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## The Murderous History of Bible Translations: by Harry Freedman

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1 DAY AGO

*An examination of the processes of preserving and communicating the central texts of the Christian tradition through the centuries.*

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One of the grander and more important foundational myths of modernity is the postulation that secular systems of social organization create less violence than religious systems. Over the past century, the consensus on this point has wavered as secular ideologies—nationalism,

communism, capitalism, Nazism and so on—have resulted in the slaughter of hundreds of millions of people. As society tenuously enters a new epoch, that of postmodernity, the superiority of secularism appears an open question for the first time in 400 years.

Harry Freedman's *The Murderous History of Bible Translations* is neither participating in the debate on this question nor standing fully outside it. Freedman and his book are adjacent to discussions over religion's supposed predilection for bloodshed. He does not discuss whether faith is inherently violent, rather his book is predicated upon the openness of that question.

*The Murderous History of Bible Translations* is most overtly an examination of the processes of preserving and communicating the central texts of the Christian tradition through the centuries. Judaism is sprinkled throughout the pages but is secondary, as is the process of deciding which texts are to be considered canonical and which are not. In shedding light on the debates about how best to pass on knowledge about Christianity, Freedman necessarily touches on an array of other topics: the role of language in identity and social function; the nature of authority in social systems; and yes, the relationship between religion and violence.

The book is fascinating, fast-paced and written with the sort of nonchalance only an undeniable expert in the field can muster. Freedman is an accomplished biblical scholar whose knowledge of the field is expansive and based upon decades of study. *The Murderous History of Bible Translations* hits the highlights—or, perhaps more appropriately, low-lights—of the Bible's tumultuous history as a multi-linguistic text. It is not composed of stodgy academic prose, nor is it targeted towards a specialist audience. This is a book intended for a much broader audience and Freedman keeps the energy level high with this type of general reader in mind.

In it, Freedman details a litany of brutalized linguistic pioneers: those men and women who believed their holy scriptures should be available in the various languages of their countrymen, often paying the price for such a belief with pain and death. What gets revealed in Freedman's description of centuries of burnings at the stake, beheadings and other unspeakable tortures is the power of language in the face of authority. The translators become the heroes of the book as they deploy their inkwells in a contest of power against the establishment—the Church and the State (often

indistinguishable)—which wishes to keep the Bible in Latin, ironically one of the many vernacular languages into which it was translated. This makes the book's central narrative an eternal story, one about plucky individuals speaking (perhaps literal) truth to power. Fortunately, 21st century readers, through the privilege of historical knowledge, are always aware of who wins: the lovable underdogs.

But what is really revealed throughout *The Murderous History of Bible Translations*' brief descriptions of the contests over the very language of the Bible is the bloody, non-linear civilizational shift from antiquity to modernity. In the West, languages, nations, identities and the very structures of the secular state are all, in one way or another, responses to violent episodes concerning the language of the printed Bible. English as we know it, as it is used in this very review, is based upon the English of the first biblical translations.

While Freedman is careful not to overtly take a side in the religious violence versus secular violence debate, his book does shed light on the topic. It suggests that the root of this violence is neither the irrational emotional attachment believers have to a religious faith nor the impersonal and hyper-rational ideologies of the secular state. Both Protestantism and Nazism, for example, are, in light of Freedman's book, epiphenomenal to the violence of human societies. Instead, the violence is rooted in questions of identity and authority, in the irresolvable reality that humans are at the same time both social and individual; we need societal structures, yet we yearn for freedom of action. All worldviews, be they religious or secular, are responses to this fundamental individual/social paradox and perhaps the violence they seem to promote is also founded in the paradox rather than the intellectual systems themselves.

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### Ryne Clos

Ryne Clos is a suburban chicken farmer who recently received his doctorate in Latin American History and International Peace Studies. In addition to viewing far too many films, he spends his free time mountain biking, trail running, and kayaking. You can find him on twitter @RyneClos.



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