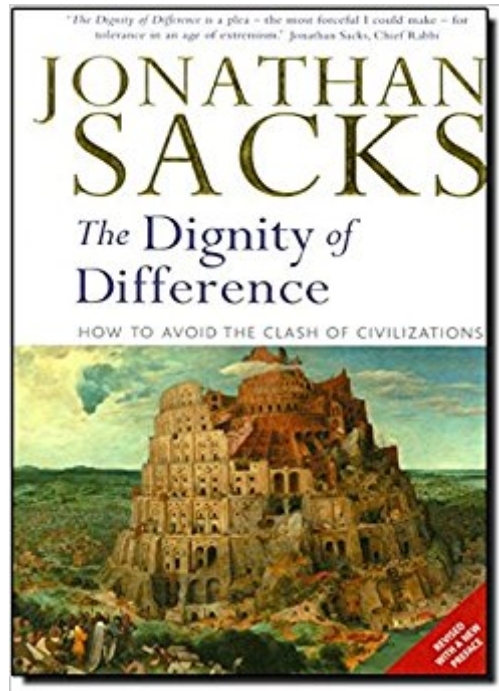




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# The Dignity Of Difference: How To Avoid The Clash Of Civilizations



## Synopsis

The year 2001 began as the United Nations Year of Dialogue between Civilizations. By its end, the phrase that came most readily to mind was 'the clash of civilizations.' The tragedy of September 11 intensified the danger caused by religious differences around the world. As the politics of identity begin to replace the politics of ideology, can religion become a force for peace? The Dignity of Difference is Rabbi Jonathan Sacks's radical proposal for reconciling hatreds. The first major statement by a Jewish leader on the ethics of globalization, it also marks a paradigm shift in the approach to religious coexistence. Sacks argues that we must do more than search for values common to all faiths; we must also reframe the way we see our differences.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“A brave plea for universal values.” —David Goldberg, The

Guardian  
“The Dignity of Difference stands far above the many other books about globalisation, both for what it has to say and for the grace with which it says it. In this most prophetic work, Rabbi Sacks has written a guide for the perplexed of our

time.” —Daniel Johnson, Daily Telegraph  
“The Dignity of Difference is a profound book that forces believers to think.” —Ziauddin Sardar, The

Independent  
“It is a splendid book. In the light of September 11, it is timely, sensible,

well-written and thoughtful.” —Dan Cohn-Sherbok, The London Times  
“Aims to define nothing less than a basis for religiously sensitive civilisation.” —Rowan

Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, The Jewish Chronicle  
“Americans will be taken with his incisive

and clear writing style...he provides some much-needed spiritual uplift in this post-9/11 world, and his work is accessible to informed lay readers." *Library Journal*"This book is far more interesting for its discussion of faith and philosophy than for its determination of concrete politics. Perhaps this is the task of rabbis, to explain and guide rather than to rule and legislate. Jonathan Sacks writes well; every sentence counts, but the space behind the grandiloquence always leaves room for interpretation. It is this ambiguity which wins him as many admirers as detractors."

*The Jerusalem Post*, 6/9/02.'The Dignity of Difference has a central and compelling vision: the magnificence and inspiring human diversity of our world'| The Chief Rabbi has made a convincing case for respecting people of different faiths and creeds.' *Jewish Chronicle*'The book "has a bold and important thesis" said Lord Habgood, especially in how it addresses relations between different faiths' *Church Times*"It is odd that a leading orthodox Rabbi should be at the forefront of a campaign to use religious difference as the catalyst for world peace ... in a brave polemic which is bolstered by feverish intelligence." -*The Herald (Glasgow)* (*The Herald (Glasgow)*)"Once in a rare while a book comes along that is so powerful and so earth-shattering that we want to get atop the highest mountain and shout out its praises...WE MUST ALL READ THIS BOOK....the most profound and deeply moving argument in favor of religious humanism I can think of."*David Shasha, Center for Sephardic Heritage*"Sacks does not offer much help in determining how religious people are to grapple with such theological questions. His brilliant service is in showing us that we must."*Paul F. Knitter, International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, July 2003"It is a profound meditation on human diversity and religious differences....It is a timely book for both believers and non-believers alike that has a profound sense of history running through it."*Limited Edition*, April 2003"The Dignity of Difference is an important contribution to our understanding of the impact of globalization on the world in the aftermath of September 11|the book should be required reading for those concerned with the present struggle between Islam and the West and the promises, but also the potential threat, that market globalization represent." *Jewish Book World*, Spring 2005 (*American Jewish Archives Journal*)"wonderful book...bold and controversial" -*Commonweal* (*Commonweal*, January 2007 *Commonweal*)Mentioned in *The Observer* (*Oliver Marre Observer*)"Unlike most other religious leaders, Mr Sacks has a wonderfully unbigoted attitude; he thinks and writes with great eloquence supported by an amazingly broad range of sources and reading." - *Journey*"It is odd that a leading orthodox Rabbi should be at the forefront of a campaign to use religious difference as the catalyst for world peace |in a brave polemic which is bolstered by feverish intelligence." -*The Herald (Glasgow)* (*Sanford Lakoff*)"wonderful book...bold and controversial" -*Commonweal* (*Sanford Lakoff*)

Commonwealth) Mentioned in The Observer (Sanford Lakoff Observer)

Sir Jonathan Sacks is Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of Britain and the Commonwealth. He is the author of numerous books, including *Celebrating Life*, *From Optimism to Hope*, *The Persistence of Faith* and *The Dignity of Difference*, for which he won a Grawemeyer Award in Religion.

This book is less one complete book than it is a set of essays on a wide range of topics- sometimes insightful, sometimes less so. Generally, I found the book to be most persuasive when it explains the appeal of traditional religion, less so when it sets out an independent argument for the way things ought to be. A few of the issues covered:

- \*The growth of religious fundamentalism. Rabbi Sacks writes: "The power of conservative religious movements has been precisely the fact that they represent protests against, rather than accommodations to, late modernity." In other words, right-wing religion is successful because it appeals to the dissatisfied; the satisfied by definition aren't going to be as motivated to switch religions or even to invest as heavily in their own.
- \*The value of religion generally. Why are religions so much more successful in attracting adherents than, say, philosophical systems with similar visions of the good life? Sacks points out that religions don't just have points of view, they "embody [their visions] in the life of the community. They make it vivid and substantial and prayer and ritual, in compelling narratives and collective acts of rededication." By contrast, a philosophy without ritual, or even a religious movement that lacks a lot of ritual, may not seem as "vivid and substantial" to some people. I completely agree; I grew up Reform and have moved towards a more ritual-oriented form of Judaism, and the reason I find traditional Judaism more appealing has less to do with ideology than the felt reality that the latter seems a bit more, well, "vivid."
- \*The value of religious diversity. Rabbi Sacks argues that the very fabric of creation supports diversity: just as God is glorified by the "astounding multiplicity" of the millions of species, and of the hundreds of human cultures and languages, the multiplicity of ways of approaching God are equally valuable. Sacks writes that "God has spoken to mankind in many languages through Judaism to Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims. But just as God is greater than any language, God is greater than any one way to relating to God." Makes sense to me- but maybe that's just because I am a non-haredi Jew. But what would Sacks say to the haredi Jew who says "But there's a difference- our revelation really happened and theirs is fictitious"? Or to the Christian or Muslim who argues that their way of relating to God presupposes the universality of their religion? I did not see how Sacks really addresses this tough issue.
- \*Economics. Rabbi Sacks correctly points

out that Judaism has sought to steer a middle course between pure capitalism and socialism, by endorsing a market economy combined with mandatory charity. But is the view of Judaism relevant to a secular society? That is- should public policy reflect the voice of Torah, or should it follow the libertarian view that people can express their religious values with their own money rather than using the government to address poverty and related issues? Rabbi Sacks doesn't seem to me to focus on this issue, perhaps because he comes from a society where a generous welfare state is taken for granted to a greater extent than in the USA. \*Environmentalism. As Sacks suggests, there is quite a bit of justification for environmentalism in Jewish tradition. Sacks does address one strand of tradition that I was unaware of before reading this book: Jewish support for preserving endangered species. Sacks writes that according to the medieval sage Nachmanides, the Torah's prohibition of seizing a bird and its mother at the same time exists to prevent Jews from culling species to the point of extinction- a kind of early Endangered Species Act. Of course, translating Jewish environmental values into public policy is even more difficult than translating Jewish economic values into public policy, for the simple reason that environmental issues often involve not just values, but difficult factual questions that most nonscientists don't really understand. For example, I might have a rational opinion that global warming is caused by human activity, if I think there is a scientific consensus behind this view. But that doesn't mean that I know what policies will actually be effective in reducing global warming, let alone whether those policies are cost-justified.

I bought a hard copy of this book. The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations by Jonathan Sacks helped me to see differences as less important than I had previously; there are things to look for in people from different backgrounds that are more important than those differences. This was an assigned (suggested) reading for a course I'm taking; and even so I did want to read it, but didn't actually have to. My only complaint with the book is that the text is small for me, which is not really something bad it's just that larger text would have been nice. I didn't give it five stars because it seemed a little slanted; but that wasn't really much of a problem. Maybe this is a topic that needs a little slant; we have great problems to contend with. It is worth the time to read.

I bought this book because I had heard some controversy about it, and took it upstairs for bedtime reading. Mistake! I couldn't put it down, and, reading on sleeplessly found my emotions deeply touched by what this man has to say. His vision is as beautiful as it is complex, being that he is himself an Orthodox Jew speaking about the unity and diversity of religion. Yet, as one, he is

uniquely qualified to beg all peoples of deep faith to find a way to see a spark of the divine in each other, even in the stranger's eyes. The inspiration and urgency of his writing, which seems to have erupted from his pen after 9/11, is profound. I checked around the web and found that this book is recommended on liberal and conservative websites, and had favorable reviews from many, including a several Christian and one Moslem reviewer. Alas, as he mentions in his foreward, only hostility and lack of understanding gets media attention today....So I imagine that this wonderful book will continue to be mainly neglected here in the US, where its eloquence and vision is truly needed. I intend to remedy this by buying as many copies as I can afford and giving them to friends and family, on the condition that they promise to read it. But not at bedtime!

A book that will change your way of thinking ! A must READ for every one in the world !

As I read this book a few pages at a time, have not finished it as I go back to something I have gone over before.

One of the best and most essential books I have ever read.

A book for our times. Many more of us should read it.

What a refreshing book . Sachs writes with wisdom and love of humanity and gives the reader a new outlook.

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