any cloth that covers the face.

And we haven't even gotten to the issue of whether we mean the same thing with our direct synonyms. An English-Arabic dictionary translates *God* with *Allah.* But does a Christian mean the same thing by the word *God* that a Muslim means by *Allah*? Put another way, would a Christian atheist and a Muslim atheist disbelieve in the same God, or in different ones? We can ask the same question about the third great monotheism, Judaism, as well. There are efforts now to launch a broad theological dialogue between Christian and Muslim experts, which could be an important step forward in understanding each other. If it gets started, Jews would probably be invited to join in. They will all need to know what they are talking about.

These are not simply word games. In an increasingly globalised world, Christians and Muslims and Jews have to understand each other better. This understanding has to pass through the filter of language – and very often, the media are the ones doing the passing. But we journalists are under constant pressure to write quickly and to reduce complex concepts to a few choice words. Sometimes, the pictures flashed across satellite television speak more forcefully than our words. This makes it all the more important for journalists covering religion not to reduce these sensitive meanings into

headline slogans. Conveying the real meaning of a religious concept across the language barrier can take time and effort. We journalists have to take that time and make that effort, so our readers feel, after reading our articles, that they are better informed rather than worse.

I would not do justice to the issue of multilingual understanding – or misunderstanding – if I did not now say a few words in my own language. By sponsoring this prize, the Templeton Foundation and the Conference of European Churches make an important contribution to fostering these efforts at understanding across the boundaries of faith, nationality and language. I'd like to thank them again for this and encourage them to continue this effort.

I would also like to say "thank you" in the third official language of the Conference of European Churches, because I use German in my work almost as often as French. No language is perfect, but each can contribute in its own way to a better mutual understanding among religions.

Ich moechte mich auch in der dritten Amtssprache der Konferenz der europäischen Kirchen bedanken, da ich in meiner Arbeit Deutsch fast ebenso oft wie Französisch benutze. Keine Sprache ist vollkommen, aber jeder kann auf seiner eigenen Art und Weise zum besseren Verständnis der Religionen beitragen.

Merci pour votre attention.