

## Review Article

**Rabbi Michael Hilton writes about the book which has caused all the fuss.**

**The Dignity of Difference**  
**How to avoid the clash of civilizations**

**Jonathan Sacks**

London and New York: Continuum, 2002,  
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### **Respect for other faiths**

Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the Orthodox United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, writes of his respect for other faiths with these words: “A Catholic may believe that abortion is murder, a Jew or Muslim that sex outside marriage is forbidden, and these convictions are given life within our respective communities of faith. But we cannot seek to have them imposed by force of law on those who are not members of our community if there are other groups who seriously disagree.” Who could object to that? But are all these religions given by God, with their differences of belief and practice? Apparently so. Sacks writes: “God has spoken through Judaism to Jews, through Christianity to Christians, and through Islam to Muslims.” If all three religions come from God, how are we to explain the differences between them? As a Reform Jewish thinker, for me part of the answer is that God’s inspiration comes to us through scripture written by humans, and therefore these scriptures may not always be right in every detail. But for an Orthodox thinker like the United Synagogue Chief Rabbi, this argument has no appeal. Sacks believes that every word in our Torah comes from God. Does he believe the same of the Quran? Clearly not. Then in what sense has God spoken to Muslims?

This dilemma lies at the heart of this book, and at the heart of the storm of controversy the book has caused. It is often true that a few quotes taken out of context lead us to forget the rest of what was said. But it is particularly unfortunate with this book, which contains chapters on many other subjects, on which Sacks writes movingly and well. Like everything he writes, the book is full of quotable phrases. “In the world of ideas, difference is resolved into sameness. Particulars give way to universals.” But, Sacks continues, the Hebrew Bible works the other way. From a history of the world, it turns to concentrate on one family. This is to teach us the dignity of difference. We encounter God in the face of the stranger. Judaism is about the miracle of unity that creates diversity.

### **Jewish self-congratulation**

Sacks goes on to write about technological advance, and points out how the invention of printing made the Reformation possible. Sacks attributes to Jews (or their Semitic ancestors) just as remarkable an invention, that of the alphabet, and reminds us that although writing (originally by means of pictures) was invented separately in many places across the world, the alphabet was

invented only once, and that its origins are still evident in the word itself, based on the first two Hebrew letters. Writing, the alphabet, the invention of printing – three revolutions. And now comes the fourth, the new information technologies, which are bound to have cumulative consequences, leading to new ways of understanding the human situation under God.

Jewish readers love to read about what we have given the world. There is a great deal of this kind of self-congratulation in this book. On tzedakah, the Jewish equivalent of charity, Sacks explains how it is “a concept for our time.” Unlike “charity,” tzedakah is a legally enforceable obligation to support the poor. And yet our state welfare systems (which do the same thing) have not ended poverty.

Then Sacks turns to politics, and here Judaism is praised for its anti-imperialist stance, the politics of a people free from slavery who owe allegiance only to God. And from here we rapidly pass to the Jewish emphasis on education, which Sacks calls “the basis of a free society.” The world needs that as well. Universal literacy is a relatively recent idea in the west, but Jews have sustained it through most of history.

### **Does Judaism support capitalism?**

As the book moves on, the arguments are increasingly well handled. Discussing mathematics and computer games, Sacks shows that our survival depends not on individual strength but on habits of co-operation. Community has a biological basis, and trust is created in a society only by people constantly inter-acting with one another. Political and economic ties are based on contract, but family and community ties are based on a different kind of agreement, for which Sacks uses the biblical word “covenant,” meaning relationships based on trust and faith. We need covenants as well as contracts, particularly in a world where so many have to work far too hard. Freedom takes away our loyalties, and marriage and attendance at places of worship decline. “One of the classic roles of religion has been to preserve a space immune to the pressure of the market.” Sacks’ attitude to the market ends up as complex as his attitude to other faiths: Judaism supports and values the free economy, but we must limit its impact. The market is a means, not an end. Sacks is gloriously eloquent on the problems of a world that is too materialistic and which puts too much faith in a market economy. The materialist position is summed up by an American car sticker. “The guy with the most toys when he dies wins.” But far too often in this book Sacks’ radicalism hits a brick wall. As with religious pluralism, so with the market, Sacks believes he can face both ways at once. He believes that in spite of its faults the free market is the best system yet devised. Sacks is very widely read, but he appears to have missed Bishop David Jenkins’ brilliant critique, *Market Whys and Human Wherefores*. It might have led him to a different conclusion.

### **Conservation and conciliation**

And from the free market, we move on to conservation, and the theme of the current environmental destruction of our planet. Sacks defends the Jewish tradition against the charge of promoting welfare at the expense of nature. The world belongs to God and our Torah insists that it be sustained. Through the weekly sabbath and the sabbatical and jubilee years, limits are set to our intervention in nature. Crossbreeding is prohibited in order to promote a sense of respect for the integrity of nature. “The power of the religious imagination is that it provides a framework of

thought for such large and intractable issues.” Sacks defines a moral framework based on control (taking responsibility), contribution, compassion, creativity, co-operation and conservation.

Then Sacks goes on to a C - word with even greater power – conciliation, and writes evocatively of the power of forgiveness to change the world. This is Sacks the writer at his most brilliant, a moving preacher of moral rearmament and forgiveness. Must Serbs and Albanians replay the great battle of 1389 until the end of time? Forgiveness is a daring idea because “no man ever forgets – where he has buried the hatchet.” Forgiveness in Judaism is a drama in five acts – the covenant with Noah, Joseph’s ability to forgive his brothers, God’s forgiveness of the Israelites who worshipped the golden calf, and then the fourth act of the drama, the extension of forgiveness to international relations: “Do not hate an Egyptian, for you were strangers in his land.” Finally for Jews (and he might have added, for Christians too) forgiveness becomes integral to our individual religious life. And then Sacks comes to the most moving, most important passage in this book, where he writes about forgiveness between Jews and Palestinians. “As a Jew I carry with me the tears and sufferings of my grandparents.... For centuries, Jews knew that they or their children risked being murdered because they were Jews. How can I let go of that pain? And yet I must, For the sake of my children and theirs. Hating the Palestinians will not bring Israel one step nearer to peace....”

### **A storm of protest**

And yet, this magnificent climax to the book was the start of the storm of controversy. It all began at the end of August 2002 when the author was interviewed about the book by Jonathan Freedland in the British newspaper, The Guardian. In the course of the interview, Sacks made some remarks about Israel, which the newspaper headlined as “Israel set on tragic path, says chief rabbi. Guardian interview will shock Jewish community.”

The article began: “Britain’s chief rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, today delivers an unprecedentedly strong warning to Israel, arguing that the country is adopting a stance ‘incompatible’ with the deepest ideals of Judaism, and that the current conflict with the Palestinians is ‘corrupting’ Israeli culture.”

I suspect that Sacks was not intending to make a political point, but a moral one, that war brutalises. But instead of trying to explain his remarks, Sacks quickly backtracked, saying that on reflection he should not have allowed himself to be interviewed by a newspaper so known to be anti-Israel. In a Radio 4 interview in January 2003, Sacks denied ever having uttered the offending words to The Guardian.

But more was to follow. Sacks allowed a chapter from his book to be printed in the New Year edition of the Jewish Chronicle. This brought it to the attention of hard-line Orthodox colleagues, who summoned him to the leafy suburbs of North Manchester for a three-hour meeting in their heartland. Sacks emerged chastened, declaring that he would have to change a few sentences in the next edition, that the book was written for a non-Jewish leadership, and that he was wrong to have put it into the newspaper.

Written for a non-Jewish readership? Perhaps that explains why my local Jewish bookshop had been unable to obtain copies. But it does not explain why Sacks reportedly gave away copies to Jewish colleagues. And what exactly was so startling, that Jews should not read it?

From this beginning, the storm grew greater. The organiser of a major Orthodox Jewish day of learning in Manchester decided to cancel an invitation to the Chief Rabbi, to keep the meeting free of controversy. Sacks' own Beit Din "the Court of the Chief Rabbi" demanded changes to the wording, and an Israeli Rabbi declared the book forbidden in a Jewish home. Even a leading moderate London Rabbi, Alan Plancey, who declared the book "brilliant," was forced to add that "various passages are open to misinterpretation." A Chief Rabbi, he argued, cannot be a philosopher as well as a Chieftain. In an editorial, the Jewish Chronicle argued that the new edition "will require him to choose among the various different voices he has used, for different and often irreconcilable audiences, since assuming office 11 years ago." Speaking at the Limmud Jewish education conference in December 2002, the editor of the Jewish Chronicle, Ned Temko, pointed out that Orthodox Judaism normally makes a distinction between the people and the texts of other faiths. Rav Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel said that. "The individual who sings the song of all humanity is close to God." But he refrained from uttering approval of the scripture of other faiths. Jonathan Sacks does seem to have stepped over a line which separates him from previous Orthodox Jewish thinking on religious pluralism.

The Guardian argued (19th November 2002) that Sacks was wrong to rewrite. Under the heading "Sacks change operation," the paper complained: "far from stoutly defending his stance, he has promised to rewrite the offending passages in a new edition. That has disappointed moderates and hardly pleased enemies who have seized on it as a sign of weakness. There was another way. The incoming Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has also been accused of heresy by his own hardliners. Far from changing his tune, he says he cannot retract what he has written and that his accusers will have to live with it. Dr Sacks should have done the same: that he has not is a loss to his own community and to a wider society which might have looked to him for a moral lead."

### **How to avoid the clash?**

The storm caused by the book reminds me of the medieval Maimonidean controversy, when the greatest Jewish scholar of all time was attacked for his synthesis of Greek philosophy and Jewish faith, a dispute which turned into 200 years of debate between rationalists and mystics. Like Sacks in our times, Maimonides was forced to publish new works in order to explain "heretical" aspects of what he had written. Yet now 800 years on, it is Maimonides who is studied while his critics are all but forgotten.

The book has a subtitle "How to avoid the clash of civilisations." In view of the storm it has caused, there is a wonderful irony here. At the official launch, Jonathan Sacks said: "I decided to write the book on January 31st 2002 when I was in New York and stood at Ground Zero and saw the scale of devastation. Somehow, the discord, the strange contrast between our ability to come together in grief - religion as conflict mediation, as friendship - and the sheer tribal passions that seemed to be making our world so dangerous a place. That is why I wanted to see whether we could turn religion into a force of conflict resolution instead of a force for conflict creation, and whether it could do something to make a little more distant and a little less disastrous Samuel

Huntington's prediction of the clash of civilisations. As I said at the time, and I repeat in the book: religion is like fire: it warms but it also burns and we are the guardians of the flame." At the risk of fanning the flames, I cannot but mention that Sacks' comments at the launch, as reported on his official website, were even more controversial and explicit than the printed text; "The unity of God up there represents itself in particularity down here; the truth is not one God therefore one faith, one way – but one God whom each of us can speak to in our own language because each faith is a language."

Whatever changes Sacks makes to his book, it is now clear that it will not be enough to satisfy his hardline critics, who condemn the book from beginning to end. Writing in the Orthodox newspaper, Jewish Tribune, Rabbi A.A.Cohen asserts that non-Jews are not entitled to have any religious rites or theological system of their own, since Judaism is the only true religion. Clearly no rewrite will be able to be harmonised with such a view. Sacks is further accused of stating the earth is at least 65 million years old (p. 69 of the book), which is anathema to the "creationists" within the Jewish community. Jewish "creationists," though they do not realise it, in fact adopt a Christian fundamentalist line on the literal truth of the creation story. They fail to recognise how inconsistent this is with their view that there is no truth to be found in other faiths. And yet on one point I concur with Sacks' hardline critics. They too find laughable Sacks' attempt to defend the book on the grounds that it was not written for a Jewish readership. Truth does not depend on who the reader is.

Will Sacks' work endure? There is undoubtedly a real problem with his view of pluralism. It is an issue on which he has lost his way before. It makes no sense to value pluralism, to see it as central to a fast-shrinking world, and yet at the same time to deny pluralism to Jews. Yet that remains the Orthodox line. Christians and Muslims can form as many sects as they like, so long as Jews stand up for tradition. And it remains an argument that is untenable.