

Jonathan Sacks: The Dignity of Difference

HOW TO AVOID THE CLASH OF CIVILISATIONS

Selections chosen by Shira Batya Lewin Solomons. With some notes in purple.

Bold face added. *Italics* are from the original. / indicates new page

Note: All quotes are from the first edition (2002), not the adulterated second edition (2004).

First editions are readily available very cheaply on [Amazon](#).

The 2nd edition radically altered the core chapter (Exorcising Plato's Ghost pp. 45-66).

Gil Student summarises all the changes Sacks made for the 2nd edition here:

<https://www.torahmusings.com/2007/10/differences-of-dignity/>

Religious Absolutes / Page 19

Relativism is too weak to resist the storm winds of religious fervour. Only an equal and opposite fervour can do that. I do not believe that the sanctity of human life and the inalienable freedoms of a just society are relative. They are religious absolutes. They flow directly from the proposition that it was not we who created God in our image but God who made us in His. They belong to the very tradition that Jews, Christians and Muslims - who have spent so much of their history in mutual hostility - share.

Monotheism is not one Truth / Page 21

... the proposition at the heart of monotheism is not what has it has traditionally been taken to be: one God therefore one faith, one truth, one way. To the contrary, it is that *unity creates diversity*...

... if we listen carefully, we will hear the voice of God telling us something we need to know. That is what I mean by *the dignity of difference*.

Theology of Difference / Page 21

Often, when religious leaders meet and talk, the emphasis is on similarities and commonalities, as if the differences between faiths were superficial and trivial. That is not, however, what comes to fore at times of conflict. It is then that what seems to an outsider to be minor variations take on immense significance, dividing neighbourhoods and turning erstwhile friends into enemies. Feud called this 'the narcissism of small differences'. There is nothing so slight that it cannot, under pressure, be turned into a marker of identity and thus of mutual estrangement. We need, in other words, **not only a theology of commonality – of the universals of mankind – but also a theology of difference**: why it exists, why it matters, why it is constitutive of our humanity, **why it represents the will of God**.

What is Religion / Page 42

The word religion, by contrast, comes from the Latin *religare*, meaning 'to bind'. That is what religions did and still do. They bind people to one another and to God.

Religion versus politics / Page 42

Religion and politics are different enterprises. They arose in response to different needs: in the one case to bind people together in their commonality, in the other to mediate peaceably between their differences.

Religion / identity Page 46

Religion is about identity and identity excludes. For every 'We' there is a 'Them', the people not like us. There are kin and non-kin, friends and strangers, brothers and others, and without these boundaries it is questionable whether we would have an identity at all.

Plato's Ghost / Pages 49-50

It is a wondrous dream, that of Plato, and one that has never ceased to appeal to his philosophical and religious heirs: the dream of reason, a world of order set against the chaos of life, an eternity beyond the here and now. Its single most powerful idea is that truth - reality, the essence of things - is universal. How could it be otherwise? What is true is true for everyone at all times, and so **the more universal a culture is, the closer to truth it comes.**

(p. 50) ... but Judaism remained a particularistic and therefore tribal faith. It was trapped into the parochialism of antiquity.

Universalism is not an adequate response to tribalism / Page 50

My main argument is ... that universalism is an inadequate response to tribalism, and no less dangerous. It leads to the belief – superficially compelling but quite false - **that there is only one truth about the essentials of the human condition**, and it holds true for all people at all times. If I am right, you are wrong. If what I believe is the truth, then your belief, which differs from mine, must be an error from which you must be converted, cured and saved. From this flowed some of **the great crimes of history**, some under religious auspices, others - the French and Russian revolutions, for example - under the banner of secular philosophies, but both under **the enchantment of Plato's ghost.**

Tower of Babel / Page 52

It is a supreme act of hubris, committed time and again in history - from the Sumerian city-states, to Plato's *Republic*, to empires, ancient and modern, to the Soviet Union. It is **the attempt to impose a man-made unity on divinely created diversity.** That is what is wrong with universalism.

Babel - the first global project - is the turning point in the biblical narrative. From then on, God will not attempt a universal, order again until the end of days.

Note: dream of a Messianic age when all the irresolvable disputes will be resolved. **Teiku.**

Judaism does not believe in one Truth / Page 52-54

Judaism is / a particularist monotheism. It believes in one God but not in one religion, one culture, one truth...

God, the creator of humanity, having made a covenant with all humanity, then turns to one people and commands it to be different *in order to teach humanity the dignity of difference*.

Biblical monotheism is not the idea that there is one God and therefore one truth, one faith one way of life. On the contrary, it is the idea that *unity creates diversity...* (p. 54) Judaism is about the miracle of unity that creates diversity.

Science versus Ethics / Page 54

Plato's assertion of the **universality of truth is valid when applied to science** and the description of what is. It is **invalid when applied to ethics, spirituality and our sense of what ought to be**. There is a difference between *physis* and *nomos*, description and prescription, nature and culture, or - to put it in biblical terms – between creation and revelation.

Note: Sacks seems to be engaging in moral relativism here. Elsewhere he does not. Does he resolve the paradox?

Language Diversity / Pages 54-5

Cultures are like languages. The world they describe is the same but *the* ways they do so are almost infinitely varied. English is not French. Italian is not German. Urdu is not Ugaritic. Each language is the product of a specific community and its history, its shared experiences and sensibilities. There is no universal language...

What we cannot do is place ourselves outside the particularities of language to arrive at a truth, a way of understanding and / responding to the world that applies to everyone at all times. That is not the essence of humanity but an attempt to escape from humanity.

Note: Soloveitchik also notes that different cultures speak different languages. That is why we cannot understand each other (and should not try). By contrast, Sacks celebrates this difference in language. It is God's will as evidenced by the Tower of Babel story.

God speaks in more than one language Page 55

The radical transcendence of God in the Hebrew Bible means nothing more or less than that *there is a difference between God and religion*. God is universal, religions are particular.

Religion is the translation of God into a particular language and thus into the life of a group, nation, a community of faith. In the course of history, **God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims.** Only such a God is truly transcendental -- greater not only than the natural universe but also than the spiritual universe articulated in any single faith, any specific language of human sensibility. How could a sacred text convey such an idea? It would declare that **God is God of all humanity, but no single faith is or should be the faith of all humanity.** Only such a narrative would lead us to see the presence of God in people of other faiths. Only such a worldview could reconcile the particularity of cultures with the universality of the human condition.

Moral absolutes do not need to be universal Page 55

This means that religious truth is not universal. What it does *not* mean is that it is relative. There is a difference, all too often ignored, between absoluteness and universality. I have an absolute obligation to my child, but it is not a universal one, Indeed, it is precisely this non-universality, this particularity that

constitutes parenthood – the ability to feel a bond with *this* child, not all children indiscriminately, that is what makes love, love: not a generalised affection for persons of such-and-such a type, but a particular attachment to this person in his or her uniqueness. This ability to form an absolute bond of loyalty and obligation to someone in particular as opposed to persons-in-general goes to the very core of what we mean by being human.

Note: This is related to the concept of covenant. We have an absolute obligation to do mitzvot as Jews because this is our particular relationship with God. We do not expect non-Jews to share this obligation with us. Different people have different bonds of obligation within their own religious frameworks.

This begs the question whether it is immoral for a person to convert to a different religion.

God as Parent, not a philosophical proposition / p. 56

God as we encounter Him in the Bible is not a philosophical or scientific concept: the first cause, the prime mover, initiator of the Big Bang. He is a parent... always bearing the love that a parent feels for a child he/she has brought into being, The God of the Hebrew Bible is not a Platonist, loving the abstract form of humanity, He is a particularist, loving each of his children for what they are.

Particularity teaches us universality / p. 56

The God of Abraham teaches humanity a more complex truth than simple oppositions - particular/universal, individual/state, tribe/humanity - would

allow. We are particular *and* universal, the same *and* different, human beings as such, *but also* members of this family, that community, this history, that heritage, **our particularity is our window on to universality**, just as our language is the only way we have of understanding the world we share with speakers of other languages. God no more wants faiths and cultures to be the same than a loving parent wants his or her children to be the same. That is the conceptual link between love, creation and difference. **We serve God, author of diversity, by respecting diversity.**

Philosophy focuses on the unsituated self / pp. 56-7

Philosophical ethics, true to Platonic origins, focuses on what we have in common... / Even when philosophy focuses on the individual it tends to do so in abstract terms: the **'unsituated self' divorced from constitutive attachments to family, friends, community and history. That is what gives philosophical morality its 'thin' or context-free character.**

... Biblical morality, by contrast, is far more complex... There are **indeed moral universals** - the sanctity of life, the dignity of the human person, the right to be free, to be no man's slave or the object of someone else's violence

... On the other hand, we are also members of a particular family with its specific history and memory. We are part of a 'thick' or context-bound morality (represented, in Judaism, by the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants) which confers on us loyalties and obligations to the members of our community that go beyond mere justice.

... 'thick; or context-laden moralities are more fundamental than 'thin' or universal ones

Note: But do we all agree on even these moral universals? We debate the ethics of abortion and euthanasia. Biblical Judaism allowed slavery, as have many societies that viewed themselves as moral. Particularistic morality often treated certain classes of human beings as not having human rights.

Empathy: the particular teaches the universal / 58

The universality of moral concern is not something we learn by being universal but by being particular. Because we know what it is to be a parent, loving our children, not children in general. We understand what it is for someone else, somewhere else, to be a parent, loving his or her children, not ours. **There is no road to human solidarity that does not begin with moral particularity** -- by coming to know what it means to be a child, a parent, a neighbour, a friend. We learn to love humanity by loving specific human beings. There is no short-cut.

Empathising with the stranger / p. 59

... this is precisely the reason why the Israelites have to undergo exile and slavery

prior to their birth as a nation. They have to learn from the inside and never lose the memory of what it feels like to be an outsider, an alien, a stranger.

Note: But we do not personally know what it is like to be slaves. The fact that we can identify as former slaves by telling a story itself shows that it is possible to gain understanding from the experience of others. The challenge is to do that without appropriating their experiences, claiming to be what we are not and appropriating victimhood. So we have our own particular story that includes our own redemption.

Finding God's image in the stranger / pp. 59-60

... *We encounter God in the face of a stranger.* That, I believe, is the Hebrew Bible's single greatest and most counterintuitive contribution to ethics. /

... The supreme religious challenge is to **see God's Image in one who is not in our image**. That is the converse of tribalism. But it is also something other than universalism. It takes difference seriously. **It recognises the integrity of other cultures**, other civilizations, other paths to the presence of God.

Universalism is oppressive / p. 61

Universalism grants rights if and only if the outsider converts, conforms, assimilates, and ceases to be an outsider. Tribalism turns the concept of a chosen people into that of a master-race. Universalism turns the truth of a single culture into the measure of humanity. The results are often tragic and always an affront to human dignity.

... There have been five universalist cultures in the history of the West: the Alexandrian Empire, ancient Rome, medieval Christianity and Islam, and the Enlightenment. Jews suffered under all five

... The Enlightenment failed to prevent the Holocaust. What turned out to be the source of intolerance was not religion as such...

It was universalism or what I have called 'Plato's ghost'. The critical test of any order is: does it make space for otherness? Does It acknowledge the dignity of difference?

Note: Yes, it is oppressive to be forced to assimilate. But some assimilation is essential for an outsider to become a *ger toshav*. The outsider must at the very least buy into the values that the society shares, so that we can all live in peace as a society. That includes the liberal value of respecting difference and not forcing their ideas on others. Respect has to be two ways.

The enlightenment did not prevent the Holocaust, but can it really be blamed? For the French revolution for Marxism maybe. But the Holocaust was a reaction *against* the Enlightenment.

Human rights are not enough / p. 62

After 1945, the world placed its faith – as did the French Revolution – in a universal code of human rights. ... equivalent to the biblical covenant with Noah...

No universal code as ,such, tells us what we would lose were the multiplicity of civilizations to be reduced; were one culture to dominate all others...

The abstract language of rights fails to enter into the depth of what Hinduism means to a Hindu... It suggests that the particularities of a culture are mere accretions to our essential and indivisible humanity, instead of being the very substance of how most people learn what it is to be human...

[Truth in Heaven vs Truth on Earth / pp. 64-5](#)

Truth on the ground is multiple, partial. Fragments of it lie everywhere. Each person, culture and language has part of it; none has it all.

Truth on earth is not, nor can it aspire to be, the whole truth. It is limited, not comprehensive; particular, not universal. **When two propositions conflict it is not necessarily because one is true the other false.** It may be, and often is, that each represents a different perspective on reality, an alternative way of structuring order... In heaven there is truth; on earth there are truths. /

... the truth at the beating heart of monotheism is that **God is greater than religion; that He is only partially comprehended by any faith.**

... He exists not only in my faith, but also in yours. That is not to say that there are many gods. That is polytheism. Nor is it to say that God endorses every act done in His name. On the contrary: a God of your side as well as mine must be a God of justice who stands above us both, teaching us to make space for one another, to hear each other's claims and to resolve them equitably. Only such a God would be truly transcendent

[How to deal with moral difference? / p.83](#)

And we do not truly believe that / moral issues are private – if we did, there would be no protests on environmental or human rights issues, no public moral debate at all. Yet the question is real and urgent: how do we live with moral difference and yet sustain an overarching community?

The answer, I have already suggested, is *conversation* - not mere debate but the disciplined act of communicating (making my views intelligible to someone who does not share them) and listening (entering into the inner world of someone whose views are opposed to my own)...

In a debate one side wins, the other loses, but both are the same as they were before. In a conversation neither side loses and both are changed, because they now know what reality looks like from a different perspective.

... That is how public morality is constructed in a plural society -- not by a single dominant voice, nor by the relegation of moral issues to the private domain of home and local congregation, but by sustained act of understanding and seeking to be understood across the boundaries of difference.

In a plural society - all the more so in a plural world - **each of us has to settle** for less than we do when we associate with fellow believers. 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 and make a compelling case, for the right to construct a life along different lines.** Yet what we lose is more than compensated for by the fact that together we are co-architects of a society larger than we could construct on our own, one in which our voice is heard and attended to even if it does not carry the day.