The Interfaith Imperative

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The Interfaith Imperative *

By Jonathan Sacks

A childhood debt

I want to thank you in particular because you have allowed me to repay a debt that I incurred a long time ago, when I was a child.

Let me explain. I grew up, for my sins, in Finchley. And my parents, being very wise, decided that their four sons could go to any school they chose with one condition; that it was within five minutes walking distance of our home. I was the eldest, and they knew me very well. To this day, I"m the only person I know who can get lost crossing the road. But that didn"t leave a great deal of choice. There were

only two schools within five minutes walk, one primary and one secondary. And that is how this particular Orthodox rabbi was educated at St Mary"s primary school, Finchley, a school attached to the local church; and Christ"s College, which was, how should I put it, not a rabbinical seminary.

Now it"s a fair question to ask, how children like us, from an Orthodox Jewish home, reacted to an educational experience like that, in which the religious environment was very far from the teachings we acquired at home and in the synagogue.

And the answer is very simple. We grew up among teachers who valued their religion; and as a result, we learned to value our own. We became conscious of our difference; but that difference was respected. In our interaction with our teachers and our schoolfriends we learned that fundamental truth which has been re-enacted time and again throughout

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history: that those who are at home in their own faith, confident in their beliefs, assured of their own religious heritage – such people are no threatened by another faith, but on the contrary, are respectful of it, and are enlarged by it.

In short, at a very early age, I learned how the encounter between Christians and Jews can benefit both traditions. By teaching us pride in our own heritage, and humility in the face of another. That seems to me to be the great truth on which the Council of Christians and Jews is predicated. And I wanted to offer my remarks this evening as a kind of belated thanks to those early teachers of my childhood.

Religion: a cause of conflict or reconciliation?

But – and here I come to the crux – how many people still share that vision?

Twenty or thirty years ago, the answer would have been: a great many.

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There was a time, I suppose it reached its high point in the 1960s, when the word "interfaith" was on many people"s lips; when it seemed as if dialogue would bring about a momentous transformation in the relationship between the great world religions.

It was as if we were about to enter a new era in interreligious understanding. Theologians, and not only theologians but popular feeling as well, seemed to sense that we had been estranged for too long. For centuries, even millennia, religions had seen themselves as possessors of exclusive truths and of unique paths to salvation. Each in affirming its own faith, denied the integrity of others. Above all, the relationship between Judaism and Christianity had been fraught with tragedy. And as centuries of suspicion, even hostility, reached their shattering climax in the Holocaust, men and women of faith knew in their hearts that some other understanding had

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now to emerge. And so, in a historic gesture of reconciliation, Christians and Jews alike began to reach out to one another, determined to turn a history of alienation into a legacy of love.

It was, and in retrospect will be seen to be, a heroic undertaking. But the world has moved on, and in some respects not for the better. Today the future seems more sombre than it did twenty or thirty years ago. In Judaism, Christianity, Islam and other world faiths the voice of tolerance and moderation has become muted, even unsure of itself. Those who claim to represent religious authenticity have been those who, by and large, reject dialogue, accommodation and pluralism, and speak instead of authority, exclusivity and the uncompromising fundamentals of faith. As a result, religion in the contemporary world has become again a scene of conflict rather than reconciliation.

Specifically in terms

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of the Jewish-Christian encounter there have been tensions on both sides. For Jews there has been a sense of unease. They ask the following questions. Have the churches fully come to terms with the centrality of the state of Israel in Jewish consciousness? Have they understood what its security means to a people who came face to face with the angel of death at Auschwitz, and had no inch of the planet earth that was their refuge and their home? Have they reflected fully on the pain caused by the convent at Auschwitz, a pain whose dimensions are too deep for me to analyse here? Do the churches understand the particular assault on Jewish sensibilities caused by missionary activities targeted on lonely or vulnerable Jews? More deeply: has Christian theology yet fully come to terms with the contemporary vitality of Jewish existence, with the miracle of Jewish religious and national rebirth after the Holocaust, with the fact that *Am Yisrael Chai* the

people of the covenant lives?

I speak this evening as a Jew. But a Christian would surely set forth another perspective and testify to pain on the other side of the relationship as well. In Christian eyes it must at times seem that the state of Israel is a dilemma, not just an achievement. How can Jewish and Palestinian claims coexist and be resolved? How, in Israel, can military and religious values live alongside one another? Can there be a religious ethic, not of powerlessness, but of power? Must our hearts not go out to the Palestinians as they once went out to the Jews? And as for the Holocaust, have we not moved beyond the time of remembering to a time of forgiving? Is there not a certain unforgiving relentlessness about bringing aged war criminals to trial forty years after the event? As a Jew, I must hear that voice and that pain and know that they express sincere Christian concerns.

But we are wrong to see these tensions in isolation. For they

are part of a much deeper shift in religious consciousness. Let me explain what I mean in terms of a picture that I can still bring vividly to mind.

Do you remember the great hurricane which swept across southern England some years ago? As Jews, we remember the date because it took place on the night of one of the great festivals of the Jewish year, Simchat Torah, the day of rejoicing in the Torah. Our family was in the West End of London at the time, because my synagogue is right next to Hyde Park. And just before dawn broke I went out to see what had happened. The scene of devastation was extraordinary. There was silence: no one else was yet about, and the wind had died. But everywhere, vast trees had been uprooted, branches hurled across roads. The order of the park had been reduced to chaos. And as the sun rose over that ravaged landscape it seemed for a moment like the end of the world.

And then a fearful thought occurred to me. It was in just such moments that our ancestors saw God. Didn"t the Psalm – the very Psalm which rabbinic tradition associated with the giving of the Torah – declare: "The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon . . . The voice of the Lord twists the oaks and strips the forests bare" (Psalms 29:5, 9)? God was not only in the still small voice that spoke to Elijah. He was also in the mighty east wind that divided the Red Sea. He was in the earthquake that swallowed Korach. He was in the volcanic upheaval that swept away Sodom and the cities of the plain. He was in the tempest that threatened to sweep away Jonah"s ship.

And it was that moment that came back to me when the Salman Rushdie affair first began. I spoke about it on the radio. I argued that for the last two centuries in the West we had seen God in the order of the garden and not in the mighty wind that wrecks the garden. We had

seen Him in quiet faith, not in the fire and the thunder and the hurricane. The Rushdie affair took us by surprise because we had edited out of our image of religion a whole range of passion that submits to neither moderation nor tolerance. We remembered that God spoke to Elijah in a still small voice. We forgot that He spoke to Job out of the heart of the whirlwind.

And there lies the problem. The great conversation between faiths, which reached the height of its aspirations in the 1960s, was predicated on a whole series of assumptions that had their roots in Enlightenment. We were gradually moving from a world moved by tradition to a society built on rationality. We were moving, slowly but inexorably, from the particular identities of particular faiths to a more universal conception of humanity. Society was becoming, as the sociologists said, secularized. Religious belief was still strong, but it was becoming more marginal to our

public decisions. Passion and prejudice were gradually dying; and in their place reason and moderation would hold sway. On that scenario, the bitter religious conflicts of the past looked very much like things of the past. It was a time for reconciliation.

But it didn"t work out that way. Almost immediately, a new kind of religiosity began to emerge, or re-emerge, in Christianity, Judaism, Islam and some of the other world faiths. It turned out that secularization had failed to provide us with our most basic human needs, the need for meaning and personal identity. And the way to meaning and identity lay in highly particular religious traditions. And so we began to see, and have become increasingly aware of, deep religious revivals, built on intense hostility to the assumptions of the modern world. Critics call it Fundamentalism, a word I don"t myself like, because it groups together so many different phenomena under a single name. But several things

followed, and have become more and more noticeable over the passing years.

Firstly, religion, far from being a force for reconciliation, has become the battle ground of some of the fiercest and most intractable conflicts in the contemporary world. Secondly, the kind of religion that has real power over the lives of its followers is increasingly exclusive and confrontational. Thirdly, the kind of theology that speaks of tolerance and openness and dialogue with the modem world is seen, by many believers in search of meaning, truth and identity, as a compromise that lacks content and authenticity. And the result is that the most passionate religious believers today, in all our several faiths, are more concerned with their own destiny than with our collective destiny. The patient, conciliatory and constructive work of a body like the CCJ comes to seem less and less significant to people"s real religious concerns.

Restating the interreligious imperative

It seems to me, therefore, that as we face a new decade, we must begin to restate the interreligious imperative in more forceful terms. We must see it not simply as a gesture of goodwill, undertaken by men and women of exceptional liberalism and vision; but as a set of religious axioms that must be confronted by all believers. Let me now try to lay the groundwork of such a statement, constructed in terms on which I hope we can agree. What, as a Jew speaking within the Jewish tradition, impels me to enter into the conversation with men and women of other faiths? Why can I not evade that meeting? If I can answer that question, then I have provided a basis for the work of the CCJ not only among Jews who are interested in Christianity, but for Jews who are simply interested in Judaism. If we can answer that question we will have provided an

impetus to the interfaith encounter which goes beyond the mood of the moment, and reaches into the roots of faith. In short, if we can answer that question, we can address even the person who does not yet see the need for meeting and reconciliation.

And it"s a question that we can answer. Let"s see how.

First, let"s recall something that we often forget. The Mosaic books on one momentous occasion command, *ve-ahavta lereacha kamocha*. You shall love your neighbour as yourself; or as some of the commentators understand it, you shall love your neighbour because he is like yourself. That command has often been taken to be the very basis of biblical morality; but I venture to suggest it is not. Only on one occasion are we commanded to love our neighbour. On countless occasions – the rabbis listed thirty-seven of them – we are commanded to love – not our neighbour, but: the stranger. *Ve-ahavtem et hager*.

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And the stranger is not one we love because he is like ourselves. The stranger is one we love precisely because he is not like ourselves.

Time and again the Jewish Bible stresses, as does the New Testament, that we are judged not by how we act to those who are like us, but by how we act to those who are decidedly not like us, and who may even call into question everything we stand for. The Jewish tradition held that Abraham was a greater man than Noah. Why? Not because Noah was not righteous; the Bible calls him a righteous man, unique in his generation. Why then was Abraham greater than Noah? Because Noah, said the rabbis, saved only his own family when the world was drowning. That was not Abraham. Abraham fought a war and later uttered a dramatic prayer on behalf of the inhabitants of Sodom, people the Bible itself calls exceedingly wicked. The Jewish mystics once asked an intriguing question. They asked why is the *chassidah*, the

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stork, an unclean animal. It has such a beautiful name. *Chassidah* means, the compassionate one. How can a bird called compassion possibly be unclean? And they answered: for whom does the *chassidah* have compassion? Only for its own. Compassion for your own only, is not compassion.

My first point, then, is that our own religious tradition itself teaches us that we are judged by how we act to those who are not of our tradition.

Second: is this not the way of God himself? There is one aspect of the book of Genesis that is often neglected by religious thinkers and commentators. It"s either passed by or regarded as too perplexing to have an answer. Twice in the book of Genesis we are presented with a drama of selection; of Divine choice. Esau is chosen and Ishmael is not. Jacob is chosen and Esau is not. And so we get the Jewish idea of a chosen people; and the Christian idea of a new Israel that supersedes the old – both of them

doctrines which have caused us, in one way or another, a great deal of soul-searching and pain.

But where, reading the Bible, do our sympathies lie? Read the text carefully, and you will see without a shadow of doubt that our heart goes out to Ishmael, not Isaac; and to Esau, not Jacob. Time and again, by every kind of narrative device, the Torah is telling us that Ishmael and Esau are also blessed and also beloved of God. They have their own kind of Divine favour. From the standpoint of the Bible, there is choice, but not rejection. How then can we talk, whether as Jews or Christians, of those who stand outside our faith traditions, as rejected, superseded, unsaved, unredeemed? The Bible itself, and not any liberal interpretation of the Bible, forces us to come to terms with the unsettling reality that even if there is only one way chosen by God, there are many ways beloved of God and blessed by God. And our faith must find room for

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that fact.

Thirdly, just before the story of Abraham and the covenantal people begins, the Bible tells of a strange and enigmatic episode: the story of the tower of Babel. Of course we understand in broad outlines the moral of the story. People gathered together to build a tower that would reach to heaven; but the proper place of man is on earth. They were guilty of hubris; they were punished by nemesis. The story, as we know, is a satire of the pretensions of Babylonian civilization; of mankind thinking that because he has technological mastery, he can become like God.

But none of this explains the central theme of the story: that after Babel the world is split into many languages; and that until the end of days there is no single universal language.

Surely the answer is that Babel is the essential preface to the history of Abraham. We might otherwise have understood that the

covenant with Abraham was universal like the covenant with Noah; that it applied to all humanity: that it expressed a universal religious truth. It did not. Just as after Babel there is no single universal language, so there is no single universal culture, no single universal tradition and no single universal faith. The faith of Abraham left room for other ways of serving God; just as the English language leaves room for French and Spanish and Italian.

We have begun to understand in the modem world that faiths are like languages. There are many of them, and they are not reducible to one another. In order to express myself at all, I must acquire a mastery of my own language; if I have no language, I will still have feelings but I will be utterly inarticulate in communicating them. But we recognize, as we have always recognized aesthetically and now commercially as well, that if we can only speak one language, we are cut off from an

enormous range of communication. If we can"t speak "computereze" these days, we can hardly communicate with our children. And if we can"t speak French or German we won"t be able to compete effectively with our trading rivals.

A faith is like a language. I can only be at home in my own language; I can only be at home in my own faith. True conversions are rare. But I am not compromised by the existence of other languages; and on the contrary, the more I can speak, the more I can communicate with others and the more I am enriched. To believe that our faith is the only religious reality there is, is rather like the oldfashioned tourist who used to believe that you could communicate with the Spanish by speaking English very loud and very slow. After Babel, the religious reality, like the linguistic reality, is inescapably plural.

Fourthly, we have come to understand very dramatically these days the idea of ecology. We"re all greens these

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days. The only question is whether we are conservative blue green, labour red green, liberal democrat yellow green, or true blue red blooded green green. And ecology is a very powerful idea. It suggests that we are all affected by each other"s actions, by the petrol we use or the aerosol spray we buy. It tells us that an act that might be justified in terms of a narrow economic perspective may be disastrous from a broader environmental perspective. It tells us that species of animal and plant life that are in apparent conflict are in fact mutually supportive, and that destroying one may affect the entire ecological balance.

What ecology teaches us is what John Donne taught long ago, echoing a deep Jewish and Christian tradition, that no man is an island, entire of itself; and not only no man, but no animal or plant species either.

But just as there is a natural ecology, so there is a social ecology. Once upon a time, not so long

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ago, religions and cultures could live for the most part at a safe remove from one another, as if they were indeed an island entire of itself. Today there is no safe remove. Take a walk in the street, and we will pass people of a dozen different cultures and half a dozen languages. Our economy, our politics, are affected by the actions of a hundred different countries. Our very survival depends on the decisions of several different powers not to use nuclear or chemical weapons. Enter a plane, or a shop, and we become aware that terrorism may suddenly involve us in someone else"s argument perhaps thousands of miles away. Our interconnectedness has become inescapable. Modernity has cast the wholly other directly into our lives.

Now Judaism long ago recognized the existence of what I call social ecology. It developed the idea of *darkhei shalom*, the ways of peace. *Darkhei shalom* is not in Judaism a pious sentiment; it is a

significant factor in Jewish law and decision making. It asserts that the basic duties that I owe to the members of my faith community, I owe to those outside it as well; not because we share a faith but because we share an environment, a society, and we must be able to live together if we are to be able to live at all. Faith sometimes demands radical and uncompromising action. But *darkhei shalom* tells me that I must exercise restraint and moderation if I am not to destroy the social environment in which I live along with those who have a different faith. *Darkhei shalom* is an ecological principle that tells us that we live in a world of complex interdependencies; and we must sometimes exercise self-restraint in order to preserve that world.

Finally, of course, the most fundamental proposition of all. Before there were religions, before there were faiths, before even there were human beings, God pronounced the still awesome

truth of the human situation. *Naaseh adam be-tsalmenu*. Let us make man in our own image. And on this phrase the sages of the Mishnah gave a fascinating comment. When human beings create things in a single image, they are all alike. God makes humanity in a single image, yet each of them is unique.

A faith that is built on the Bible must come to terms with the stunning implications of that remark. We have great difficulty, all of us, in recognizing the integrity, the sanctity, of those who are not in our image. Whose faith and traditions and culture and language are not like ours. And yet we are told, and must struggle to see, that the wholly other, he or she who is not in our image, is yet in God"s image.

Coexist we must

I have tried to show, in these simple ways, how a Jew, simply through his or her commitment to Judaism, is led outward to the

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realities of a multifaith world; and my argument rests on no hidden liberal or modernist premises that could be rejected by, as it were, a religious extremist. Christian theology will find its own way at arriving at these conclusions. But arrive at them we must. For if we are to coexist in a world of rising religious intolerance, we shall have to find an interfaith imperative that speaks not with a still, small voice but out of the heart of the whirlwind.

And coexist we must. For the modem world has thrown us together with this supreme religious challenge. Can we preserve the freedom to live our way without threatening or being threatened by those who live another way? Can we respect the needs and rights of those who are not like us, as well as those who are, and can we secure the future of this planet earth of which we are all conjointly the guardians? In this fateful enterprise, the work of the CCJ is like a beacon pointing the way. For its sake and for ours, I wish it in the

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coming decade,
success, support
and blessing.

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