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The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid a Clash of Civilizations

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The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid a Clash of Civilizations

Cover Page Footnote

Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, delivered this lecture on May 21, 2008, at the celebration of the fifteenth anniversary of Sacred Heart University's Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding (CCJU). The program was sponsored by CCJU in partnership with the Anti-Defamation League.

JONATHAN SACKS

*The Dignity of Difference:
How to Avoid a Clash of Civilizations*

Friends, it is an enormous honor to join you here at this wonderful university in this wonderful part of America. I am honored to recognize and praise the work of the Anti-Defamation League, one of the great organizations of the Jewish world, fighting as it has done for so long the good fight against hatred and prejudice. And what a delight it is to have encountered for the first time this great University, with its wonderful president, Anthony Cernera, and its Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding, so beautifully led by Ann Heekin. This is a tremendous partnership. In fact, I think when the Almighty brought together CCJU founding director Rabbi Joseph Ehrenkranz and your wonderful president, he was having a good day.

Friends, what you are doing here is so beautifully illustrated by a story told by one of the great Hasidic leaders of the nineteenth century, Rabbi Chaim of Sanz. He said there was once a man who found himself lost in a forest. For two days he searched and searched for a way out, and only got more and more enmeshed and lost in

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the forest. On the third day he heard footsteps coming toward him. And he thought, "Ah, here is somebody coming, he will show me the way out." The stranger approached him and said, "Friend, I do not know the way out for I too am lost. But now let us search for a new way together."

That is what the Catholic Church did at the Second Vatican Council with the call for the Church's reconciliation with the Jewish people in the document, *Nostra Aetate*. They searched for a new way together. And that is what this University and the Anti-Defamation League and those who work in the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding are doing. It is very rare that such moments happen in history: that the Catholic Church had the courage after the Holocaust to reflect on all that had happened, to examine itself and say, "Now is the time, together with the Jewish people, to search for new way together." That to me is one of the greatest signs of hope in this post-Holocaust world, and therefore what is being done here—and hopefully what is being done throughout the world—is a signal of hope for all of us. And I hope my words this evening take us an inch further on that journey.

I wrote my book, *The Dignity of Difference*, as a response to the tragic events of 9/11. On my visit a few months later to Ground Zero, together with the then Archbishop of Canterbury, I realized the destructive power of hate. And it is not clear that six-and-a-half years later, the forces that were then unleashed have yet reached their resolution. There is still war in Afghanistan and Iraq; Iran and North Korea are still in pursuit of nuclear weapons; the world is full of repressive regimes from Myanmar to Zimbabwe; slow genocide continues to take place in Darfur. The world is not a safe place, and we have not seen Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History*, but instead what Robert Kagan calls in his new book, *The Return of History*. We are living through what they call on those jets from Britain to America "a period of turbulence." We are, as Matthew Arnold said, "Caught between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born." We are at a critical juncture in the history of humanity, and it may well generate, as it has thus far generated, an age of conflict.

How much of that conflict has to do with religion? Perhaps not much, and yet there is very little doubt that religion has returned to the center stage of world politics in a way no one could have foreseen in the eighteenth or nineteenth or twentieth centuries. To take one obvious example: A couple of weeks ago we celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of the State of Israel. Israel today is surrounded by enemies, as it has been since the day of its birth. But on the date of May 15, 1948, the day it was born, those enemies fought Israel in the name of secular Arab nationalism. Today Hamas and Hezbollah and Iran oppose Israel in the name of religion. And that makes a difference.

This is so because when conflict is “religionized” it is also “absolutized,” because compromise, which is a political virtue, is a religious vice. And that is why, whereas a political conflict can be resolved, a religious conflict is very hard indeed to resolve. The divisions within Christianity between the Eastern and Western churches, the divisions within Islam between Sunni and Shiite, and the divisions within the Jewish world of which there are far too many to mention, have not yet reached resolution after centuries. And hence, we face the possibility of a century of unprecedented powers of destruction in liberal democratic states, which in a global age are unprecedentedly vulnerable; where small groups can cause immense harm in ways that are very difficult to detect in advance, and can organize globally and create extraordinarily dangerous and damaging results. In short, we face an age of insecurity.

Let me give you a small example. We had in Britain our own 9/11—we call it 7/7. It happened on the seventh of July 2005, when four suicide bombers struck. And those four suicide bombers had lived in Britain, were educated in Britain, worked in Britain. They had friends and neighbors and colleagues, none of whom had the remotest suspicion that they were terrorists. They were shocked when they discovered the truth about who they thought were nice, quiet, decent people. The only thing they noticed different about them was that they had become very religious. And yet after 7/7, not only did they realize and we realize that these people were

prepared to die and prepared to kill innocent civilians on their way to work: it also became clear in the videos that they left behind that they had a violent hatred of Britain and of everything Britain and America stood for by way of freedom. And there is no way of knowing in advance where the next attack will come from or from whom. Now in a sense this is a security problem; in another sense, a political and diplomatic one; and maybe globally it's a military problem. But it is also and inescapably a religious problem. And I want to define precisely why.

The process that began in Europe in the seventeenth century that we call "secularization" needs to be seen for exactly what it was. Secularization did not begin when people simply began to think scientifically and thus stopped believing in God. Absolutely not so. On the contrary, the great heroes of that revolution, Newton and Descartes, believed in God. Newton believed in God very much indeed. Descartes' philosophy couldn't get to step two without a belief in God. They were very religious people. Secularization did not begin when people stopped believing in God; it began when people stopped believing in the ability of people of God to live peaceably together. It began in that period of European history between the beginning of the Reformation (1517) and the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), a period in which Europe was convulsed by wars of religion. And it was then that people began searching for another way. They said, "We must have another way, a way of basing knowledge, and the arts and the sciences in universities, and culture, and politics, and society on something other than religious foundations, because if things rest on religious foundations, they will give rise to insoluble conflict." Secularization happened once people stopped believing that religious believers could live together in peace. And it is entirely possible that we face a twenty-first century that will resemble nothing as much as the seventeenth century, a new age of religious conflict. And one sign that there are those who believe this is going to happen is a whole series of books, each of which has become a best-seller.

I don't know if you've noticed this trend in America, but if you want to write a best-seller in Britain you have to be an atheist. I'm sure you have seen and maybe even read the books by Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, and our own dearly beloved Richard Dawkins—all of which have become best-sellers, all of which have been works of atheism. And the appeal of those books is really rather strange, because they say nothing new. There is nothing in any of these books that couldn't have been said at any time between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries by Bertrand Russell, Tom Paine, David Hume, or Thomas Hobbes. What is new in these books is not the argument but the feeling that we face another period of wars of religion and the only way of making the world safe is to become secular.

Now there are three ways of preventing wars of religion. One is the way of further secularization, but that is not going to happen. Globally, we are going through a period of desecularization, of children who are more religious than their parents. And every religion is encountering this reality today. So we are going to get more religious, not less, in the twenty-first century. The second way, and it was the classic way in America and Britain, is to disempower religion, marginalize it, and make sure it has no power. That strategy worked then but it doesn't work now because today it is too easy to lay your hands on means of destruction. You cannot systematically disempower the potential religious terrorist. It is almost impossible. I know our government's security services and yours know just how difficult that is. And therefore there is only one alternative, which is to seek a resolution within religion itself. If religion is the problem, let religion be the solution. That is the way I have chosen and the question I set to myself is, "Can we find—especially within the three Abrahamic monotheisms—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—a road to tolerance, a road to coexistence, or better still, a respect for difference?"

That is the path I sought to explore in my book, *The Dignity of Difference*, and I did so for the most obvious reasons after looking at the Book of Genesis. You see, the Book of Genesis is where we read

the story of Abraham and, with some variance, it is the one story that Jews, Christians, and Muslims hold in common. And that is why if we are going to find some new way together, then it is in the story of Abraham and what immediately precedes it that we have to do so.

Most of us know the Book of Genesis so well that we take it for granted, and we don't always see how strange a story it is. And it is a very strange story. What are the opening chapters of Genesis, chapters 1-11, all about? They are about the creation of the universe and humanity as a whole. Its figures are archetypal and its stories are paradigmatic: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the flood, Babel and the tower. They are about humanity as a whole. In Genesis 9, God makes a covenant with humanity as a whole, the covenant that we in Judaism call the Noahaic covenant.

But in Genesis 12, the focus of the story changes. The focus shifts from humanity as a whole to one man, Abraham, one woman, Sarah, and their children, who become a family, who become a tribe, who become twelve tribes, who become a nation. And what is very interesting about the Bible is that the members of that nation, the bearers of the covenant, are not the only people to know God. It is like the famous American advertising slogan, "You don't have to be Jewish to enjoy Levy's Rye Bread!" I find it absolutely fascinating that in the Bible, you don't have to be Jewish to know God. So let's take some examples beginning with Abraham's contemporary, Malachi, about whom the Bible says, "He was a priest of the Most High God, but he was not a member of the Abrahamic covenant." God appears to Joseph's pharaoh when pharaoh asks, "Where else can we find a person in whom is the spirit of God?" And he uses the biblical word for God, not an Egyptian one. Pharaoh knows God. So does Moses' father-in-law, Jethro. And who is the most righteous man in the entire Hebrew Bible? His name is Job, the man who never sinned. Job is the biblical anti-type of Adam. Job brings the whole human story to closure because it is the last time in the Hebrew Bible that God speaks to human beings. And so Job is the closure of the human story, as Adam was the beginning. Adam is the

man who has everything and yet sins. Job is the man who loses everything, and yet stays in conversation with God. Job is not Jewish; Job is a kind of Everyman. So we find this extraordinary claim in the Bible that you don't have to be Jewish to find God. And yet, the Hebrew Bible is overwhelmingly about this one nation, thus we have a paradox. It is an extraordinary paradox which you can put in very simple terms: The God of Abraham is the God of all humanity, but the religion of Abraham is not the religion of all humanity.

Therefore we have to ask, "What is going on here?" And the answer I propose in my book, *The Dignity of Difference*, is this: Western civilization is based on two sources. Number one, ancient Greece; number two, ancient Israel. It is what Matthew Arnold called Hellenism and Hebraism. They were two great cultures that were completely different. Ancient Greece was the birthplace of philosophy, of people like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Ancient Israel was the birthplace of prophesy, of people like Abraham and Moses, Elijah and Elisha, and Isaiah and Jeremiah. And those two different cultures came together in the form of Christianity. Christianity is the religion of Israel, but the religion whose earliest texts are all written in Greek. Christianity is where Hebraism and Hellenism meet.

One major difference between those two cultures is fundamental, and we can see this in the most famous passage in all of Greek philosophy. Alfred North Whitehead said that Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato. And in the most famous of all passages in Plato, the parable of the cave in the dialogue *The Republic*, Plato asks, "How in a world of appearances and change can we ever come to know true knowledge, the knowledge that is deeper than appearance; the truth that is eternal and doesn't change?" And Plato's answer—indeed the general answer in Western thought—is that to reach true knowledge you have to move from the particular to the universal, from the local to the global, from the parochial to the cosmopolitan. We begin with narrow loves: we love our parents, then our family, then our friends, then our neighbors,

then the people of the town, then the people of the nation, then the people of the world. Civilization is a journey from the particular to the universal.

As soon as we see how in Western thought civilization is a journey from the particular to the universal, we begin to realize what is so radical about the philosophy of the Book of Genesis. Genesis begins with the universal, with Adam and Eve and humanity as a whole. And it is from there that it moves to the particular, to Abraham and Sarah and their children. It is the exact opposite movement of Platonic thought; it is what makes Genesis what I call Western civilization's great counter-Platonic narrative. The question is, why? And the obvious place to look for the answer is in the passage immediately before God's call to Abraham to leave his land, his birthplace. What precedes this passage is Genesis 11, the story of the tower of Babel.

That is the transitional moment. The first verse of the story begins with a very striking phrase: "The whole world was of one language and shared vocabulary." The whole world was in a state of unity. And the question is, what was wrong with that? And it was here that, in writing my book, I relied on a remarkable interpretation given by one of the great Jewish scholars of the nineteenth century known as Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, who said an extraordinary thing. He said, "Babel was the first totalitarianism. It was the first place that had no room for difference." And what is fascinating is that in effect, Netziv was echoing Aristotle's critique of Plato's *Republic*. Aristotle said that the unity presupposed in Plato's *Republic* cannot be a free society, it is not a polis. It is exactly the point made by a great Jewish thinker of the twentieth century, Karl Popper, in his book, *The Open Society*. Popper says, following Aristotle, that Plato's *Republic*, beautiful though it is, is an imposed unity, a totalitarianism. And indeed that I suppose was Madison's argument in *The Federalist*, that a free society is created by a multiplicity of factions that counterbalance once another. And that was the one on which the United States was built.

So we must ask ourselves, what is the Bible telling us here? Why is this story the crucial transitional point in the Bible? And we can put it very simply. The Bible is telling us that one of the greatest sources, perhaps the greatest source of human evil, is the fear and even the hate towards those who are different from me. It is that fear and hatred of difference that has led historically to violence, to war, and yes, to genocide. Babel is a society without space for difference; one language, shared thoughts, no difference.

Totalitarianism is the attempt to impose unity on society in a way that crushes and forbids human difference. Or forget totalitarianism: think of a not unrelated phenomenon, religious fundamentalism. I define religious fundamentalism as the attempt to impose a single truth on a plural world. And that is why God responds to Babel by creating a multiplicity of languages, and hence a multiplicity of cultures and civilizations. That is why the key movement of the Bible is from universality to particularity. That is why at the beating heart of monotheism is the miracle that unity up there creates diversity down here. And the rabbis in the second century in a document we call the *Mishnah*, chapter 4 of Sanhedrin, said it so beautifully: “When a human being mints many coins in the same mint they all come out exactly the same. God makes every human being in the same mint, in the same image, his image, and we all come out different.”

And that is the point the Bible is making. If we read the Mosaic books carefully, we find a very strange phenomenon. I am sure you know the biblical command, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” It appears how many times in the Hebrew Bible? It appears once, Leviticus, chapter 19, verse 18. The rabbis were very struck by that fact and they went through and counted them. And I must tell you, I’ve counted them and I got the same answer. The Bible commands us in one place to love our neighbor, but in thirty-six places to love the stranger. Why does it tell us thirty-six times to love the stranger? Because it’s much harder to love a stranger than your neighbor. You live here in Fairfield, where it’s not hard to love your neighbor because your neighbor is pretty much like you. But

to love the stranger—that is the challenge. And that is why the Bible labors again and again and again, “Love the stranger”; “Do not oppress the stranger”; “You know what it feels like to be a stranger, you were once strangers in the Land of Egypt.” Friends, this is the greatest religious challenge. Can I see the trace of God on the face of a stranger, in the face of one whose color is not like mine, whose culture is not like mine? Can I see God’s image in one who is not in my image?

And now we begin to understand why immediately after Genesis 11, the story of Babel and the attempt to impose an artificial unity on human diversity, comes the call to Abraham:

Abraham, leave your land, leave your birthplace, leave your father’s house, leave all the places where everyone is like you, and travel to an unknown destination. Become a stranger in a strange land. Go and live a life that is different from the people all around you, different from the way the Mesopotamians live, different from the way the Egyptians live, different from the way your neighbors, the Canaanites and the Hittites, live. Go and be different.

Why did God tell Abraham to be different? It was to teach all humanity the dignity of difference. And friends, we now know, thanks to the entire environmental movement, and thanks to Al Gore—may he win many more prizes—that our entire ecology depends on biodiversity. And any loss of that diversity can have incalculable consequences. Cut down the rain forests and you get global warming. We now know, thanks to Crick and Watson and the discovery of DNA and Craig Ventner and the decoding of the human genome, that in every one of the one-hundred trillion cells in the human body is a double copy of the human genome, each of which contains 3.1 billion letters of genetic code which, if transcribed, would fill a library of five-thousand books. And that is why every one of us is different: every one of those letters makes us somehow unique. Even genetically identical twins are only alike in

fifty percent of their features. There is no such thing as sameness in humanity because God cherishes our uniqueness. Universality is where we begin, but particularity is where we reach our greatness, our uniqueness. And what would human culture be if there was only one language, only one culture, only one way of dress, only one cuisine?

Friends, diversity is what constitutes our humanity, and that is why universality is where we begin: we're all the same. But it's not where we end. And that is why the Bible has the structure it has, as the counter-Platonic narrative in Western civilization. Where would we be without the serene beauty of a Japanese garden, or Balinese music, or the art that Gauguin discovered in Samoa or Modigliani discovered in Africa? And that is ultimately the challenge of the twenty-first century.

You see, in the past most people in most places at most times lived among people who were like them. But today the sheer diversity of London and Britain—I'm sure America likewise—is so great that, when you walk down an average city street you will encounter more diversity than an eighteenth-century anthropologist would have encountered in a lifetime. When I visit a typical British school, I find children coming from forty to fifty different language groups within each school. And everyone in the world is affected by the way that we come face to face in contact with another culture. You know in the deepest jungles of Africa, the remote tribes there are sitting with their satellite television watching the latest episode of *Friends*, or *West Wing*, or whatever entertainment media is popular at the moment. All of a sudden, every one of us is confronted by the sheer astonishing diversity of humanity. And one of the responses to that shocking encounter with difference can be fear, which becomes hate, which becomes violence and terror.

And hence the appeal of fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is the attempt to simplify a plural world into one where everyone is the same. But the alternative, which I've suggested tonight and in my book, is to go back and reread the texts that are the very foundations of Abrahamic monotheism, and hear that unsuspected

but astonishing message, which is that since God is different from us, we find traces of God in people and cultures that are different from us. And that is the religious challenge. Can we balance that lovely minuet, that fugue of our differences and our commonalities, the things that we share and the things that are uniquely us? We have things in common and we have things that are different and that is of the essence, because if we were completely different from one another we couldn't communicate, and if we were exactly the same we'd have nothing to say. And it is sustaining that balance, as you do here, that is the great challenge of the twenty-first century.

What I have tried to sketch tonight, in the most brief and broad brush strokes, is a theology of diversity, of the Abrahamic message which I decode as the dignity of difference. Only religion is strong enough to bring peace between religions, and if religion is part of the problem, for the sake of heaven let us make it part of the solution. Let us have the courage in the twenty-first century to heal those ancient rifts between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, because that is what God is calling us to do. The hour is late; the challenge is great. Let us have the courage to stretch out the hand of friendship across the boundaries between faiths and turn strangers into friends.