



Ethical Issues in Christian Publishing

by Bruna Filli-Teresak

In Eastern Europe, in countries with many small Protestant churches, and in countries that are destinations for foreign mission organizations, Christian publishers face several ethical issues. The first one that comes to a Croatian Christian publisher's mind is the problem of intellectual property violations. The others have to do with payments—both to and from Christian publishers. The situation is most likely similar elsewhere.

Intellectual property rights

Good Christians are expected to give up their intellectual property rights. Those who disagree are considered worldly and greedy. It goes without saying that a spiritual person might well forget to think about such trivia. And if the proprietor should remind them to do so, he or she is bound to face the fervent indignation of righteous Christians who are "too saintly" to think about money, and who will instantly declare any such concerns unfair, unchristian and unrealistic. "Don't we strive in all our efforts to glorify the Lord?" they ask. "If so, there is no place for money talk."

Copyright violation is generally not considered a crime. I have seen a translation printed without the translator's consent (and even without notifying the translator), a stolen translation published as another person's work, and a carried-through threat that the husband of the translator, who worked for the same organization, would be fired if the translator did not donate her work. I have been a witness to situations in Croatia when foreign mission organizations were

not willing to give contracts to translators, and if they did sign contracts, they repeatedly breached them. A suggestion that the missions should become informed about the country's laws on publishing is met with the good old phrase: "Our organization does things another way," without second thoughts about whether their way is illegal. An observation their behavior is unethical would instantly provoke wrath, scorn, indignation—and explicit remarks about how foreign missionaries have made a great sacrifice by coming to live in this (implicitly: uncivilized) country. The least we beneficiaries of such ministry can do is to be generous with our work and not insist on formalities.

Perhaps intellectual property is too abstract a term for some Christians to understand. What else can be said about a church choir recording a CD containing a well-known love song by a famous American pop singer (with the words, of course, changed into a text glorifying the Lord)... without even thinking of asking for permission?

Ethics in product development

In countries rife with corruption, those who bribe the key people get all the big business opportunities. In Christian circles, the opposite is true. Jobs are most often offered to those willing to do them for free. Since such people are considered more holy, foreign missionary organizations tend to give jobs (especially translations) to well meaning churchgoers who produce astoundingly bad texts.

Professionals would, in most cases, also expect to get paid.

Moreover, editing is deemed unnecessary by both foreign missions and small, local church publishing organizations. The person designated as the editor is usually a well-known figure from the Protestant milieu, who has not even properly read the text, but whose name is a guarantee that the book will be noticed in the Protestant community, though it might not be presentable to anyone else. (No one even stops to consider whether it is ethical to be given credit for working on a book you did not edit.)

Poor translations and lack of editing are too often matched by poor layout and poorer covers, done by people who happen to have a computer at home and bought some software (usually from pirate sources, since original software is too expensive for people who do not use it professionally). All the people who work on such projects are good churchgoers. Their zeal is highly commendable. Their desire to contribute without asking for anything in return is sincere. However, the product of such work is almost always of very poor quality.

Is expertise as important as other essential Christian virtues, such as generosity? With such a context, the dubious ethics of many Christian publishing endeavors seem to be a negligible problem. Yet, is it really ethical to accept a job we cannot decently perform? Is it ethical to give a job to incompetent individuals, to avoid having to pay – even when money has been raised for that very purpose? (Too many times, the money disappears through unknown channels before the work on the project even begins, so volunteering is not an option, but a necessity.) Is it ethical to present God with the poorest we can do in His service? How ethical is it to present Christian texts to the public in ways that do damage to the dignity of Christian publishing in general?

However, the situation has improved over time. Good quality books, both from the point of view of text and

covers, used to be exceptions, but now they are produced more and more. Local churches seem to be learning. Maybe the reason is that they learn from experience. The same cannot be said of foreign mission organizations, where employees tend to rotate and official policies stay the same for decades. There, the same mistakes are repeated again and again.

Ethics with customers and suppliers

Sometimes, Christian customers do not pay their bills because they “forget” to do so. Others do not even think that it is appropriate for spiritual Christians to take heed of such prosaic things. They consider their lack of consistency in paying to be a sign of their strong spirituality, which keeps them aloft from such worldly things as tending to one’s business properly.

In Croatia we live in a country where our publishing boat gets tossed to and fro by the unpredictable winds of the country’s economy. Faced with some issues, the only thing we can do is turn to God for solutions, because human wisdom is rarely ever enough.

Two years ago we found ourselves, almost overnight, in un-surmountable difficulties. The government changed and bookstores stopped paying. Our sales were better than we had planned—but the money did not come in. Everything was put on hold. Even now, this is the economic situation faced by secular publishers and by STEPress today. The money is somewhere out there, trickling in from time to time, but not in amounts big enough to pay the bills. What do you say then to the people to whom you should be paying honorariums?

The money is not coming, and there is no way of knowing when, or if, it will start coming in. The first solution is, of course, to ask them to remember the good will that you have demonstrated for years with your prompt payments. This we did, successfully, so that many are most patient in waiting for payment, and some are even willing to wait until the crisis is over.

The question remains. What is more (un)ethical: To stop producing books that are a tremendous blessing to your readers, where you receive most encouraging feedback, and give up on doing the Lord's work – or to persevere and actually create more debt (because of new production costs)? If you give up now, then people are never going to get their fees paid. A publisher should not owe money to those who have worked on past projects. But if you strive to make the publishing house stronger—which can be done only by producing new titles—you

are perpetuating the situation. Producing more books means new costs and new debt. Whatever you do, your conduct is bound to be liable to ethical criticism.

What do you do when you feel that He is encouraging you to go on, and the money is still not coming? Seeking the Lord's face is always the answer, but sometimes I feel such ethical issues are more that I can bear.

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