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Cultural/Linguistic Diversity and Deep Social Ecology (Genesis 11:1-9)

by Ched Myers

Not too far from where we sit today, hidden at the heart of post-modern Los Angeles, surrounded by gleaming skyscrapers built by and for Big Capital, lies the *placita*, once the center of the old Mexican *pueblo*. Lying under spreading trees, ignored by the teeming tourists and new Latino immigrants who fill the plaza each day, is a plaque commemorating the founding of *El Pueblo de la Reina de Los Angeles sobre el rio de la Porciuncula,* in November 1781. The plaque notes that of the original 22 adult *pobladores* who came from northern Mexico to colonize Los Angeles there were eight mulattos, eight Indians, two blacks, one mestizo — and only two Spaniards. In its first century Los Angeles was a sleepy Mexican and Indian village; in its second century, it grew into a world metropolis. But this plaque reminds us that from the very beginning this city has been a singularly MULTICULTURAL project.

Indeed, before Europeans arrived here California was a genuinely multicultural world–like the rest of Great Turtle Island made up of widely diverse but co-existing peoples, tribes and nations. California

had about 16% of the aboriginal population of the United States... Even at the minimum estimate of 130,000 (the figure has been placed as high as 700,000), the density of Indian population in California was three or four times greater than for the nation as a whole... The California Indians were a highly heterogenous lot. Some 22 linguistic systems and 138 different idioms have been recorded...the Indians were scattered in small land-owning, politically autonomous groups (McWilliams, 1946).

There was cultural and commercial interaction between the various indigenous groups, sometimes over vast distances. Moreover, attempts by stronger and larger tribes to unify disparate peoples or to assert military, economic or cultural hegemony were never more than regional in scope. In other words, cultural diversity was the ORIGINAL social characteristic of this place, this continent. This is important to acknowledge, because we who have been socialized into the dominant culture are tempted to believe that multiculturalism is a dubious historical *novum* to be feared.

The European took great pains to destroy the original social fabric of diversity in the Americas. Early Los Angeles, for example, was still a small town populated mostly by Mexican *Californios* and Indians as late as 1870. But then a massive migration of white easterners began, orchestrated by railroad and real-estate interests, so that by 1940 the city fathers of this new metropolis of a million and a half people could boast that it was the most White Anglo-Saxon Protestant major city in the U.S.

Yet at that point, the wheel of history began to turn again.

Since 1940 California's total population has quadrupled...but the two largest ethnic minorities, Latinos and blacks, have grown more than ten times during that same period. Since the immigration law reforms of the 1960s and the Indochinese refugee provisions of the 1970s, the Asian and Pacific Islander group is now the fastest growing segment of California's population... By the early 21st century, California will become the first mainland state with a third world majority. Or a more accurate way of saying it is that by the year 2010 or even earlier, everyone in California will be members of one or another minority (Wollenberg, 1988).

In the Southwest today, some Latinos speak of the "browning" of the region as a *reconquista*. They remember the multiethnic roots of this place. Los Angeles, California and the Southwest have ALREADY been transformed by demographic trends, REGARDLESS of whether or not we wish to be a multicultural society. And what is happening here represents the future of the U.S. as a whole. The question facing us is only HOW we will adjust to this new/old reality.

Los Angeles, California and the Southwest have already been transformed by demographic trends, regardless of whether or not we wish to be a multicultural society. And what is happening here represents the future of the U.S. as a whole. The question facing us is only how we will adjust to this new/old reality.

Indeed, post-Columbian America has in some sense always been defined by the struggle between two realities: dominant culture ideologies and structures from above, and multicultural populations and practices from below. "It is impossible to say to which human family we belong," said the Venezuelan nationalist Simon Bolivar to the Congress of Angostura in 1819; "Europeans have mixed with the Indians and the Negroes, and Negroes have mixed with the Indians; we were all born of one mother America, though our fathers had different origins." But Bolivar's vision stands in sharp contrast to the contemporaneous observation of French statesman Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* (1835): "The European is to the other races of mankind what man himself is to the lower animals: he makes them subservient to his use and when he cannot subdue them he destroys them."

The struggle between these two points of view–that of race, class and gender supremacists on one hand, and organic, grassroots diversity on the other–define the American story: past, present and future. I believe that one of the key theological challenges facing this Urban Caucus is where our churches stand in that struggle.

This is NOT a theoretical question. I have watched my city burn twice in my lifetime because of the persistent violence and dehumanization of racism and social inequality, and our refusal to have a public conversation about it. We are approaching the tenth anniversary of the 1992 uprising–the largest "domestic disturbance" in the U.S. since the Civil War–that burned through THIS very neighborhood. History shows repeatedly that the "cold war" of frozen race and class relations inevitably erupts into the heat of built-up rage. As James Baldwin famously put it, "We may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, recreated from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: 'God gave Noah the rainbow sign; no more water, the fire next time!'"

It is no overstatement, then, to say that the future of North American society — indeed, of the human experiment as a whole — depends upon our ability to live peaceably with diversity. The question is whether we can, in the church and in American society as a whole, forge models of coexistence-with-congruence rather than unity-by-uniformity.

At the beginning of the third Christian millennium, more than half the world's population resides in cities, as compared with about nine percent at the beginning of the 20th century. Densely-populated metropolises exert an overwhelming centripetal force on human, technological and natural resources, and continue to dominate the economic, social and cultural geography of not only first world nations, but third world ones as well. "Adam Smith said it once and for all," wrote William Appleman Williams in his classic 1980 book *Empire as a Way of Life*, "The city enjoys and exploits a structural advantage over the country… The essence of imperialism lies in the metropolitan domination of the weaker economy (and its political and social superstructure) to ensure the extraction of economic rewards."

I offer these biblical reflections on three texts (Genesis 11, Acts 2, and Ephesians 2), and my analysis will revolve around two basic concepts:

- ***centripetality***, that is the power of the Center (in this case, the city) to pull everything into itself from the margins and rule over them, thus concentrating power and wealth; and
- ***centrifugality***, that is, the force of moving away from the center (i.e. a centrifuge), which in this case will be represented by strategies of deconstructing those concentrations by dispersal, resistance and diversity.

The Bible has at best an ambivalent, and at worst an antipathetic perspective on the city — particularly in the Old Testament. This should not be surprising, considering that these texts were generated by peoples who, if we can suspend the biases of Christianized civilization long enough to recognize it, had far more in common with the lifeways of indigenous peoples than to anything found in urban modernity.

After all, early Israel was a heterogeneous mix of foragers, fringe-dwellers, pastoralists and small-scale farmers who existed at the margins of the late Bronze Age Egyptian empire, as has been outline so persuasively by Norman Gottwald. Their myths of origin had to do with wandering Aramaens, and a prophet who summoned them to abandon the store cities of Late Dynastic Egypt for a reconstituted life in the wilderness. Their divine revelations came under trees and upon mountaintops and beside magically flowing rivers and burning bushes. Their form of social organization was for many generations a kinship-based and loosely confederated tribal system. Their economy was based on gift ritual and generalized reciprocity, or what I call "Sabbath economics." And they largely eschewed the urban life of Canaan until they abandoned their primal ways and fashioned their own centralized kingdom under David and Solomon so they could be like all the other surrounding nations. This "civilizing" project, understood in I Samuel 8 to be a betrayal of their tribal identity, was centered in an old Canannite fortress city called Jerusalem.

In the foreground of the ancient Hebrew's historical perspective on the city was the experience of slave oppression in Egypt, summarized so succinctly in Exodus 1:

> The Egyptians set taskmasters over the Israelites to oppress them with forced labor. They built

> supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharoah... The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks upon the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. (Exodus 1: vv 11,14)

The human cost of such a construction project would surely color the view of those who were literally at the bottom of the Egyptian social pyramid. Moreover, these supply cities were the symbol and substance of Egypt's imperial "forward basing" strategy. Fortresses were constructed along the main northeastern trade route traversing the coastal plains, serving both to project military power up into the subservient province of Canaan, and as collection points for the tribute of the vassal cities and villages there. The Hebrews, a name which possibly derives from the old Egyptian term *'apiru,* meaning rebellious peasants or social outcasts, thus had political and economic reason to resent the very cities their slave labor helped build.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the centralized regimes of Mesopotamia, Egypt and Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) are portrayed as Israel's primal adversaries. And laced through these stories like a bad refrain are denunciations of the fortified city-states, symbolized preeminently by the architecture of domination: the tower. "In your thoughts you will ponder the former terror," writes Isaiah. "Where is the one who took the tribute, the officer in charge of the towers? You will see those arrogant people no more…" (Isaiah 33:18). For Zephaniah the "day of the Lord" is a day of "trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers" (Zephaniah 1:16). And Gideon's vow to the men of Peniel represents the archetypal defiance of the city's might by an Israelite guerilla from the mountains: "When I return victorious, I will tear down this tower" (Judges 8:9). It was a threat he made good on more than once.

It is the ancient folk tale in Genesis 11, however, that best expresses the antipathy of those who lived in the shadow of these great city-states. The Babel tale culminates the rebellion theme of the primeval cycle of Genesis, which narrates the "Fall of civilization" from a garden where human beings enjoyed communion with God and creation, to a metropolitan nightmare of hubris and oppression. "Babel" is, of course, a thinly-veiled reference to imperial Babylon (v 9a), and a play on words besides. The Akkadian name *Babil* might have meant "gate of the gods," but from the Hebrew perspective it rather signified "confusion." The centripetal power of the city is clearly understood in this tale: "As men moved eastward they settled on the plain of Shinar" (v 2). The city draws human and natural resources into its vortex of production and consumption; it is characterized by centralization (v 2), cultural conformity (v 1) and above all, the architecture of domination (vv 3f). The "tower" here no doubt alludes very specifically to Babylon's grandiose ziggurats "reaching to the heavens." This image reappears in later prophetic denunciations of Babylonian arrogance:

- "You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven, I will raise my throne above the stars of God…" (Isaiah 14:13f)
- "Even if Babylon reaches the sky and fortifies her lofty stronghold, I will send destroyers against her, declares the Lord (Jeremiah 51:53).

"Brick-baking" (v 3), meanwhile, although an accurate comment on Mesopotamian construction practices that differed sharply from Canaanite stonework, gives the story an edge by also alluding to the political economy of slave-labor that Hebrews knew first hand in Egypt.

The root of the problem in Genesis 11, however, is the matter of SOCIAL ECOLOGY. The

centripetal, homogenizing force of the Metropole ("they are one people and they have all one language," v 6), functions to confound God's intention that human communities be "scattered abroad over the face of the earth" (vv 8f), a mandate reiterated throughout the primeval cycle (see Genesis 1:28; 9:1). HUMAN variety is seen here as essential to social ecology as species diversity is to a healthy biosystem–an insight we are only just now rediscovering.

The action of divine shatters the urban project of human re-engineering, and re-disperses peoples through the rehabilitative vehicle of linguistic diversity (v 7). The tale understands this "scattering" not as the tragic result of God's judgment, as it is usually preached in our churches, but rather as an act of liberation from the imperial project. Cultural heterogeneity is affirmed as the best natural restraint upon the human impulse to construct societies of domination. Several millennia have only confirmed this story's political insight — and its uncanny depiction of the correlation between massive State construction projects and imperial ambition remains all too relevant today: Mulholland's aqueduct, the Manhattan Project, yes, even those lamented Trade Towers in New York.

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But if Israel's traditional suspicion of the surrounding empires, as reified in the walled city, is in the foreground of these literary traditions, there is a larger and deeper issue in the background, which we can see if we look at how the Babel story is narratively situated in the overall primeval cycle of Genesis. This etiological story of origins was probably redacted during or after the collapse of the Israelite monarchy and the experience of exile in Babylon. By knitting together ancient Semitic tales, spinning Mesopotamian myths, and peering deep into the collective past, they composed a narrative of Creation and Fall that represents a sober retrospective assessment by Israel's scribes on their people's own experiment with urban civilization. It did not turn out so well, suggesting that perhaps this was an anthropological issue, not just a national one.

The first creation story of Genesis 1 emphasizes an abundant, vibrant creation crowned by a cosmic Sabbath. There is no hint of scarcity, conflict or exploitation. The second creation story of Genesis 2 introduces the human being as indigenous to a "garden," *'eden* meaning "pleasure", better known to us through the Greek of the Septuagint as *paradeisos*, paradise. Man is fashioned from the "dust"; the Hebrew wordplay of *'adam* and *'adamah* is more resonant for us in the Latin equivalent, *homo* and *humus*. Here the human being and his partner *'ava*, meaning life personified, live in symbiotic relationship with the spirit world (symbolized by walking and talking with God), with the creation (symbolized by the naming of all the critters), and with each other (symbolized by Eve being fashioned from Adam's own body).

One need not be historicist about these narratives to see here a primal memory of a time when human beings actually experienced this abundance and this symbiosis. Now modern anthropology, under the influence of Social Darwinism, up until recently fashioned a consensus portrait of the life of all pre-historic human beings as, in Hobbes' famous phrase, "miserable, violent and brutish." This view, however, began to change with Marshall Sahlins' landmark 1972 study, *Stone Age Economics*, in which he posited the "original affluence" of primal societies. Sahlins argued that the archaeological

and ethnographic evidence turned the traditional portrait on its head: hunter-gatherers were, on the balance, healthier, freer, more egalitarian, less violent, worked less and enjoyed life more than urban cultures, not least our own. Interestingly, over the last three decades of anthropological research Sahlins' view has generally become accepted by the mainstream of the field, prompting no less a social philosopher than Robert Heilbroner to admit that the new consensus about primal cultures is "as dangerous as it is fascinating, dangerous, that is, to the premises on which rests so much of our economic thought." Yet the bias is already well-entrenched in our consciousness. "So scandalous," writes Bob Black, "are the foragers and their small scale, sustainable and bountiful economic practices to modern economists and their addictions to the twin fatalities of infinite wants and finite scarce resources that they call forth paroxysms of pulpit-thumping prejudice." Think of your own gut reactions to my hypothesis this morning!

Perhaps the Genesis narrators were drawing on the deep memory of the abundant lifeways of Neolithic foragers in the rich Tigris-Euphrates delta, traces of which memory also survive in earlier myths such as the Atrahasis, the Gilgamesh epic and even in Homer. In any case, the crucial contribution of these Israelite scribes lay in their attempt to explain how and why these lifeways had disappeared in a way that focused on human culpability rather than divine whims. In fact, though there are Middle Eastern myths far older than the Genesis tale, the biblical account represents the world's first systematic ideology of resistance to the project of civilization, and it is produced by a people who had front row seats in the historical drama, surrounded as they were by empires of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Anatolia.

The Genesis explanation of what had gone wrong was a story about a Fall. But our understanding of this Fall has been trivialized by traditional theological interpretations that moralize about of an act of individual disobedience or hubris. This story means to reflect on nothing less than civilization itself, and as such it narrates the history of the human condition. But this history should not be understood literally as fundamentalists do, but archetypally, in the narrative style indigenous to traditional societies.

Throughout the history of civilization, right up through the conquest of the New World by Europeans, indigenous peoples have been given an unyielding ultimatum by the harbingers of Progress… Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce summed it up best: "When you come," he said, "we die."

What does the story look like if we interpret the human being's grasping of the taboo Tree of the Knowledge as a powerful metaphor of the primal human impulse to imagine that we can actually improve upon the Creation? This impulse has issued in a long and sordid history of attempts to domesticate and re-engineer the world, beginning with the late Neolithic beginnings of agricultural around 10,000 BCE, most likely in the Fertile Crescent and Nile valley. The domestication of plants and animals slowly but surely led to sedentary village life and the beginnings of stored surplus. This in turn led inexorably to population increases, the complexification of society, the rise of hierarchy and militias, and the invention of writing (the first examples of which have to do with bookkeeping). This process is chronicled, by the way, in Jared Diamond's brilliant opus magnum of a few years ago, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fate of Human Societies*. And the result of all this is that around 7 or 6,000 BCE we see the first archeological evidence for cities: Catal Huyuk in present day Turkey, the Sumerian city-states, and perhaps the oldest site of all, Jericho. This is the dawn of civilization, and it brings war, ever more sophisticated technologies and ecocidal tendencies, as human societies grasp ever firmer onto the Tree of Knowledge. In our own time we have transformed rivers into dams and

forests into boardfeet, and re-engineered the atom and the seed and the gene. As the Australian singers Vicka and Linda put it, "we've started a fire we can't put out."

It is interesting that the symbol of the Fall in Genesis 3 is the human being's expulsion from the Garden, his alienation from the earth, and his condemnation to a life of toil as an agriculturalist. This was indeed the story of the late Neolithic. Moreover, the first act outside the Garden is fratricide, in which the pastoralist Abel, symbolizing the remnants of the older, not-yet-fully-domesticated lifeways of the nomad forager, is murdered by the farmer Cain. This metaphorical vignette represents the opening battle of subsequent history's longest war between aggressive, expansionist agriculturally based societies and their insatiable appetite for land on one hand, and ever-retreating traditional foragers on the other. Throughout the history of civilization, right up through the conquest of the New World by Europeans, indigenous peoples have been given an unyielding ultimatum by the harbingers of Progress: move further into the wilderness while we take and settle on the best land; or be sucked into the vortex of our conquering culture, serving us as peasants or slaves; or perish altogether, because as many European usurpers put it, natives are unfit for civilization. Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce [Indian Nation] summed it up best: "When you come," he said, "we die."

Most telling for our theme this morning, however, is Cain's first act after his banishment. He constructs a city that he identifies with his son Enoch, whose name means "re-creation" (Genesis 4:17). The city becomes the re-engineered alternative to the garden–an accurate reflection of what actually happened in the last millennia of pre-history. In this way the Genesis scribes boldly portray the rise of civilization as a progressive history of the Fall.

By Genesis 6 the world has quickly filled with violence, led by the mysterious "Nephilim"–giants on the earth. While this mythic pseudonym inspires endless fundamentalist speculation about angels, demons and even UFOs, the Bible clearly understands the Nephilim to be symbolic of warrior cultures — people who had grown too big and powerful. As the Israelite spies returning from Canaan complain to Moses in Numbers 13, "The land does flow with milk and honey (two originally wild but now domesticated commodities, we might add parenthetically), but the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendents of Anak there…who come from the Nephilim" (cf Dt 2:10f).

God reconsiders the human project altogether, and proposes to pull the plug. This of course ushers in the Noah story, whose hero, we are told in 6:9, is "just a man." We might say this tale represents the redemptive counterpoint to city-construction: re-genesis vs. re-engineering. If *homo habilis* has become *homo sapiens* is now become *homo faber*, the only **divinely-ordained** work of our hands is to preserve Creation, in contrast to those who would usurp or destroy it. Hence the Ark is the symbol of our true vocation as stewards. Noah's fidelity to this vision of radical preservation (ridiculed then as now), offers a new start for the human being, whose indivisible interdependence with all the other creatures on the planet is emphasized repeatedly in the new Covenant of Genesis 9.

In a compromise measure, the rainbow Covenant allows for the killing and eating of meat–though with severe restrictions concerning the sanctity of both animal and human blood. There is fierce debate about when humans began hunting; some paleoanthropologists say a quarter of a million years ago, others argue as recently as the early Ice Age. The point here in Genesis is not chronologic, however, but archetypal. For the ensuing post-Diluvian genealogies of Gen 10 introduce a new, "predatory" line of people. The sons of Ham are Mizraim (the ancient name for Egypt), Put

(symbolizing north Africa west of Egypt), Canaan (about whom the Bible will have much to say), and most significantly here, Cush. Interestingly, in the ancient Sumerian king lists Kish was the place where civilization resumed after the Great Flood, associated with the Early Dynastic period (roughly 2800 BCE). Cush's most notorious son is Nimrod, given the curious moniker "a mighty hunter" (10:9), and it is his progeny that gets our attention. The list reads like a litany of the imperial kingdoms:

- Babylon (about whom Israel knew all too much);
- Erech (probably the Sumerian Uruk, seat of the second dynasty after the flood, which included the famous Gilgamesh);
- Accad (founded by the great Sargon ca. 2300 BCE); and
- Calneh (as yet unidentified, but located on the "plain of Shinar," a euphemism for the Fertile crescent and mythic site of the Tower of Babel;

Proceeding further from this geneology are Asshur (Assyria), Ninevah (just ask Nahum and Jonah about this place), and Calah, another great Assyrian city-state rebuilt by Shalmaneser I in the mid-13th century BCE, and today known as Nimrud. The list concludes with a cryptic allusion to "the great city"–which could mean any and all of them. "Urban civilization is warring civilization," writes Ellul; "Conqueror and builder are no longer distinct" (p. 13). Mighty hunters indeed. This is the bigger narrative, then, that culminates in the tale of the Tower of Babel. It is the unqualified lament of a late Bronze Age people called Hebrews who had been displaced or colonized by urban civilization.

But the Bible identifies the tower not only with imperial might, but also with idolatry. This reflects the ancient perception that the *ziggurat* represented an artificial mountain upon which the gods could be met–in contrast, say, to Moses' rendezvous with the wilderness God Yahweh on Sinai. Evan Eisenberg, in his brilliant book, *The Ecology of Eden*, discusses the phenomenon of the *axis mundi,* or cosmic world-pole, in world mythology. Ancient peoples seemed to sense that the origins of life were somehow upriver and, ultimately associated with the wild and remote mountainscapes. This is, he says, "mythic shorthand for ecological fact": that indeed water, weather and wildness flow down from the mountains, serving to cleanse, spread the gene flow, and regulate the ecosystem. He writes:

Man-made landscapes, from the wheat fields and vineyard of ancient Canaan to the strip malls of New Jersey, survive only by courtesy of the wilderness around them and the wildness that remains in them. Energy flows, water and nutrients circulate, climate is kept within bounds, the ingredients of the air are kept in balance, the soil is made fertile. All these things are matters of life and death for us. All are done for us freed of charge, in ways we do not fully grasp…we would be unwise to try and take them over. (78)

Or as he succinctly puts it: "Without wildness, civilization could not survive. The converse does not hold" (106).

Ancient peoples thus acknowledged the wild mountaintops as home of, or at least reference point for, the gods–a cosmology Israel obviously shared. On the other hand, ancient imperial urban societies, the predatory legacy of Nimrod, in keeping with their project of domesticating the world, brought the gods "in-house," engineering their own *axis mundi* in pyramids and ziggurats. The penthouse suite was, of course, reserved for the king's communion with the deities, who were seen as patrons of the empire (vs. Yahweh, who is ever critical). The distant sacred mountain, looked AT reverently by traditional

peoples as the source of life and power, is now replaced by a tower from where the king and his gods look down ON their subjects in the spirit of surveillance and control.

Eisenberg continues his description of the re-engineered cosmology of the rising city-states:

It was a sign of the Mesopotamians' pride that they drew the gods–and paradise itself–down from the mountains and into their own cities… Recipients of the hills' largesse, their mistake was to forget that fact. Giddy with prosperity and progress, they came to think they had done it all themselves… They controlled the waters, tapped the great rivers like kegs of beer. It was easy to forget that the waters came from somewhere. They had agriculture down to a science. It was easy to forget that it had arisen among the savages of the hills. The storehouses spat out grain, the markets were littered with dates and slippery with oil. Surely the city was the source of all life. (83)

In this light, God's decision to deconstruct Babel can be seen as a polemical counterattack by the Israelite scribes on the cosmologies of empire.

Eisenberg's conclusion is ironic: "Had God stopped to think about it, he would have seen that the engineers of Babel would fall short, having failed to consider the relationship of a ziggurat's height to its base. For its top to reach heaven, the tower's base would have to cover the earth" (84). Yet today the height and breadth of urban civilization does indeed dominate the whole planet. Those ancient sages understood the threat of concentrated and managed human ingenuity in the service of the imperial state: "Now there is nothing they propose to do that will be impossible for them" (11:6). The terrible truth of that warning is just dawning on our own time, living as we do under the Damoclean swords of ABC and GNR (atomic, biological and chemical weaponry, and genetic, robotic and nanotechnologies).

The primeval cycle of Genesis traces the human journey from Garden to the centripetal power of the urban Tower, and pronounces it Fallen. As it closes, a new narrative begins, opening the main plot of the Bible, the journey of redemption. It commences with the first great act of centrifugality: Abram is called to leave the ancient Sumerian city of Ur, site of one of the region's oldest ziggurats, dating to the third millennium BCE. This sets the pattern for the rest of the book. The first war narrated in the Bible takes place, unsurprisingly in light of Genesis 10-11, on the plain of Shinar, and it catches Lot in its crossfire because he, unlike Abram, chose to settle among the "cities on the plain" (Genesis 13:12). The Jacob cycle tends to avoid cities, and the first Hebrew building project is not a tower, but a pile of stones, placed as an altar by the patriarch Israel at Galeed (Genesis 31:47). What a gesture of indigenity: marking covenanted boundaries without fences or fortifications. It foreshadows the poignant (and very uncivilized) warning of Exodus 20 that to hew a stone is to profane it. The Joseph story, in contrast, revolves precisely around the centripetal pull of Egypt, particularly his role in forcing people to come in to the city by managing scarcity during a time of famine.

Above all, however, it is the Moses story that establishes the archetype of going feral from civilization. He leads the people to abandon (however reluctantly) the fleshpots of a command economy in order to relearn the economics of grace in the wilderness. When Israel does venture back into Canaan, they occupy existing cities but do not build their own, something that doesn't transpire until the time of the monarchy (and then with a vengeance!). But the first "conquest" episode is a telling object lesson, perhaps even something of a political cartoon. Joshua's inaugural target is the ancient, fortified Canaanite city state of Jericho, which is vanquished, we are told in one of the great

polemical legends of scripture, by a sort of Jubilee liberation song and dance. But this notorious city is NOT to be re-occupied, or even plundered; instead Joshua curses anyone who attempts to rebuild on that site. And when an Israelite is busted for trying to keep some booty, it is revealed ominously as a "beautiful robe from–Shinar!" (Joshua 7:21).

This basic pattern is confirmed in story after story throughout the Bible and into, I would argue, the New Testament itself–though that would take another lecture. Israel carried in its bones a kind of paleo-psychic geography of centrifugality, and this was intensified after their own failed experiment of urban centralization under Solomon. And while some later writers were nostalgic about the monarchy, its Temple and its "City of David," the prophets were always clear that God had something better in mind. Israel's consciousness is best summarized in the Psalmist's reiteration of the old Babel image (Psalm 55:7,9-11):

> Truly, I would flee far off; I would lodge in the wilderness...
> Confuse, O Lord, confound their speech, for I see violence and strife in the city.
> Day and night they go around it on its walls, and iniquity and trouble are within;
> Ruin is in its midst; oppression and fraud do not depart from its marketplace.

The social architecture of domination is still with us. As did ancient Babylon, modern European imperialism has systematically eroded local cultures and spread the colonizer's language and culture. Today the revolution in global communications, the opening of trade barriers and the growth in multinational business, and the mobility of world populations from leisure travelers to displaced refugees are all working to accelerate this erosion. Ethnic costume are giving way to western fashion, traditional chants to Madonna, and regional dishes to McDonalds. Human variety is as essential to social ecology as species diversity is to a healthy biosystem, yet both are falling victim to global capitalism. The new Tower of Babel is the banal homogeneity of commercial culture and transnational technocracy.

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Let us briefly look at this through the lens of language, which is one of the fundamental things that makes us human. Thus, linguistic diversity is also one of the key barometers to the health of our social ecology. We are beginning to understand that human diversity is as crucial to social equilibrium and sustainability as biodiversity is to ecological systems. If that is the case, the health of our social ecology is severely compromised. Terralingua, an international organization founded in 1996, articulates the problem this way:

Linguists estimate that there are anywhere from 4,000 to more than 10,000 distinct languages still spoken. Many linguists give a figure of 6,000-7,000–not including sign languages. But it is the distribution of power among those languages that is telling. According to ***Ethnologue***, as of November, 2000 there are more than 20 languages in the world that have more than 50 million native speakers, the top three being Mandarin Chinese (885 million), Spanish (332) and English (322). *The Geolinguistic Handbook* noted that in 1991 some 208 languages had more than 1 million native users. The median number of speakers of a language, however, is only around 5-6,000. More than 95% of

the world's spoken languages have fewer than 1 million native speakers, and half of all the languages have fewer than 10,000 speakers. A quarter of the world's spoken languages have fewer than 1,000 users.

Michael Krauss, the director of the **Alaska Native Language Center** reports that somewhere between 20% and 50% of the smaller languages are no longer being spoken by children. "That doesn't mean they're endangered," he explains. "It means they're doomed." Many more are at risk… falling victim to bulldozers, which are destroying the jungles that used to shelter them, to intolerant national governments and to the global forces of homogenization — as people are "catapulted... from the oxcart to a satellite dish that is picking up Ted Turner."

Thus, Terralingua declares:

1. That every language, along with its variant forms, is inherently valuable and therefore worthy of being preserved and perpetuated, regardless of its political, demographic, or linguistic status;
2. That deciding which language to use, and for what purposes, is a basic human right inhering to members of the community of speakers now using the language or whose ancestors traditionally used it; and
3. That such usage decisions should be freely made in an atmosphere of tolerance and reciprocal respect for cultural distinctiveness -- a condition that is a prerequisite for increased mutual understanding among the world's peoples and a recognition of our common humanity.

Terralingua's commitment to illuminate the connections between cultural and biological diversity and to promote the joint preservation and perpetuation of cultural and biological diversity is exemplary. The church should take notes.

Yet the struggle over language is very concrete, very local, and very political. A recent study found that almost half of the some 1.3 million students in public schools throughout Los Angeles County spoke a language other than English at home, with more than 80 languages represented. Soon, those who speak Spanish as a first language will be a majority in California. Despite these demographic realities, resistance to linguistic diversity has taken place on a number of fronts, the most notorious being the 1986 proposition declaring English as the "official language" of California, which passed by 73%. English-only organizations have gotten many other states to pass similar symbolic measures (though in some it has been overturned as unconstitutional). Cultural monists are also pressing for more substantive restrictions, such as dismantling multilingual state services and bilingual educational programs. Employers have insisted that employees speak only English on the job, and suburban cities have passed laws dictating how much English must appear on commercial signs. This backlash comes not from pragmatism, as its supporters contend, but from ethnocentrism. Multi-lingual societies flourish around the world. There is no good reason why California cannot institutionalize what it IS IN FACT and SHOULD BE by historical rights: a bilingual society. It is a matter of political will.

The new "melting pot," meanwhile, is the banal homogeneity of global commercial culture. In a thoughtful 1993 essay entitled "Pop Goes the World," Mitchell Stephens has sketched how local culture is being replaced by mass-marketed commodities and technologies both here and abroad:

It is not just that National Basketball Association games are now televised in more than 100 different countries or that you can be listening to a Flemish radio station in Belgium and suddenly hear Cousin Brucie's "Cruisin' America" oldies show, exactly as it was broadcast on KCBS-FM in Los Angeles. It is not just that Paris today has about 70 Japanese restaurants, or that there are five Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets in Beijing, or that a small cafe on the road from Ceske Budejovic to Tabor in the Czech Republic offers a couple of Mexican specialties. It is not just that...you can quench your thirst with a Coke in 185 countries. (The United Nations only has 178 members). No, to understand the direction which we are going, we also have to examine the consequences of these dramatic developments: the growing sameness of products made in Japan, Portugal, Ecuador, Kenya and Kentucky; the decline of indigenous and unique athletic, musical, culinary and even linguistic traditions; the fading differences between the cultures of the United States, Belgium and China.

Stephens notes that while colonialism has long eroded local cultures, three factors make such processes more widespread and profound today. The first is the revolution in global communications, from satellite TV to Walkmen to computers, which "permit cultures to be trampled from a distance." The second is the opening of trade barriers and the growth in multinational business and markets. The third is the cross-fertilization resulting from the mobility of world populations, from refugees to leisure travelers.

While there are aspects of this global mix which are surely liberative many are troubling and some downright genocidal. HUMAN variety — like biological and botanical diversity — is falling victim to global capitalism. More than any single factor this paves the way for what Nigel Calder called in 1970 the "silent revolution of Technopolis." Sounds like Babel to me. The church must reassert the Genesis wisdom of a "scattered" human family by nurturing diversity. Just as it is the church's vocation to CRITIQUE each culture in light of the gospel, it is also her duty to DEFEND each culture's rights, because each is a gift of creation as well as a result of the Fall.