

2 Cor. 4:11-18; Luke 24:44-48
Feast Day of Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky

Translating Between Different Worlds

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My sermon for today is on postcolonialism, hybridity . . . and why *Star Wars is so much more awesome than Star Trek*. I'm sorry, but I thought EDS took diversity seriously. All we've heard from this pulpit for weeks is Star Trek this, Star Trek that. It's time for all of us closeted Jedis to come out with Star Wars pride!

For my dear friend Fr. Thomas, who is probably very confused by all this, around two weeks ago, there was an incredible flurry of emails on the EDS listservs about whether Star Wars is better than Star Trek. This was prompted by an email from Ed Rodman that said "Trekkies Rule." Something like 30 responses within a 24-hour period.

It was a special moment – as Joan Martin put it, a *kairos* moment. There was a huge amount of energy (the Force, perhaps?), and there were lots of new voices on the listserv. It was clear that some people in the EDS community, including our President and Dean, were quite fluent in the language of Star Wars and Star Trek. For others, however, there was definitely something "lost in translation."

Our academic dean was kind enough to request a digital "Rosetta Stone" for those who needed some help with translation. In other words, a lexicon for those members of the EDS community with cultural backgrounds that didn't include, as Angela put it, "various flying objects and . . . bridges, pods, aliens, and lots of fire power."

Translation. Today we celebrate the feast day of Bishop Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky, the nineteenth-century Episcopal bishop of Shanghai and translator extraordinaire. Schereschewsky was a genius with languages. Born in Russian Lithuania to Jewish parents, and orphaned at an early age, he studied Hebrew to become a rabbi, but later pursued graduate work in Germany. While in Germany, he was exposed to Christianity by Anglican missionaries from London. Are you keeping track of all the languages so far?

Schereschewsky immigrated to the United States at the tender age of 23 and eventually graduated from General Seminary in New York City and was ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church. At the age of 28, he traveled to China where he learned Chinese en route aboard the ship from New York City to Shanghai. Someone once asked Bishop

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Schereschewsky how many languages he knew. He responded that he could speak thirteen languages and read twenty!

But Bishop Schereschewsky was not only good at languages. He was also good at translating among cultures. In his first report back home as a missionary, he stated that, like St. Paul, missionaries to China must not only “bring the Christian message in the Chinese idiom” but also understand the Chinese “mind” and “way of thinking.” To that end, Schereschewsky founded St. John’s University in Shanghai, which over the next few decades became one of the most respected universities in China and all of Asia.

In fact, St. John’s University is where my late father went to college in the 1940s and learned the English he needed to immigrate to Hong Kong in 1950 and later to the United States in 1970, along with his wife Deanna and a one-year old baby boy named Patrick. So, in a way, I literally would not be here today at EDS – let alone the U.S. – were it not for the “cultural translation” work of Bishop Schereschewsky and the Episcopal Church.

The skill that Bishop Schereschewsky wrote about – to understand another culture’s “way of thinking” and world view – is a gift held by those of us who are first-generation immigrants. It is also a gift held by those of us who live on the margins or borders between two, three, or more cultures (like being Asian, queer, and Christian). We are constantly translating between different worlds.

So what exactly does the philosophy of Athens have to do with the gospel of Jerusalem, to paraphrase the second-century theologian Tertullian, who was most definitely *not* a Trekkie? Everything! What does EDS in Cambridge, Massachusetts, have to do with St. John’s University in Shanghai, China? Everything! Translating the language of one culture into another culture *matters*.

Bishop Schereschewsky’s life-long passion was translating the entire Bible and Prayer Book into Chinese. Even when he was struck with paralysis at the age of 52 – with his outer nature “wasting away,” as Paul so eloquently writes in today’s reading from the Second Letter to the Corinthians – Bishop Schereschewsky’s inner nature was amazingly alive. During the last twenty years of his life, he sat in the same chair and typed out some 2,000 pages of transliterated Chinese with just the middle finger of a single hand. (The photo on the cover of today’s service bulletin is of Bishop Schereschewsky sitting in his study with his Chinese secretary, Lien, on one side and his Japanese scribe, Bun, on the other.)

I’ve been wondering about this during the last two weeks: Wouldn’t it be amazing if somehow we could translate the recent burst of energy on the EDS listserv about Star Trek and Star Wars into *our own* evangelism and mission work? What would it mean, as today’s gospel puts it, to truly proclaim the Good News “to all the nations”? And not only in the languages of the United Nations, but in the languages of the Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z “nations,” the Queer Nation, the Twitter Nation – the *ethne* of our day?

How full would our churches and seminaries be if we could speak fluently about the Gospel according to Luke . . . Skywalker? To translate between the famous opening words of “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away”; “Space: the final frontier”; and “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”?

(Come to think of it, maybe Star Trek isn’t so bad after all. George Takei, the openly-gay Japanese American actor who played Lt. Sulu on the original TV series, is the closest thing that we queer Asians have as a celebrity role model!)

So if Wookies, Ewoks, and Jawas are not your thing, that’s OK. If Vulcans, Romulans, and Klingons are not your thing, that’s OK. But if we are truly called to proclaim the Good News “to all the nations,” then we must learn to translate fluently between Athens and Jerusalem; between Cambridge and Shanghai; and between the Millennium Falcon and the Starship Enterprise. The gospel demands nothing less!

+Amen.