

The Outcome of “The Confusion of Tongues”

By

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Now the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And in time, as men journeyed from the East, they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there.

They said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they used bricks for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, “Come let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top may reach to heaven; and let us make a name for ourselves.”

The Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the children of men were building. And God reflected, “Behold, they are one people nothing will restrain them in whatever they resolve upon. Come, let us go down and confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.”

So the Lord scattered them abroad upon the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.

Therefore it was called Babel; for it was there that the Lord confounded the languages of the nations, and from there he scattered the people abroad over the whole earth. (Gen. 11)

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Imagine the world’s intertwined relationships positioned on a continuum, where at one extreme exists utter narcissistic behavior, or excessive selfishness, and at the opposite pole subsists unjustifiable codependent conduct, or unhealthy, self-destructive behavior. In this light, an ideal world would hold up somewhere in the middle, as exemplified in *The Confusion of Tongues*, where everyone embodies the Three Musketeers’ motto of “tous pour un, un pour tous” (Dumas 112), more commonly referred to in English as “all for one, one for all.” Unfortunately, the world’s location on this continuum continually fluctuates, which accounts for societies’ inability to peacefully coexist. Not only supported by this one religious tale, this notion is also buttressed by myriad accounts of culture clashes prevalent throughout history, including, but

certainly not limited to, Spain's South American crusade during the 1500s, the Japanese internment camps established in the western United States around World War II, the Nazi's delusional Aryan quest, known as the holocaust, in the early 1940s, and America's present-day invasion and continued presence in Iraq. While it remains ineffable to categorize exactly what events precipitate these horrific, xenophobic epidemics into one single category, the aftermath can be examined to discover what sparked the physical encounters. All societies frequently differ majorly in two succinct ways: first, in their bodies of principles, rules and norms and, second, by the fact that norms valid in one society may be considered invalid in another. After a certain period of disagreement, the problems, caused by these differences, often thrust societies, or nations, into physical conflict. Unfortunately, the results of these horrific events and genocides of the past appear to be repeating in present-day. While only a single, scientifically and historically unjustified account of the past, *The Confusion of Tongues* offers a tale of how the world's human societies could possibly cooperate and live both harmonically and symbiotically, regrettably, due to the actions of the power brokers of both past and present civilizations, societies continue to fail to understand and to accept the differences and practices of their foreign neighbors. Illustrating this point, Gallimard, a character from David Hwang's play *M. Butterfly*, claims that "We French lost our war in Indo-China because we failed to learn about the people we sought to lead," and, in retrospect, he asserts that "it was natural, therefore, correct even, that they should resent us" (Hwang). Taking Gallimard's statement into account, it can be inferred that if the two countries had communicated, then the war could have been avoided and the two could have arrived at a truce. On a global scale, however, because tensions between countries continue to escalate, the life expectancies of the world's organized civilizations appear to gradually decrease.

By evaluating past and present conflicts, it becomes apparent that only through communication and understanding can human civilization hope to survive.

In certain instances, such as the Spanish conquests in the Central American region from 1492 to 1580, there existed no prior feud between the two parties, but, instead, the aggressor, the Spanish conquistadors, invaded simply to gain wealth, explore *unexplored* land and convert aborigines to Catholicism. In the minds of the Spanish, who at the time were the vanguard when it came to the expansions of all the European civilizations, this *necessary* enquiry led by Hernán Cortés into the Americas was beneficial because it served to broaden Spain's knowledge of global societies, in particularly the Aztec, Inca and Maya cultures. At first, the primary objective was geographic exploration; however, it soon shifted to a treasure hunt that ravaged the Amerindian cities in search of silver and gold (Nicholson). Ironically, if the Spanish had communicated their intent at gaining wealth instead of ransacking cities in search of it to the Amerindians, both deceased civilizations could have told them that the land was scarce of silver and gold. Instead, in the course of fifteen years, Cortés' conquistadors managed to extinct two of the most advanced civilizations of the era, the Aztecs and Incas. From the perspective of these extinct cultures, it was impossible for them to communicate and reason with the foreigners since their sole purpose was to steel wealth. Couple the fact that the Amerindians were met with muskets pointed at them and that the Spanish unknowingly brought the smallpox virus with them, the two civilizations had little chance of survival. The only reason the Maya culture exists today is because instead of having one main city, as the Aztecs and Incas did, they had several smaller, well-fortified, self-supported cities (Collier). There is an old proverb that says people have two ears and one mouth, so they should listen twice as much. If the Europeans had taken the time to communicate and exchange information with the natives, they would have discovered

that the societies they were attacking were extremely technologically advanced in the sense that they had an established calendar, a form of writing, an elaborate religion and impressive masonry skills. Both societies could have learned myriads from the other. Instead, the ancient cities were reduced to ruins and thousands of years of human achievement gone went with them.

During the Second World War, a similar series of events occurred when the United States government forced Japanese-Americans living within America into internment camps. From an American's stand point, it is difficult to acknowledge that the United States government, backed by her people, erred from due process and carried out this act of discrimination against thousands of innocent people, but it did occur. In *Farewell to Manzanar*, Jeanne Wakatsuki powerfully portrays "the entire situation there, especially in the beginning—the packed sleeping quarters, the communal mess halls, the open toilets—all this was an open insult to that other, private self, a slap in the face you were powerless to challenge" (Houston 30). While the conditions that the Wakatsukis were forced to live with described above sound awful, it is more important to understand why the Japanese-Americans were discriminated against in the first place. At first, the Americans were not in direct conflict with the Japanese. In fact, it was Germany that the United States was attacking. With that in mind, it does not appear fair that, while the Japanese-Americans were being sent to internment camps, German-Americans remained free of imprisonment and ridicule. The simple fact is that Japanese families like the Wakatsukis were persecuted because the people of the United States knew nothing of them. The little that was known of these Eastern foreigners was that they had old, odd beliefs, originated thousands of miles away from the United States and that their country was supporting countries killing American troops. In his introduction of *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, Howard Phillips Lovecraft offers that "the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and

strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown” (Lovecraft 12). When Lovecraft’s declaration is applied to this situation, it makes perfect sense: Because Americans knew almost nothing about the Japanese-Americans’ culture, they feared them and the Japanese-Americans became the victims of mindless discrimination. The reason the German-Americans were not persecuted is simply because they came from a western-thinking society, and they physically looked American. If Americans had just taken the time and put in the effort to understand their Japanese-American neighbors, it is unlikely that Japanese internment camps would have been erected in the first place.

On a personal note, having lived in a foreign country, I know and understand the difficulties of communicating with people who do not speak the same language, and I discovered that the result from putting in the effort to communicate is well worth the trouble. When I spent two summers living in Rome, Italy, I only knew how to speak English and conversational French. While in Rome, I was understood when I spoke in English, but in the rural parts of the country I was unable to communicate. Therefore, it made little sense for me to walk into a trattoria, a small Italian restaurant, there and order burgers with French fries. The Italians would not have understood and all I would have gotten were strange looks. Likewise, for the Italian traveler to walk into a Dunkin’ Donuts and demand a bombolone, a round doughy donut with a Nutella filling, Americans would be equally confused. However, when I bought a translation book and learned a few key phrases of Italian, daily life became a lot easier. The Italians would hear my efforts to speak their language and open up to me by offering me additional patience that would not have been shown to someone not putting in an effort to speak their language. Simply, people are more apt to negotiate when they see you are making an effort to communicate with them and understand them.

Having established that spending a little effort to communicate can go a long way, realistically, there is no rational account of the Holocaust that can justify the destructive actions, activities, and consequences that came about from this event. Like the Spanish conquistadors, the German Nazis looked to create and expand their nation into the most powerful. While it is true that Germany wanted to expand and grow, it is unknown if the Holocaust was the method they had in mind. In *Rethinking the Holocaust*, Yehuda Bauer suggests that

The basic motivation [of the Holocaust] was purely ideological, rooted in an illusionary world of Nazi imagination, where an international Jewish conspiracy to control the world was opposed to a parallel Aryan quest. No genocide to date had been based so completely on myths, on hallucinations, on abstract, nonpragmatic, ideology – which then was executed by very rational pragmatic means. (Bauer 48)

What Bauer is trying to say is that the Nazis were living under the false pretense that there was an unknown Jewish conspiracy to control the world in a way that did not mesh with that of the Aryan's way. Imagine being a German and believing that there is an unknown conspiracy out there to overthrow everything Germany stands for. Now, parallel this unknown fear reaction to what the Americans did to the Japanese. Both responses are extremely similar: contain the foreign threat through force. Now, of course, it remains evident that the Holocaust was in fact a meticulously planned onslaught that led to the deaths of millions of innocent people, while the United States just acted to contain the foreign threat in a time of crisis. Either way, in no way does this justify either reaction of discrimination, but it does provide two instances where humans overreacted fearfully in the face of an unknown.

As farfetched as it may sound, these misunderstandings are the epitome of how extremely important communication among people, friends, groups, towns, cities, states and countries can be because the reality humans live in is of their own making. Giving into the Latin motto *homo faber*, or man the toolmaker, humans create tools to perform specific tasks, such as the wheel or the nuclear bomb. Because humans are such advanced beings, they can easily transform and manipulate their environment and surroundings by using these tools. Humans create tools to build and weapons for protection. Every single person is the creator of his/her own reality and, therefore, in turn should embrace the fact that individuals can make a difference.

Since everyone controls his or her own life, or reality, that person is in charge of making the decisions of how to run it, and oftentimes religion plays a large part in how a person conducts his or her lifestyle. At the Christmas and Easter holiday services, it is all too common to overhear those few people scoffing at the presence of the people who only show up for special occasions. Everyone has a choice and, obviously, it is those people's prerogative to be as faithful as possible. Others place their faith on the back of sports teams. There are always those diehard fans that faithfully go to every game as if it were their religion. So, if being as faithful as possible is noteworthy and admirable, then how is it possible for the world to judge the Muslim suicide bombers, who by sacrificing themselves remain the most faithful to their religion? Before dismissing these people as lunatics, remember it is hypocritical of society to say be as perfect and faithful as possible, but when these men show perfect faith they are instantly frowned on by the entire world.

That being said, it is my personal opinion that what these men do is wrong and unjustifiable. My opinion, as an American, shows how America's core values clash with those of Islamic terrorists. Because American democracy and market is meant to be profitable and ever

expanding, American products can be found all over the globe, even in Iraq. In 1996, before the events of September 11, 2001 took place, Samuel Huntington wrote about how American products have made their ways to the Middle East and that this would not change their views of America. Huntington claimed that “somewhere in the Middle East a half dozen young men could well be dressed in jeans, drinking coke, listening to rap, and between their bows to Mecca, putting together a bomb to blow up an American airliner” (Huntington 58). Five years later, these men flew missiles, in the form of airplanes, into predominant American buildings. That act of terrorism proved Huntington’s point that consumer goods cannot simply buy another country’s loyalty. Now, six years later, America is occupying Iraq trying to establish a stable democratic government. The idea of one unified Iraq is a novel idea, but America fails to understand the former social working of the country. The fact that Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds having been feuding for years is not going to stop just because American troops arrive to establish democracy. Instead, America threatens Iraq with deadlines that are impossible to meet. All people are proud to be who they are whether it be American or Iraqi.

Contrary to popular belief, globalization does not refer to some super society wiping out smaller economies, in order to form a single society. Yet, at the same instance, America is the world’s only superpower, and it has the power to unify, but it appears that that power is not being used effectively. Spain tried to create the largest empire during the colonization era and failed. In the 1940s, the Nazis attempted to bully the rest of Europe into forming a superior Aryan civilization. Now, admittedly, what America does has not always been correct, but should she use her power and influence to attempt to reunify the world as it mythically once existed? This may as well be what happens in the future. However, it is highly unlikely because technology’s and religion’s reach will forever create conflicts preventing any kind of unification.

Since the dawn of organized civilization, man has struggled to understand why and how other cultures communicate and act. The failure of most societies to understand their neighboring societies has often led humanity closer and closer to self annihilation. And in more than one instance such thinking has swept an entire society off the face of the earth or into existing only in history books. In *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes states that “a fifth law of nature is complaisance; that is to say, that every man strive to accommodate himself to the rest” (Hobbes 63). If the world really does exist somewhere on this continuum, then the only way to make it back to the state described in *The Confusion of Tongues* is by, as Hobbes suggests, striving to accommodate and understand everyone else. If everyone is aware of everyone else and understands and accepts them, then there are no bases for feuds. And the world will find itself existing in a peaceful harmony. At least we can dream.

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