

The divine protest of Pentecost

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May 16, 2013

The God of Pentecost doesn't have an official language.

This is the shocking revelation of the day of Pentecost, but one often lost amid the day's more bombastic metaphors of rushing winds, descending doves and intoxicated disciples with tongues touched by fire.

But in a country with a history of suppressing other languages in the name of unity and imperialism and in a nation where [a xenophobic English-only movement is gaining ground](#), this is the message of Pentecost we need to hear.

Because Pentecost, at its fiery heart, is not only about language, but it is also an act of divine rebellion through language. It is the windswept protest of a borderless God, standing against humanity's misguided preference for the empty language of the powerful. In Pentecost, God speaks against humanity's tendency to [force](#) unity through [sameness](#) and exclusivity, to conflate righteousness with homogeneity and to do it all in God's holy name.

On Pentecost day, God spoke outside the walls of temple religiosity and outside the halls of political power. God spoke in the streets. The divine voice manifested in all languages and in all peoples, not just in the imperial Latin of the Roman occupiers who conquered the promised land and not just in the language of the religious elite who restricted access to God with oppressive temple taxes. Rather, God spoke in the vernacular of the everyday and the everywhere.

[On Pentecost, God gives the divine voice to the languages of a bunch of nobodies and a crowd of commoners. It is an act of liberation, both for humankind and for God.](#)

And we should never underestimate the subversive power and importance of the multilingual way in which God enters the world on Pentecost. Language, and the culture it builds, are the mortar and bricks of power. Powerful countries like ours

have used language as a weapon and have restricted languages of other peoples in order to oppress and eliminate those perceived as different or threatening.

Our history is littered with examples. Waves of immigration are often met with linguistic repression and ridicule, from the United States' response to German immigrants and their language in the early 1900s to Britain's repression of the Irish language. Indigenous languages fared even worse in the United States, with the government funding Christian missionaries and denominations to forcibly assimilate indigenous peoples into Euro-American culture at boarding schools in the 19th and 20th centuries. Many of these schools banned indigenous languages and punished children for using the languages of their ancestors. As if it wasn't enough to perpetrate genocide against them, to force their exile and to steal and extort their lands, we wanted to destroy any meaningful future many of their cultures might have had and, as a result, make it easier for the demands for justice by indigenous groups to be ignored and denied without any real ramifications for the powerful.

The ideological descendant of this unjust legacy of language suppression is the political movement that seeks to enshrine English as the official and only language of the United States. It's an ahistorical notion at best to believe this land we have claimed and occupied as our God-given right and manifested destiny has ever been a land of only one tribe and one tongue. But more to the point, it stands in contradiction of who God has been revealed to be on Pentecost.

A God of many tongues. A God of many peoples. A God who doesn't have an official language. God is a God who speaks through all and is present in all, who not only welcomes all languages but also actively becomes incarnated through them.

We should listen carefully to the indictments that Pentecost holds against us. We live in a largely post-colonial world, but we remain citizens of the world's lone remaining imperial power through our economic and cultural might (which is still just as capable of colonization and the destruction of indigenous culture). We remain complicit in the sins against and the [ongoing injustice toward indigenous people of what is now the United States](#). We stand poised to commit sins against many of our immigrant brothers and sisters with laws that target them, profile them, and label their languages as not good enough for our country.

We should listen carefully to the gospel — the good news — of Pentecost. On that day when God moved in fiery inspiration, God gave the divine voice to all the

languages, to the marginalized, to the street. Any time a language or a voice crying out is suppressed, it is God's voice, too, we are attempting to silence. We might do well to participate in Pentecost with this in mind, listening for the voice of God among the silenced, the powerless, the ignored, the forgotten, the oppressed, the nobodies.

Pentecost wasn't just about evocative images of fiery tongues and a rushing wind.

Pentecost was a rebellion against those that would seek to restrict God to a single, official language, a single, righteous people, a single, systematic theology.

Pentecost was a protest in which God refused to be silenced by the languages of the powerful.

Instead, on Pentecost, God spoke.

And the people in the streets understood.

Nothing could have been more subversive.

*Originally posted at [Henson's blog](#)*