

Is the world building a new tower of Babel?



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

The other day Carol and I had a brief conversation about languages, agreeing it would be good if world leaders could speak more than one language. Some do, of course. Imagine what a difference it would make if presidents, prime ministers, secretaries of state, diplomats and other national representatives were able to converse in the languages of other lands (without translators).

It seems reasonable to assume this might foster an increase in good, peaceful relations between countries, deeper knowledge of other cultures and traditions, and fundamentally improve communication to create a more cooperative climate around the globe.

Of course, this might have a direct impact on religious relations as well. What if more Christian leaders knew Hebrew and Arabic and more Jewish and Muslim leaders knew each others'

languages? What if Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Taoists could speak each others' languages? Wouldn't there be greater understanding and more respect?

According to Wikipedia (List of Polyglots), Thomas Jefferson "spoke English, French, Italian and Latin, and could read Spanish and Greek. He may also have had some knowledge of German." We read that Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603), "is thought to have known English, Welsh, French, Spanish, Italian, Latin, Greek and some German." Former Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, spoke Czech, Polish, Serbo-Croatian, Russian, English, German, and French."

This fascinates me in part because of the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis (chapter 11). Reading it again raises several towering questions.

We're told that, once upon a time, there was one language uniting the tribes of the earth. Their common communication led to collaborative action. They chose to build a tower "to the heavens" (the sky). They believed this project would show they were united,

with "a name," so they would not be scattered all over the known world.

There was just one problem: the Lord didn't want any of that. "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them." Apparently God feels threatened, fearful of what humans will do, what they will become, if they reach great heights — literally and communally.

The story concludes with the people dispersed — by God — over the earth, and no skyscraper left to show for their efforts. So ends the ancient attempt at E Pluribus Unum. The One Lord destroyed the union, and that place became known as Babel, which means "to confuse" in Hebrew.

What to make of this confusing story? Biblical scholars have tortured an explanation for centuries. Yet, maybe the meaning is as clear as the text.

Consider the similar tale in the Garden of Eden, where the Lord is nervous his new creatures will eat from the Tree of Knowledge: "For God knows that

when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God" (Genesis 3). One tree leads to God's mind, a tower leads to God's home. This is unacceptable.

What can we conclude from this? The Creator made mini creators who can learn, grow and build, who can think, reason and cooperate — and become gods. But their built-in potential poses a serious challenge to the Potentate. Like the story of Icarus, if clever people fly too high, get too close to the realm of the gods, they will fail and fall. I can't help but think of those who created Artificial Intelligence, fearful it will become too advanced, too intelligent, too human, or better. A.I., perhaps the greatest "tower" created by human minds, might replace its creator.

In the 1880s, a Polish Jew named Ludwik Zamenhof created a new language he named Esperanto, the "hopeful language." The hopeful religion he imagined emerging from this new universal tongue would be "Humanism." Wikipedia explains that Zamenhof

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spoke “Russian, Polish, Yiddish, German, and French ... and English, but not well. He knew four classical languages, Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic, and may have had some knowledge of Italian and Lithuanian.” (Wikipedia). And

of course he spoke his invented Esperanto.

What would the Lord of Babel — Creator of Confusion — think of Ludwik and his unifying language? Maybe we’re OK, since we aren’t babbling Esperanto, and we haven’t reached all that far into the heavens ... yet.

Chris Highland's books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (www.chighland.com).