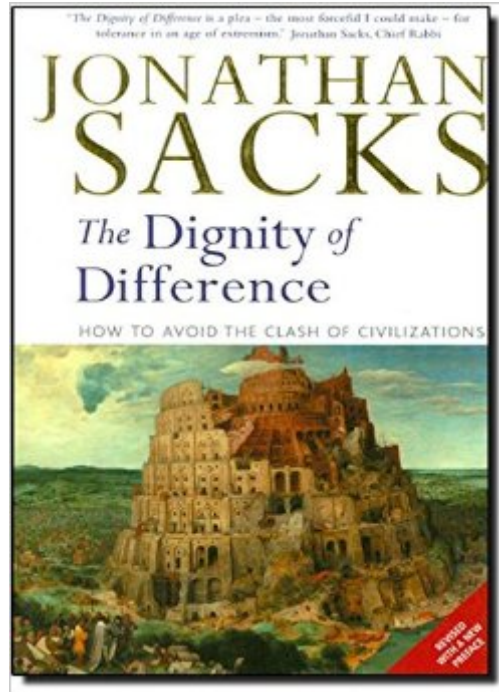


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The Dignity Of Difference: How To Avoid The Clash Of Civilizations



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.

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Customer Reviews

As an International Relations major in college, I spent four years debating and writing about Samuel Huntington's warning of a "clash of civilizations." Then, it seemed that globalization and the United States' increasing role as the hegemonic superpower of the world were discussions limited to academia. In the years since, our world has become much smaller, we have been introduced to the "axis of evil," terrorism has penetrated our own borders, and a vocal anti-globalization effort has gone mainstream. Now, the chief rabbi of the British Commonwealth has proposed that we borrow values from Judaism to avoid the clash of civilizations, seeking an alternative to religious coexistence through his notion of the ethics of globalization. Much of the Jewish media's coverage of Sacks' book has focused on his criticism of Israel's stance in the current conflict with the Palestinians. However, looking past this critique (only a short section of the book treats this subject),

one finds a novel argument about how people of different nationalities and faiths can coexist in the new world. Sacks argues that religion does not have to lead to a clash between rival civilizations, but rather can be used to generate tolerance. In our politically correct society, we often look for ways to put our differences aside and search out our commonalities, and we feel the need to be all-inclusive in our dialogue efforts. Sacks challenges us by asking whether this "dialogue" is doing any good, or if we would be better served to embrace our differences. Monotheism doesn't mean there's only one way to God, he argues, rather, it's the belief that the unity of God creates diversity. Our global borders have clearly shrunk, as evidenced by African children eating McDonalds and sipping Coke while wearing Nike shoes and watching MTV; and, we must now ask what the implications of globalization are to us as Jews. Sacks ingeniously looks to the Torah for insight into the great debates about globalization, the clash of civilizations, and the campaign against terror. He divides his book into seven moral principles (all beginning with the letter C) needed to make world harmony a reality: control, contribution, compassion, creativity, co-operation, conservation, and conciliation. We, in the Jewish community, have a long history of striving to attain these core moral imperatives, labeling them as acts of tikkun olam, repairing the world. In this post-September 11 world of great uncertainty, we must not be too quick to label globalization, which Sacks argues has compromised human dignity, as wholly positive or negative. For every story of a Jew living in a remote part of the world once removed from Jewish existence and now able to participate fully in Jewish life due to vast technological advances, there is a story of how globalization has infused a community with American/Western values to the point that its own identity and cultural differences are forgotten. As American Jews, there are many issues that drive our feelings about globalization and anti-globalization (most notably Israel), but we must not fall prey to oversimplifying the arguments of those in either camp. At a time when religious values seem to be dividing us, this book is a fresh perspective that charges us to use those values for good. With the current state of world affairs, the very least we could do is try.

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!

I am an American who teaches overseas, and I think that this book clearly illustrates the problem facing our various countries today: as the author states, we "narrowcast," meaning that we seek out those who are like us, communicate with those individuals, and then pronounce ourselves correct without ever truly seeking a diverse opinion. The political faultlines we walk today are a perfect example of what happens when we stop talking to each other and only desire positive feedback. This book, however, is not for any standard reader: it appeals, I believe, more to moderates than someone of a strident ideological background. If you blindly follow an extremist path in a political party or religion, I think this book could radically change your mind about said path, but you need to approach the book with as open a mind as possible. I write this only a few days before the next U.S. presidential election, which has been the ugliest since I came of voting age in '92. I wish both candidates and their quislings would read this fine book.

A stunning book. Beautifully written. Inspirational and accessible, incredibly thought-provoking and sometimes challenging. Overall it's the best book I've read in a long while. It takes the world we know we live in, and causes us to think really carefully about how the pieces fit together, and how we are each one of those pieces. Like Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point*, this is a book that will be passed on from reader to reader in the next few years.

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