



The Dignity of Difference: Avoiding the Clash of Civilizations

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Religion has become a decisive force in the contemporary world, and it is crucial that it be a force for good— for conflict resolution, not conflict creation. If religion is not part of the solution, then it will surely be part of the problem. I would like therefore to put forward a simple but radical idea. I want to offer a new reading, or, more precisely, a new listening, to some very ancient texts. I do so because our situation in the 21st century, post-September 11, is new, in three ways.

- First, religion has returned, counterintuitively, against all expectation, in many parts of the world, as a powerful, even shaping, force.
- Second, the presence of religion has been particularly acute in conflict zones such as Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, Kashmir and the rest of India and Pakistan, Northern Ireland, the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of Asia.
- Third, religion is often at the heart of conflict. It has been said that in the Balkans, among Catholic Croats, Orthodox Serbs, and Muslims, all three speak the same language and share the same race; the only thing that divides them is religion.

Religion is often the fault-line along which the sides divide. The reason for this is simple. Whereas the 20th century was dominated by the politics of ideology, the 21st century will be dominated by the politics of identity. The three great Western institutions of modernity — science, economics, and politics — are more procedural than substantive, answering questions of “What?” and “How?” but not “Who?” and “Why?” Therefore when politics turns from ideology to identity, people inevitably turn to religion, the great repository of human wisdom on the questions “Who am I?” and “Of what narrative am I a part?”

When any system gives precedence to identity, it does so by defining an “us” and in contradistinction to a “them.” Identity divides, whether Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Jews and Muslims in the Middle East, or Muslims and Hindus in India. In the past, this was a less acute issue, because for most of history, most people lived in fairly constant proximity to people with whom they shared an identity, a faith, a way of life. Today, whether through travel, television, the Internet, or the sheer diversity of our multi-ethnic and multi-faith societies, we live in the conscious presence of difference. Societies that have lived with this difference for a long time have learned to cope with it, but for societies for whom this is new, it presents great difficulty.

This would not necessarily be problematic. After the great wars of religion that came in the wake of the Reformation, this was resolved in Europe in the 17th century by the fact that diverse religious populations were subject to overarching state governments with the power to contain conflict. It was then that nation-states arose, along with the somewhat different approaches of Britain and America: John Locke and the doctrine of toleration, and Thomas Jefferson and the separation of church and state. The British and American ways of resolving conflict were different but both effective at permitting a plurality of religious groups to live together within a state of civil peace.

What has changed today is the sheer capacity of relatively small, subnational groups—through global communications, porous national borders, and the sheer power of weapons of mass destruction — to create havoc and disruption on a large scale. In the 21st century we obviously need physical defense against terror, but also a new religious paradigm equal to the challenge of living in the conscious presence of difference. What might that paradigm be?

In the dawn of civilization, the first human response to difference was tribalism: my tribe against yours, my nation against yours, my god against yours. In this pre- monotheistic world, gods were local. They belonged to a particular place and had “local jurisdiction,” watching over the destinies of particular people. So the Mesopotamians had Marduk and the Moabites Chamosh, the Egyptians their pantheon and the ancient Greeks theirs. The tribal, polytheistic world was a world of conflict and war. In some respects that world lasted in Europe until 1914, under the name of nationalism. In 1914 young men— Rupert Brooke and First World War poets throughout Europe — were actually eager to go to war, restless for it, before they saw carnage on a massive scale. It took two world wars and 100 million deaths to cure us of that temptation.

However, for almost 2,500 years, in Western civilization, there was an alternative to tribalism, offered by one of the great philosophers of all time: Plato. I am going to call this universalism. My thesis will be that universalism is also inadequate to our human condition. What Plato argued in *The Republic* is that this world of the senses, of things we can see and hear and feel, the world of particular things, isn't the source of knowledge or truth or reality. How is one to understand what a tree is, if trees are always changing from day to day and there are so many different kinds of them? How can one define a table if tables come in all shapes and sizes — big, small, old, new, wood, other materials? How does one understand reality in this world of messy particulars? Plato said that all these particulars are just shadows on a wall. What is real is the world of forms and ideas: the idea of a table, the form of a tree. Those are the things that are universal. Truth is the move from particularity to universality. Truth is the same for everyone, everywhere, at all times. Whatever is local, particular, and unique is insubstantial, even illusory.

This is a dangerous idea, because it suggests that all differences lead to tribalism and then to war, and that the best alternative therefore is to eliminate differences and impose on the world a single, universal truth. If this is true, then when you and I disagree, if I am right, you are wrong. If I care about truth, I must convert you from your error. If I can't convert you, maybe I can conquer you. And if I can't conquer you, then maybe I have to kill you, in the name of that truth. From this flows the blood of human sacrifice through the ages.

September 11 happened when two universal civilizations— global capitalism and medieval Islam— met and clashed. When universal civilizations meet and clash, the world shakes and lives are lost. Is there an alternative, not only to tribalism, which we all know is a danger, but also to universalism?

Let us read the Bible again and hear in it a message that is both simple and profound, and, I believe, an important one for our time. We will start with what the Bible is about: one man, Abraham, and one woman, Sarah, who have children and become a family and then in turn a tribe, a collection of tribes, a nation, a particular people, and a people of the covenant.

What is striking is that the Bible doesn't begin with that story. For the first eleven chapters, it tells the universal story of humanity: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the flood, Babel and the builders, universal archetypes living in a global culture. In the opening words of Genesis 11, "The whole world was of one language and shared speech." Then in Genesis 12, God's call to Abraham, the Bible moves to the particular. This exactly inverts Plato's order. Plato begins with the particular and then aspires to the universal. The Bible begins with the universal and then aspires to the particular. That is the opposite direction. It makes the Bible the great counter-Platonic narrative in Western civilization.

The Bible begins with two universal, fundamental statements. First, in Genesis 1, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness." In the ancient world it was not unknown for human beings to be in the image of God: that's what Mesopotamian kings and the Egyptian pharaoh were. The Bible was revolutionary for saying that every human being is in the image of God.

The second epic statement is in Genesis 9, the covenant with Noah, the first covenant with all mankind, the first statement that God asks all humanity to construct societies based on the rule of law, the sovereignty of justice and the non-negotiable dignity of human life.

It is surely those two passages that inspire the words “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights. . . .” The irony is that these truths are anything but self-evident. Plato or Aristotle wouldn’t know what the words meant. Plato believed profoundly that human beings are created unequal, and Aristotle believed that some people are born to be free, other to be slaves.

These words are self-evident only in a culture saturated in the universal vision of the Bible. However, that vision is only the foundation. From then on, starting with Babel and the confusion of languages and God’s call to Abraham, the Bible moves from the universal to the particular, from all mankind to one family. The Hebrew Bible is the first document in civilization to proclaim monotheism, that God is not only the God of this people and that place but of all people and every place. Why then does the Bible deliver an anti-Platonic, particularistic message from Genesis 12 onwards? The paradox is that the God of Abraham is the God of all mankind, but the faith of Abraham is not the faith of all mankind.

In the Bible you don’t have to be Jewish to be a man or woman of God. Melchizedek, Abraham’s contemporary, was not a member of the covenantal family, but the Bible calls him “a priest of God Most High.” Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, a Midianite, gives Israel its first system of governance. And one of the most courageous heroines of the Exodus—the one who gives Moses his name and rescues him—is an Egyptian princess. We call her Batya or Bithiah, the Daughter of God.

Melchizedek, Jethro, and Pharaoh’s daughter are not part of the Abrahamic covenant, yet God is with them and they are with God. As the rabbis put it two thousand years ago, “The righteous of every faith, of every nation, have a share in the world to come.” Why, if God is the God of all humanity, is there not one faith, one truth, one way for all humanity?

My reading is this: that after the collapse of Babel, the first global project, God calls on one person, Abraham, one woman, Sarah, and says “Be different.” In fact, the word “holy” in the Hebrew Bible, *kadosh*, actually means “different, distinctive, set apart.”

Why did God tell Abraham and Sarah to be different? To teach all of us the dignity of difference. That God is to be found in someone who is different from us. As the great rabbis observed some 1,800 years ago, when a human being makes many coins in the same mint, they all come out the same. God makes every human being in the same mint, in the same image, his own, and yet we all come out differently. The religious challenge is to find God's image in someone who is not in our image, in someone whose color is different, whose culture is different, who speaks a different language, tells a different story, and worships God in a different way.

This is a paradigm shift in understanding monotheism. And we are in a position to hear this message in a way that perhaps previous generations were not. Because we have now acquired a general understanding of the world that is significantly different from our ancestors'. I will give just two instances of this among many: one from the world of natural science and one from economics.

The first is from biology. There was a time in the European Enlightenment when it was thought that all of nature was one giant machine with many interlocking parts, all harmonized in the service of mankind. We now know that nature is quite different, that its real miracle is its diversity. Nature is a complex ecology in which every animal, plant, bird, every single species has its own part to play and the whole has its own independent integrity.

We know even more than this thanks to the discovery of DNA and our decoding of the genome. Science writer Matt Ridley points out that the three-letter words of the genetic code are the same in every creature. "CGA means arginine, GCG means alanine, in bats, in beetles, in bacteria. Wherever you go in the world, whatever animal, plant, bug, or blob you look at, if it is alive, it will use the same dictionary and know the same code. All life is one." The genetic code, bar a few tiny local aberrations, is the same in every creature. We all use exactly the same language. This means that there was only one creation, one single event when life was born. This is what the Bible is hinting at. The real miracle of this created world is not the Platonic form of the leaf, it's the 250,000 different kinds of leaf there are. It's not the idea of a bird, but the 9,000 species that exist.

It is not a universal language, it is the 6,000 languages actually spoken. The miracle is that unity creates diversity, that unity up there creates diversity down here.

One can look at the same phenomenon from the perspective of economics. We are all different, and each of us has certain skills and lacks others. What I lack, you have, and what you lack, I have. Because we are all different we specialize, we trade, and we all gain. The economist David Ricardo put forward a fascinating proposition, the Law of Comparative Advantage, in the early 19th century. This says that if you are better at making axe heads than fishing, and I am better at fishing than making axe heads, we gain by trade even if you're better than me at both fishing and making axe heads. You can be better than me at everything, and yet we still benefit if you specialize at what you're best at and I specialize at what I'm best at. The law of comparative advantage tells us that every one of us has something unique to contribute, and by contributing we benefit not only ourselves but other people as well.

In the market economy throughout all of history, differences between cultures and nations have led to one of two possible consequences. When different nations meet, they either make war or they trade. The difference is that from war at the very least one side loses, and in the long run, both sides lose. From trade, both sides gain. When we value difference the way the market values difference, we create a non-zero sum scenario of human interaction. We turn the narrative of tragedy, of war, into a script of hope. So whether we look at biology or economics, difference is the precondition of the complex ecology in which we live. And by turning to the Bible we arrive at a new paradigm, one that is neither universalism nor tribalism, but a third option, which I call the dignity of difference. This option values our shared humanity as the image of God, and creates that shared humanity in terms like the American Declaration of Independence or the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But it also values our differences, just as loving parents love all their children not for what makes them the same but for what makes each of them unique. That is what the Bible means when it calls God a parent. This religious paradigm can be mapped onto the political map of the 21st century. With the end of the Cold War, there were two famous scenarios about where the world would go: Francis Fukuyama's *End of History* (1989) and Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996).

Fukuyama envisaged an eventual, gradual spread first of global capitalism, then of liberal democracy, with the result being a new universalism, a single culture that would embrace the world.

Huntington saw something quite different. He saw that modernization did not mean Westernization, that the spread of global capitalism would run up against countermovements, the resurgence of older and deeper loyalties, a clash of cultures, or what he called civilizations— in short, a new tribalism.

And to a considerable extent, that is where we are. Even as the global economy binds us ever more closely together, spreading a universal culture across the world — what Benjamin Barber calls “McWorld” — civilizations and religious differences are forcing us ever more angrily and dangerously apart. That is what you get when the only two scenarios you have are tribalism and universalism.

There is no instant solution, but there is a responsibility that rests with us all, particularly with religious leaders, to envision a different and more gracious future. As noted earlier, faced with intense religious conflict and persecution, John Locke and Thomas Jefferson devised their particular versions of how different religious groups might live together peaceably. These two leaps of the imagination provided, each in their own way, bridges over the abyss of confrontation across which future generations could walk to a better world.

I have gone rather further than Locke’s doctrine of toleration or the American doctrine of separation of church and state because these no longer suffice for a situation of global conflict without global governance. I have made my case on secular grounds, but note that the secular terms of today--pluralism, liberalism--will never persuade a deeply passionate, indeed fanatically passionate religious believer to subscribe to them, because they are secular ideas. I have therefore given a religious idea, based on the story of Abraham, from which all three great monotheisms--Judaism, Christianity, and Islam--descend. A message of the dignity of difference can be found that is religious and profoundly healing. That is the real miracle of monotheism: not that there is one God and

therefore one truth, one faith, one way, but that unity above creates diversity here on earth.

Nothing has proved harder in civilization than seeing God or good or dignity in those unlike ourselves. There are surely many ways of arriving at that generosity of spirit, and each faith may need to find its own way. I propose that the truth at the heart of monotheism is that God is greater than religion, that he is only partially comprehended by any one faith. He is my God, but he is also your God. That is not to say that there are many gods: that is polytheism. And it is not to say that God endorses every act done in his name: a God of yours and mine must be a God of justice standing above both of us, teaching us to make space for one another, to hear one another's claims, and to resolve them equitably. Only such a God would be truly transcendent. Only such a God could teach mankind to make peace other than by conquest or conversion and as something nobler than practical necessity.

What would such a faith be like? It would be like being secure in my own home and yet moved by the beauty of a foreign place knowing that while it is not my home, it is still part of the glory of the world that is ours. It would be knowing that we are sentences in the story of our people but that there are other stories, each written by God out of the letters of lives bound together in community. Those who are confident of their faith are not threatened but enlarged by the different faiths of others. In the midst of our multiple insecurities, we need now the confidence to recognize the irreducible, glorious dignity of difference.