

President's Banquet Speech, 19th June, 2014

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Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Colleagues and Friends,

In the beginnings of time, all the human beings lived in one place and spoke the same language and treated each other nicely. In fact they got on so well together that they decided, unanimously, to make their shared life-style even better. They would not be content until they had acquired for themselves the dignity, luxury and pleasures of God himself. They would build a tower of such unprecedented height that it would allow them simply to climb up into God's heaven and reign supreme.

I say that they were all in on this, and that they all treated each other nicely. But perhaps I'd better admit that some of them were a bit more keen on the tower than others, and tended to look askance at those who were less keen.

Anyway, the enormous feat of architectural engineering got under way, and one day God started paying attention. He saw the human beings' tower coming closer and closer to the lower reaches of his heaven. And though I shall not immediately go into God's own thoughts and motives, he put a stop to it. He didn't call in an army of angels and archangels to bombard it with thunderbolts or something. Somehow or other, he saw to it that all the human beings suddenly or gradually – I don't know exactly how long this took – fell into different groupings. Each grouping had its own language, which meant that the various groupings couldn't understand each other, which in turn meant that they could no longer cooperate. Work on the tower seized up. God saw this and was pleased. He *did not mind* that different peoples now spoke different languages.

As I hardly need tell you, many human beings did not speculate about God's deeper intentions, either then or later. They just carried on as before, but with much less readiness to cooperate, and with a lot more cases of one group looking askance at other groups – not only groups as hallmarked by language, but groups based on what we nowadays call gender, sexuality,

class and ethnicity. Divisions grew and grew, and although human beings continued to be extraordinarily inventive and technologically masterful, treating each other nicely and being truly happy became less common, as all sorts of dehumanizing power structures came to hold sway in seemingly never-ending succession.

Some human beings did ask themselves why God had introduced different languages, though, and came to the conclusion that God was scared and jealous of humankind, and that he was in fact the first power-holding tyrant shivering on a throne – such a despicably small-minded being that he did not deserve to be called God. And in fact, these commentators said, there was not, and never had been, a God. Languages had just happened.

I am not going to enter into controversy – one more divisive controversy! – about the existence or non-existence of God. But what I will now say is that, *if* there is and was a God, his motives in making us babble in different tongues were not necessarily malign. Perhaps, in the beginning of things, cooperation between human beings had been so easy that people ended up taking each other for granted, not really appreciating each other and sometimes, as I admitted, looking askance at each other from the very start. Because of languages, we are ultimately forced to try and understand each other: what a paradox, that a language, a means of communication, makes communication harder! Harder at first, though, but more rewarding in the long run: the different language groupings, if life is going to continue in some sustainable and beneficial form, must begin to empathize with each other's thought-worlds. And understanding between language groupings can advance *pari passu* with understanding between other kinds of grouping as well. That was what was happening during the era of postmodernity some ten, fifteen, twenty or thirty years ago. The postmodern politics of recognition not only legitimized all languages – both the so-called major and the so-called minor languages – but every grouping of all those other kinds as well: gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity and others as well. And now in the post-postmodern era, when, while wishing to consolidate the politics of recognition, we no longer wish to place each human individual so definitively into just a single box, we are at last beginning to imagine world community that would be indefinitely large but also non-hegemonic and indefinitely heterogeneous. The point being that a true community is not at all the same thing as a consensus based on a fixed set of common values and interests, but is a grouping of people *in communion* with each other through agreeing to disagree when necessary, to live and let live.

Utopian, you perhaps say. A beautifully idealistic dream. But Martin Luther King had a dream, and his dream was socially effective. Without the

ideals, without the dreams, the world will only get worse, because there will be no criteria by which one can propose reform.

FILLM's post-postmodern mission involves the dream of overcoming that early radical split along language lines by promoting understanding through teaching and research. And in this Congress here in Ningbo, the utopian ideal has already started to become reality. I don't need to tell you that this wasn't one of those so-called conferences where everyone has their knife into everyone else's back and where everyone is jostling for position. Here in Ningbo we've all positively enjoyed each other's differences, we've all enjoyed exchanging notes in a frank and friendly spirit. And the really tell-tale sign? Most of us have observed the rule of twenty minutes for the paper, ten minutes for discussion! We have recognized that each and every colleague has and is entitled to an opinion, and we have been positively interested in granting those ten minutes in order to hear and understand it. That is what I call genuine communication.

Having made which point, I feel ethically bound not to contradict myself by carrying on further. Please let me simply say how delighted I am to note that FILLM, thanks to our wonderful hosts, thanks to our Committees outgoing and incoming, and thanks to every single participant here, is confidently moving in the right direction.

I propose a toast: FILLM!