



Building the Tower of Babel, ca 1200, Duomo di Monreale, Sicily

TOWER OF BABBLE: GIVING VOICE TO INTOLERANCE IN AN AGE OF PLURALISM

A WORDS & WAYS COMMENTARY BY JOHN BENNISON

INTRODUCTION

A self-professed neo-Nazi skinhead in a small Wisconsin town goes on a murderous rampage; attacking members of a religious sect that would once have appeared utterly out of place in middle-America. Regardless of whatever motivation may eventually be determined by officials, what is obvious is that the perpetrator found a way to express both his fervent beliefs -- as well as his intolerance of any opposing points of view -- in a violent way any sane person would find abhorrent.

Meanwhile, a successful Christian businessman who owns a chain of fast food restaurants espouses certain personal religious beliefs about so-called "traditional marriage," prompting critics and supporters by the thousands to clog blog sites to praise or vilify him. Is it free speech, or hate speech? Is it about freedom of religion, or the intolerance of a religious bigot? The restaurateur soon plans to open a new location in the city in which I live, and the local citizenry are equally divided.

And in San Francisco, the Roman Catholic archdiocese had to back-peddle recently when it allegedly instituted a new policy in a local parish in the Castro that has long served the gay community; but had now banned drag queens from hosting a fundraising event, as they had done previously. They've since clarified the new policy has to do with "appropriate behavior" for any outside groups using church facilities.

So who's in and who's out, when it comes to "church?" What's the dress code? Is the religious institution deciding who can wear a dress to church and who can't? What about Jesus in a tunic? If Jesus had a Facebook page and we were friends, what would you write on his wall? Limiting our "tweets" on Twitter to 140 characters hardly hampers everyone from chiming in. The babble is incessant, with strident voices exposing a multiplicity of views.

"We live in a *pluri*-verse, not a uni-verse," says Raimon Panikkar (*Invisible Harmony: Essays on Contemplation & Responsibility*, p.56). Ours is a pluralistic age in which we have many different and opposing -- even sometimes mutually incompatible -- worldviews that threaten planetary human coexistence. In the midst of such chaos and confusion, how can we tolerate each other's differences? Or, some might ask, should we even try?

AN OLD TALE, A FRESH LOOK

From childhood days in Sunday school, many of us learned the story from the Jewish scriptures about the Tower of Babel. The lesson typically taught was about some prideful humans that got too uppity and big for their own britches, trying to build a city that reached the heavens; and the gods conspiring to put us back in our proper place.

Too often overlooked is the back story, and the original plan we presumably had for that glorious city. The way it all started out, the Tower of Babel was meant to be the crowning achievement of anything but babble.

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ... Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth. [Gen 11:1-4]

The writer of the book of Genesis spun this mythic tale to provide an explanation of the obvious. Namely, that where once humankind may have all spoken the same language with one unifying plan to build a place all could dwell and abide one another, it has long since ever been the case. The story would have us believe that, to have created such a heavenly city, it would have rivaled godly status.

So Genesis offers one explanation; namely, the gods decided to confuse and scatter us to the four winds. For all our babbling we are unable, or unwilling, to hear or understand one another.

The Lord said, ... Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. [Gen. 11:8-9]

Regardless of how we got here, what's clear is if we ever wanted to create something that resembled heaven, we've missed the mark by a mile. Instead, in the midst of all our chaos and confusion, the kind of intolerance that comes with strife and division has been an undeniable result ever since. Our tower of babble consists of pitched camps of shrill voices that seem to speak without listening.

"If you have ears to hear," Jesus, the Galilean sage implores, "then listen." And so I hold my tongue and bend an ear. After all, I consider myself a very tolerant person! In other words, I like to think the only people with whom I have very little patience are intolerant, ill-informed and ignorant bigots!

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To take my earlier examples:

- My ability to converse reasonably with a neo-Nazi skinhead who turns his ranting hate speech into acts of deplorable violence has as much chance as stopping the bullets in his semi-automatic assault rifle. Don't get me started on how I feel about gun control.
- Devout Christians who say they believe in the "traditional definition of marriage" -- but who demonstrate so little actual knowledge of our common scriptures -- would actually have us practicing polygamy, denying women any rights, and treating their offspring no better than their slaves. Don't get me started on the fanatical scriptural literalists and their menace to any society.
- Churches that open their doors to outside groups, but roll up the welcome mat when the outsider fails to conform to "appropriate behavior," will stumble over their words of welcome; so that the subsequent message of invitation comes out as unintelligible babbling, at best. When it comes to the religious hierarchy abandoning Jesus' gospel of indiscriminate inclusion for the sake of appearance or sheer expediency, don't get me started!

But if this is where I draw the line -- or at least *my* lines -- does that make me equally intolerant; or merely deeply discerning and highly principled? When does one say let's just "live, and let live"? And when -- and more importantly *how* -- does one say "No!" to what one decides is an intolerable position or situation?

To begin to wrestle with that question, another Bible story comes to mind. It's a story about babbling for some, but welcome news to others. It's the Pentecost story in Acts 2.

WHAT'S BABBLING TO YOU IS MUSIC TO MY EARS

Here is another mythic tale, this time one of reversal and restoration; meant to express a shared message of good news that might be heard and understood, instead of what would otherwise have been perceived as merely babbling. The tongues of the frightened and fearful apostles are loosed and they suddenly become extraordinary multi-linguists!

The important point of the story lies in what is said; and not so much how it so effectually gets delivered with those "tongues of fire" alighting on their heads. But people get so wrapped up in the pyrotechnics of the story that 2,000 years later the recurring reenactments have somehow devolved into the ecstatic experience of babbling all over again for some (speaking in tongues); while for others, it's the claim of apostolic authority for those charged with safeguarding the hierarchical institution that would come to pass.

But in the Pentecost story's account, instead of everyone hearing the same message in one language, *one message is shared and heard in many tongues*. The key question then is, what is the message? For the message is a universal one, no matter what the translation.

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Luke, the one who relates this story, would have us understand the message is about Jesus, as the messiah of God.

But Jesus would have us understand it's about the only thing he not only *spoke* about, but *demonstrated*, over and over in all his words and ways; about the perennial and eternal vision of God's reign of *equitable justice, peace by non-violent means, and love as the ultimate expression of forgiveness and reconciliation*.

For Jesus, anything that stood as a refutation of those core beliefs is what he himself found intolerable. Put another way, it was his intolerance of just those things the religious and political institutions instead found so tolerable that made him so intolerable in their eyes, and worthy of their riddance.

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What were those things?

For one thing, the Jesus character portrayed in the gospels is far more tolerant of others than his counter-parts with whom he is constantly at odds. He freely associates with the riffraff whom those who represented religious conventions of his day found to be so intolerable:

For example, the Jesus of Luke's gospel overtly suggests a half-breed (Samaritan) is a better neighbor to a half-dead robbery victim lying by the side of the road than the religious authorities who preached all about love of God and neighbor; but could not run the risk of ritual defilement. To violate their purity codes was an intolerable notion (Lk.10:25-37).

Again, in another tale, the Jesus portrayed in Mark (7:25-30) and Matthew (15:21-28) not only showed tolerance for a foreign pagan (the Syro-Phoenician *woman*, for God's sake) who came seeking restoration to health; he's portrayed as finding an openness within himself to hear her universal cry for all of humanity's restoration. And, in doing so, was persuaded the sectarian message to the "house of Israel" was indeed a message for all peoples.

Before we look further at that universal message expressed time and again in his words, we can consider what constitutes not only an attitude of tolerance; but an affinity, and even affection, for those who might give it a try, as well.

TOLERATING TOLERANCE, AND MORE ...

Tolerance is more than resigned acceptance in the form of cold indifference. It is an openness, a willingness to acknowledge the very real and simple fact we do not see things the same way because you and I, in fact, see the same things differently! To *lovingly* acknowledge that is the task.

Raimon Panikkar was a Roman Catholic priest and scholar of comparative religions. Born of a Spanish Catholic mother and Hindu father, the voluminous body of his life's work centered on both the multiplicity of expressions and unifying principles of all religious traditions; sometimes expressed in simple and understandable terms:

“One of the metaphors I use is we are all seeing the world through a window. The cleaner the window, the less I see through the window. I see through the window. And I need my fellow to say, “Look, here, you're looking through a window.” But then I have to tell him, “Sorry, but you are also looking through a window.” ... We see the same landscape, but perhaps we see it a different way. So we need each other.

But here's another thing. I cannot say that I do not see what I see through my window. I don't see through the window of my neighbor. But if I love my neighbor, then I have to hear what my neighbor said. ... I discover my neighbor does not see the world as I see. But I also discover that I don't see the whole world. Because unless he's a fool and I'm a fanatic, I hear the other telling me something about the world of reality something that they see through the window that I don't. ...

You say what you hear, you say what you believe, you say what you experience. And at the same time you hear the other telling other narratives, other beliefs, other experiences. And then we dialogue.”

If we were to attempt to resume construction of a glorious city on that ancient plain of Shinar, it seems clear the unifying tower that would strive to reach the heavens would need to have many windows. Otherwise, we will be doomed to perpetuate our partisan forms of tribalism with all our endless, warring fiefdoms.

But how to begin? Here's one simple suggestion which isn't that easy. Writer Robin Meyer's calls it the “B-O-D” factor.

Meyer's is an unabashed liberal pastor with a radical (even subversive, he would say, in the way Jesus was subversive) view of church and politics. But B-O-D is the acronym that Meyer's spouse whispers in his ear each time he would rail against those with whom he might vehemently disagree and can hardly stand.

B-O-D stands for *benefit-of-the-doubt*. It is a reminder none of us has 20/20 vision. It is also a pre-condition of trust in a process of maintaining active and intimate relationships with one another, over against rigid belief systems of orthodoxy that can snuff the very breath of life out of the church as God's living Word.

Meyer's applies it to the appropriate role of any faith community; but it need not be so limited. It can just as well represent a creative, subversive alternative to what is so prevalent in the larger diverse communities in which we all try to coexist; and in the way we babble without hearing, or argue with little tolerance for the other's point of view:

“One of our highest and most sacred obligations in the Underground Church is to look for the good that's not there yet, until we see it. We are not just a gathering of like-minded folk who share a similar theological or political orientation. ... The church is a place where we make one another into what we expect from one another. When radically embodied trust replaces intellectual assent to theological propositions, we ... create people who possess and practice radical trust.”

Robin Meyers, *The Underground Church: Reclaiming the Subversive Way of Jesus*, p127

One of the key components of what is often referred to as the emergent movement in progressive Christianity is the distinction of belief and faith; moving beyond the rigidity of the former that has often manifested itself in its intolerance of other strongly held belief systems. Here, first think Christian crusades, Spanish Inquisition, 21st century fundamentalism sometimes known as Christian fundamentalists, and other times radicalized terrorists.

Next, consider when faith (faith as synonymous with trust) is taken to be *trust-in-action*, instead of static and dogmatic principles, it lends itself to a

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The progressive Christian movement implies *movement*; and an openness to reality that a living, dynamic divine reveals itself in *new ways*, in *living words*. As a stance of faith, it would therefore seem we should not only be tolerant of -- but receptive to -- such revelatory possibilities. God is both the journey, and the journey's end.

But, one wonders, are there never signposts along the way that can assure us we are on the right path?

PRINCIPLED INTOLERANCE

"The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in times of great moral crisis, maintained their neutrality."
Dante

If you stand for nothing, the old saying goes, you'll fall for anything, right? So for each of us it seems, there ought to be deeply held principles, convictions and beliefs that are non-negotiable; that to dispute, contradict, violate or refute them would be such an untenable form of acceptance as to make those opposite principles untenable, unacceptable, intolerable. So, when does a person of faith practice such principled intolerance?

Much of what is considered by biblical scholars to be the most authentic words of Jesus attributed to him in the canonical gospels are his teachings on anger (Mt.521:-26), on retaliation (Mt. 5:38-42), and love of your enemy (5:43-48).

If Jesus originally delivered the three lessons separately, his listeners might have thought he was preaching the same sermon three different ways.

But more so, they are lessons in extreme tolerance on the one hand, and teachings about a principled

form of intolerance for just the opposite on the other.

Each begins with the reversal of what his listeners once found tolerable and intolerable. "You've always been taught (one thing)," he says, "but I say to you ...". Then he either reverses our prior assumptions, or exceeds all seemingly tolerable limits.

Reducing a full commentary of each of the three referenced passages above to a couple one-liners:

- Reconcile with those you consider ignorant morons as a first priority. Nothing good can come of anything before that.
- Turn the other cheek. In the ancient world, to invite a backhanded slap would throw the presumed power of your opponent off balance. It was the means of non-violent resistance, and reasserts that God's ways, not chaos and division, will ultimately prevail.
- Don't just tolerate those you find intolerable. Love them! Love them as you would those you already find more than tolerable, even loveable.

"To sum up," Jesus then says, "you are to be unstinting in your generosity in the way your heavenly Father's generosity is unstinting." (Mt.5:48 translation by Funk & Hoover)

When he conjoins such principled intolerance with such a generosity of spirit, Jesus turns the limits of conventional tolerance on its head. I am simultaneously expelled from that place of comfortable intolerance towards those I find so intolerable; and shown how we might confront and confound the babbling intolerance of our Age.

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REBUILDING THE TOWER ON THE PLAINS OF BABBLE

*Give us, O God, the strength to build
the city that hath stood
too long a dream, whose laws are love,
whose crown is servanthood,
and where the sun that shineth is
God's grace for human good.*

Hymn text, Russell Walter Bowie, 1969

I am reminded of the uproar not that long ago in New York City, over the placement of an Islamic community center in the shadow of what was first called the Freedom Tower, and now will be simply known as the World Trade Center. The interfaith chapel within the center is intended to unify and promote those perennial truths of peace and justice, mercy and compassion, love, forgiveness and reconciliation.

But the center, which stands in close proximity to a gleaming new monolith for global commerce, was not a tolerable idea for some. For them it was a raw and painful reminder of our intolerance of one another, and the violence such strife and division can inflict.

In the pluralistic age in which we live, how then might we speak in our many tongues about one shared and unifying plan to build a city that has been too long a dream; drowned out instead by the bellicose babble of those who can only hear the incessant sound of their own voices, and limited vision of our own window on the world?

I write these lines with two contemporary, iconic figures in mind. The first is the former astronaut and first human to set foot on the moon, Neil Armstrong, who died recently. His is the story of a people who had come together with a common plan and purpose. All who were around at the time can recite from memory the famous lines in 1969, as he hopped onto the moon's surface, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

But Armstrong always maintained he'd been misquoted, and that the slightly garbled radio transmission back to earth had left one small word inaudible on the recording tape.

So in 2006, a computer programmer ran a software analysis to measure a 35 milliseconds sound wave that was much too quick to be heard by the human ear, and concurred. In fact, Armstrong's first words from the moon was, "That's one small step for 'a' man."

The leap in human achievement to reach the heavens was meant to be tempered with a little humility on the part of one who had the most extraordinary window on the world; but knew enough to say it was not the only one.

It seems to me if the gods were to look down on what is now our Plain of Babble they should not fear, but rather laud us; should we desire to attempt yet another "leap for humankind," and build that heavenly city.

If the gods were to look down on what is now our Plain of Babble they should not fear, but rather laud us; should we desire to attempt yet another "leap for humankind," and build that heavenly city.

And so I'm also thinking of another iconic figure of our age, now in the dimming twilight of his days; but who once took another leap for mankind right here on earth. He is one of the great figures of our age, and already stands among the saints of non-violent resistance to what is so intolerable about us.

He has done so with a spirit of joy, buoyed with a kind of enduring hope in the transformative power of reconciliation and love for his adversaries that never in all his many years of incarceration gave bitterness a place to dwell. Instead, he would one day lead his entire nation from a doomed road of intolerance to a place of gentled tolerance.

When Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently visited Nelson Mandela in Johannesburg, on the occasion of his 94th birthday, she exclaimed, "That's a beautiful smile," as she greeted the old and ailing man.

"It's his trademark," Mandela's wife told Clinton.

POSTSCRIPT & SEQUEL

It's what was behind the smile that Clinton reflected on in a speech given shortly thereafter to students at the University of the Western Cape. The talk had essentially urged the young South African audience to remember how they had rebuilt their society when apartheid could no longer be tolerated; and to not lose sight of that example for both their own country and the world community.

But then in what was taken to be some unscripted remarks, Clinton reflected in very personal terms about the lesson she had just tried to convey to her audience.

"I've been in and around politics a long time," she said. "It's easy to lose sight of the common humanity of those who oppose you. You get to feeling that your way is the right way, and that your agenda is the only one worth pursuing."

"It becomes all too easy," she then said with a smile, "to dehumanize anyone who disagrees with you."

This commentary has been an attempt to once again hear -- in the midst of all our babble -- how we might practice greater tolerance in a pluralistic world, while still holding fast to those perennial truths espoused by one such as Jesus; with a kind of principled intolerance towards all feudal forms of religious, political and social violence.

It is a call to return in this pluralistic age of many voices to a shared message; and resume building a place we can not only coexist, but lovingly abide one another.

With this in mind, the next commentary from Words & Ways will be entitled, "A Tale of Two Cities: Jerusalem, Now and When?" It will continue to explore these ideas in concrete, contemporary ways, beginning with the next Pathways Faith Community gathering on Sept. 30, 2012.

The program will include a presentation by Dr. Michael Cooper, an American Jewish pediatric cardiologist who participates in regular missions to the divided city of Jerusalem; caring for Palestinian children who lack adequate medical aid. His presentation is entitled, "Breaching the Wall and Healing Hearts: A Pediatric Cardiologist's View of Israel and Palestine"

For more information go to:

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