Can we have a theology of difference?

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Abstract
The former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, wrote about the dignity of difference. This article seeks to understand what this might mean in terms of interfaith relationships and in terms of relationships between Christians holding different views within the Church.

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difference, dignity, interfaith relations, internal church relations, Jonathan Sacks

In 2002, Great Britain’s Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, published a book entitled The Dignity of Difference. In it he sought to explain how people of different faiths might relate to one another; there should be what he called a ‘dignity of difference’. He sought to be inclusive of all people and all faiths; an article that was published in the New York Times after his death called him ‘the UK’s inclusive former Chief Rabbi’. In his drive for inclusion he talked about what he called a ‘theology of difference’. That phrase has haunted me since I first read the book shortly after its publication; Sacks’ death has prompted me to unpack what the idea might mean from a Christian perspective.

The dignity of difference
Writing his book not long after the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center in New York, Sacks said that the great faiths must become a source of peace rather than division. As well as the attack on the Twin Towers, he also had in mind
Samuel Huntington’s book *The Clash of Civilizations*, in which Huntington argued that there was a necessary clash between Western and other civilizations, and particularly between the Christian West and Islam as the other major world faith. Huntington argued as follows: ‘the underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power.’

Jonathan Sacks sought a different way. He said that each faith needs to find a way of living with others, with members of each acknowledging the integrity of other faiths. He asked whether we might ‘make space for difference. Can we hear the voice of God in a language, a sensibility, a culture not our own? Can we see the presence of God in the face of a stranger?’ What Sacks was wanting was, in the words of the *New York Times*, inclusivity. In other words, he wanted faith communities to acknowledge that ‘their’ God might in some way be present in other faiths. From his own faith perspective he suggested that ‘Judaism, Christianity and Islam are religions of revelation – faiths in which God speaks and we attempt to listen’. He suggested that traditionally monotheism has been understood to mean that there is one God, one faith, one truth and one way. He set out to argue that instead there is one God but one who created diversity.

Sacks notes that the Bible does not begin with the creation of the Jewish people: instead, it begins with the story of Adam and Eve, a story about humanity as a whole. Then it moves on to the story of Noah; through him God makes a covenant with mankind, known in the Jewish tradition as the Noahide Covenant. Following Noah we have the story of the Tower of Babel, a story in which man is ‘scattered...over all the earth’, a scattering that results in different languages. Only then does the Bible focus on one man, Abraham, the forefather of the Jewish people. In other words, the Bible begins with the creation of and covenant with all men before it proceeds to the particularity of the Jews. So, at the very start God is involved with everyone and not just the Jewish people. Sacks argues that the universality of the covenant with Noah is followed by the development of different races and cultures. That difference involves a difference in religious belief.

‘In the course of history, God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims.’ Sacks argues that religious truth is not universal and that God no more wants all faiths and cultures to be the same than a loving parent wants his or her children to be the same. The challenge for people of faith, therefore, is to see God’s image in one who is not in our own image. Difference is therefore something to be celebrated, not something to be used as a reason for conflict.

Jonathan Sacks’ inclusivity got him into trouble. Critics argued that by suggesting that God might reveal himself through faiths other than Judaism he was undermining belief in the uniqueness of the Torah. Two senior Orthodox rabbis asked that the book be recalled. Then a leading rabbi in Jerusalem, an expert in Jewish law, ruled that the book contained ideas that were inconsistent with Jewish
beliefs. The result was that Sacks agreed to alter or delete what were considered to be offending passages when the book was reprinted in a second edition.

In the new edition, his statement that Christianity and Islam were ‘faiths in which God speaks’ as well as Judaism was deleted. His statement that ‘God has created many cultures, civilizations and faiths’ was replaced by ‘there are many cultures, civilizations and faiths’. And the phrase ‘no one creed has a monopoly on spiritual truth’ was deleted. A number of other phrases were also amended.8

Jonathan Sacks had tried to dignify difference: he had tried to dignify religions other than his own by suggesting that God can make himself known through a variety of faiths. By his amendments he retained the idea that members of other faiths might still be dignified but in a different manner: now he argued that God had made himself known through the people of Israel and that members of other faiths or none should obey the Noahide commandments. By doing so they would be dignified because Jews would recognize that they were following God’s provisions for them, whatever their religious beliefs.

The dignity of difference towards those outside the Church

The Church has not always had good relationships with those of other faiths. In the third century, for example, Hippolytus argued that Jews should act as slaves because they had killed Jesus. The Council of Nicaea referred in 325 AD to the Jews as ‘this odious people’. Later in the same century Hilary of Poitiers suggested that the Jews were a people whom God had cursed for ever. In the thirteenth century, Archbishop John Peckham ordered that synagogues should be destroyed, while the Bishop of Exeter said that Christians were not to meet with Jews nor were they to take medicine from a Jewish doctor.

Martin Luther suggested that Jewish homes and synagogues should be burned and, in his On the Jews and their Lies, portrayed Jews as ‘nothing but thieves and robbers who daily eat no morsel and wear no thread of clothing which they have not stolen and pilfered from us by means of their accursed usury’. The Church’s history of anti-Semitism is something we should admit and confront with shame. Difference in faith was something that gave rise to insult and hate; it might be said to have laid the seedbed for the Holocaust.

The Church of England’s Faith and Order Commission’s recent document on Christian–Jewish relations says that the Church needs to repent of its anti-Semitic history. Although we ourselves might not have an anti-Semitic inclination today, the report suggests that ‘where the continuing effects of past sins by members of the one body of Christ continue to be felt and where those sins have not come to an end, then members of Christ’s body here and now are bound to seek God’s mercy’.9 Such repentance would enable us to restore a dignity to the relationship between Christians and Jews.

There are still some sections of the Church where the sort of insults and demeaning actions of medieval and reformation Christians towards those of other faiths are still exhibited. In 2018, for example, protests were raised about
a visit to the UK by Franklin Graham for an evangelistic speaking tour. Objectors said that he had called Islam ‘evil’ and ‘wicked’ and had said that Barack Obama’s ‘problem is that he was born a Muslim’. Fortunately, public statements of this kind by church leaders today are few and far between. Yet questions are naturally raised about the status of other faiths. Are they true? Do their members worship the same God as we do?

The Roman Catholic Church in particular has led the way in affirming the value of other faith traditions and the dignity of their members. In the 1965 document *Nostra Aetate*, Pope Paul declared that ‘the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions’. In a ground-breaking declaration in the same document, the Pope dignified members of the Jewish faith by renouncing the idea that they were in some way responsible for Christ’s death.

What happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures.

With regard to Muslims, Pope John Paul II said to them in Casablanca: ‘We believe in the same God, the one God, the living God, the God who created the world and brings his creatures to their perfection.’ In so saying he was reflecting the words of official Roman Catholic teaching embodied in the *Nostra Aetate* declaration: ‘The Church regards with esteem... the Moslems. They adore the one God.’

Christians will have different views about members of other faiths: they may have different views as to whether, as *Nostra Aetate* suggests, Muslims (and Jews) worship the one God. Where they are unsure about this they may prefer the weaker affirmation that they bear witness to the one God. There is a similar range of opinion on the question of salvation: some will maintain a more conservative position with the belief that members of other faiths cannot enter the kingdom of God while others will suggest that God’s love would not reject people simply because they had been brought up in another faith tradition.

Whatever position members of the Church might take on these issues, we must surely follow Jonathan Sacks’ advice and grant members of other faiths a dignity even though their beliefs and practices are different from our own. Whatever their beliefs, it remains true that Jews and Muslims, for example, seek to follow the values that their faiths demand. They seek to put God first and set aside time to worship and pray. Their respective faith communities will offer service to their local communities. They will put a value on kindness and serving their neighbour. For these reasons, whatever our theological differences, we must ascribe them dignity.

What might it mean, then, for the Church to dignify our Jewish and Muslim colleagues? It means that we must value them as individuals, as communities, and value too their devotion to their faith. There must be no return to the rejection, hate and demeaning of our medieval forebears – or of their modern counterparts. We must value them even though they are different and even though we may
disagree with them on some issues. To quote the title of Richard Sudworth’s book, we must be distinctly welcoming: we have a faith that is distinct from that of others but we must welcome them. Andrew Smith, in his book on interfaith relations, suggests that working with members of other faiths and with religious dialogue ‘is not a specialist activity or theological discipline but an outworking of the commands to love God and to love our neighbour’. In my own church in Leeds, we have dignified our Jewish and Muslim neighbours in a number of ways. We have discussed the issue of Israel/Palestine with them; we have gathered together Jews, Christians and Muslims in the city and publicly rejected the concept of violence in the name of faith; we have visited local mosques and attended Muslim *iftars* during Ramadan; members of the congregation have organized interfaith meals in their homes for Jewish, Christian and Muslim students at two of our universities; we send greetings to Jewish and Muslim communities on our Facebook page at the time of major religious festivals. Some churches carry out social action projects with members of other faiths; some work together on the issue of climate change; some have come together to look at the problem of housing. All these activities are enjoyable, help to build community, and, of course, help us ascribe dignity to those who are religiously different.

**The dignity of difference towards those within the Church**

The Church is the body of Christ: it is at the same time a very human institution. The former means that it has a unity: the latter means that it contains difference. In the book of Acts it is clear that there were disagreements between ‘Grecian Jews’ and ‘Hebraic Jews’ (Acts 6.1). In 1 Corinthians, St Paul indicates that some in the church at Corinth were saying ‘I follow Paul’ while others were saying ‘I follow Apollos’ (1 Corinthians 3.4). Later on in the same letter he indicates that there had been division between those with different gifts: they had not seen themselves as members of one body but rather as competing parts.

Throughout the early history of the Church there were disagreements on doctrine, particularly with regard to Christology. Was Christ simply a man (the Ebionites)? Was God’s Son a created being and not of one substance with the Father (Arianism)? And what about the procession of the Holy Spirit: does the Spirit ‘proceed from the Father’ (the Eastern Church) or ‘from the Father and the Son’ (the Western Church)? At the Reformation the Protestant Church was formed following on from doctrinal disputes with the Roman Catholic Church. Within the Protestant Church there were divisions between Calvinists and those who disagreed with the idea of double predestination and between Christians supporting a variety of forms of eucharistic belief and practice.

Within the Church of England there are differences between conservatives and liberals; between those holding ‘high’ and ‘low’ sacramental doctrines; between clergy who are happy to marry a couple where one party has been divorced and those who are not; between those who will accept oversight by female clergy and
those who see it as unscriptural; and churches may have differing policies on baptism.

Many of these differences stem from different interpretations of the Bible or from a different emphasis being placed on early church history. Some in a particular theological or ecclesiastical tradition may think that theirs is the ‘correct’ one and that others are simply wrong. But it might not be as simple as they think. How is it that people from the same faith tradition can have such differences in belief? Why does one set of people interpret Scripture one way and another set another way? Can we say that one group is inspired by the Holy Spirit and that another is not?

Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist and professor at New York University, may help us appreciate why we have different viewpoints. His book *The Righteous Mind* is subtitled *Why good people are divided by politics and religion.* One of the ideas he puts forward is that, when it comes to deciding about right and wrong, we think we use reason to make those decisions. Actually, he argues, we do not; instead, we intuit a response very quickly and then use reason to back up the conclusion we have already come to. That initial intuition may be formed on the basis of what our family, friends and others we look up to themselves think. In other words, we make an emotional response first and only then do we use reason. I suggest that the same may be true with regard to much of our religious belief. We believe because of what we have seen in others; reason plays a much more minor part than we might think.

It is because of the role of our affective rather than our rational side that we may find it difficult to accept that we really do have differences: we may simply assume that we are right and that ‘the others’ are wrong. Within the Church, we may need to learn to accept others much more willingly and lovingly, recognizing difference and acknowledging that they may feel about their difference in the same way that we feel about ours. Once we do that, the way is open for ascribing to others a dignity of difference. We may need to jettison the idea that I am right and that they are wrong and replace it instead with the idea that each of us holds a particular belief and that we can dignify one another. Each of us may be able both to interpret Scripture or appeal to a particular authority and to genuinely come to different conclusions.

**Conclusion: difference – to be accepted or celebrated?**

In looking at different religions, John Thatamanil asks whether we can see religious diversity as a ‘gift and promise rather than a mark of error’. If Christians believe that Jesus Christ is God’s incarnate Word, they must continue to say that it is through him that revelation and salvation come to humanity. But that should not lead to us simply rejecting other faith traditions. We should rejoice that Jews and Muslims, for example, seek to worship and serve God and to put him first in the way that we do as Christians. We can say that God is pleased with others when they seek to worship their creator and live according to his will as they understand it. That can be celebrated. That is dignifying difference.
The same will hold true when it comes to other traditions and beliefs within our own Church. We may not agree with the way in which others interpret the Bible or with their beliefs about the sacraments or how the Church should be ordered. But just as we should do with members of other faiths, so too we should value and dignify those with whom we may disagree within our Christian community. They too can be celebrated because they too are putting God first and seeking to follow him.

We must seek to dignify those whose beliefs are different from our own. That is what a theology of difference looks like. And that theology should not prevent each side from engaging in robust debate with the other. In the light of current discussion, what would be the result if the principle of ascribing dignity to those with whom we disagree was applied to those with opposite views on matters of sexuality and marriage?

Notes

1. Jonathan Sacks, The Dignity of Difference: how to avoid the clash of civilizations (London: Continuum, 2002).
2. Sacks, The Dignity of Difference, p. 21.
3. Samuel P. Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (London: Simon and Schuster, 1997), p. 217.
4. Sacks, The Dignity of Difference, p. 5.
5. Sacks, The Dignity of Difference, p. 19.
6. The Noahide Covenant is a series of seven commandments based on Genesis 9.9. They are outlined and explained at <www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/sourcebook/Noahide_covenant.htm>.
7. Sacks, The Dignity of Difference, p. 55.
8. For a fuller account of the debate and of textual amendments, see Simon Rocker, ‘Vive la différence’, Jewish Chronicle, 14 February 2003, p. 27.
9. Church of England Faith and Order Commission, God’s Unfailing Word: theological and practical perspectives on Christian–Jewish relations (London: Church House Publishing, 2019), p. 20.
10. Harriet Sherwood, ‘Muslim group calls for preacher linked to Trump to be denied UK visa’, Guardian, 9 September 2018 <www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/09/muslim-council- Insists-evangelical-preacher-franklin-graham-be-denied-uk-visa>.
11. Pope Paul, Nostra Aetate, 28 October 1965, Section 2 <www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html>.
12. Pope Paul, Nostra Aetate, Section 4.
13. Quoted in Miroslav Volf, Allah: a Christian response (New York: HarperOne, 2012), p. 27.
14. Pope Paul, Nostra Aetate, Section 3.
15. For a discussion on the relation of Christianity to other faiths, see David G. Kibble, ‘New directions in relating Christianity to other faiths’, Theology, Vol. 122, no. 1 (2019), pp. 30–7; David G. Kibble, ‘The Pope and the Grand Imam: how inclusive can Christians and Muslims be?’ in Mitri Raheb (ed.), Towards an Inclusive Society (Bethlehem: Diyar Publisher, 2020), pp. 53–68.
16. Richard Sudworth, *Distinctly Welcoming: Christian presence in a multifaith society* (London: Scripture Union, 2007).
17. Andrew Smith, *Vibrant Christianity in Multifaith Britain* (Abingdon: BRF, 2018), p. 77.
18. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: why good people are divided by politics and religion* (London: Penguin Books, 2013).
19. John J. Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant: a comparative theology of religious diversity* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2020), p. 4.

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