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Arguing For/Over the Dignity of Difference
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1 Methodology and Terminology

We seek to make a difference, somehow, by appealing to ideas. If that were not the case, we would not be here working through nuances of an idea and their implication for religious communities and how they view each other. Our task is to work through a concept and to consider how it could help us view each other - members of different faith traditions. Such exercises come under the domain of “theology of religions”, and our project is in some way informed by a pluralist ethos, even if, as I shall suggest below, it need not be identified with the philosophical position technically referred to as “pluralist”.¹ But our goal is surely to increase respect, to accommodate, to endow with value, and all this from the foundations of a particular faith tradition - in my case - Judaism, as it addresses today’s interreligious challenges.

Let us then consider what ideas we seek to work through, in this exercise for deepening respect for the other. The present conversation, focusing on the notion of respect for difference, is part of a larger conceptual project, focused on the notion of “flourishing”. My presentation will accordingly explore the dual foci - flourishing and the respect for difference, within the framework of a Jewish view of other religions.

Let me begin with a word about “flourishing”.² In this term I hear the following elements: well-being, reaching fulfillment of one’s being or realizing the potential of one’s identity, identifying one’s true calling or vocation, finding one’s place in God’s plan. These nuances overlap and inform each other, offering a robust sense of flourishing that is not simply this-worldly, but anchored in a vision of spiritual fulfillment in the Divine. Accordingly, if we consider the flourishing of the other, we consider the other’s greatest fulfillment and realization, and if we think of the other as flourishing we not only consider the other with a benevolent gaze, but also proffer value upon the other. Attaining a state of flourishing is not only valuable as a “good” thing, but also a state that engenders respect and positive value for the other. Anyone - individual, group or religious community - who has reached the telos of their lives and fulfilled it deserves our respect. The challenges of human life are such that one cannot take such an attainment for granted.

While “flourishing” provides positive valuation for the other it may not and need not be the grounds for a view of the other as equal. Going back to the just-mentioned distinction between a

¹Following Alan Race’s threefold typology, made famous by John Hick, of exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist.

²The first project of the Elijah Interfaith Academy, a decade ago, was titled: *Religion, Society and the Other: Hostility, Hospitality and the Hope of Human Flourishing*. The volume will appear shortly at Lexington Books. The appeal to the term was intuitive and we did not offer a formal definition of what we intend by flourishing.

pluralist and an inclusivist approach to other religions, we usually consider the pluralist as someone who sees the other as fully equal in value, achievement, closeness to God, knowledge, salvation etc. By contrast, the inclusivist maintains some sense of his tradition being of greater value than that of the other: either a fuller revelation, a more intimate relationship with God, greater knowledge, or some other way of being superior, greater or better, even though the other religion is seen in a basically positive light. Positive, yet in some way inferior. To the extent that those active in interfaith work and reflection rarely subscribe to a strong exclusivist view, and seek to find some way of articulating a positive view of the other, positions typically oscillate between shades of inclusivist and pluralist views.³ Within this range, it is worth considering how “flourishing” functions. As noted, our conversation is informed by a pluralist ethos, but it would seem that “flourishing” need not rely on a pluralist view of religions in order to uphold our view of the religious other. We can seek, appreciate and value the flourishing of the other, even if the religion that is the means for such flourishing is not deemed on a par with our own and is accommodated through an inclusivist strategy. In fact, “flourishing” is a very helpful category for the inclusivist, inasmuch as it addresses the impact of a religion upon the lives of believers, rather than the truth, authenticity, revelation or any other factor that related to the metaphysical, hierarchical or revelation-based status of a religion. Another religion may be “good” because it leads to its followers’ flourishing, even if it is considered limited or even inferior to our own, in some way. And so, a religion may be considered less perfect than our own, in need of rectification, advancement, evolution etc., but still worthwhile because it leads to the flourishing of its adherents.

Put differently, “flourishing” allows us to put aside the question of truth. All too often, we evaluate religions, ours and those of others, in terms of their “truth”, usually assuming that “truth” signals some correspondence to a higher reality and to how things “really” are, either metaphysically, historically or in terms of God’s will. “Flourishing” allows us to consider the lived truth and its impact in the lives of believers. If a religion leads to the flourishing of believers then in some significant way it is true, not by virtue of metaphysical declarations, but by virtue of how it shapes lives and enriches them.

Let us now move on to “difference”. In the framework of theology of religions, certainly a Jewish theology of religions, “difference” is usually overlooked. Strategies for affording respect to the other typically appeal to commonalities as the foundations for respect, recognition, appreciation and valuation. Commonality may be moral, theological or historical, in the sense of a perceived continuity between Judaism and another religion that carries forth its message. In all this, difference is quietly overlooked. One appreciates what one has in common with the other, grants recognition, thereby often resolving practical challenges, and ignores some of the real stuff of religion, that divides one religion from the other. The following abstraction seems fair - all interreligious relations, dialogue and above all theological reflection, revolve around the axis of similarity and difference, highlighting the one or the other, according to the perspective one seeks, that is: whether to narrow

³One interesting nuance to the conversation is the addition of “universalist” as a supplementary category. See Alan Brill, *Judaism and Other Religions: Models of Understanding*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2010, Chapter 5.

divides or deepen chasms. The very attempt to appreciate difference *qua* difference as part of a theological strategy for enhancing respect, is therefore novel.

Our exercise is accordingly twofold, and both its components are largely novel. We seek to find positive meaning in difference and diversity and wish to appreciate such difference within the framework of “flourishing”, as a means of describing what it is religions, in their diversity and its details, bring to their believers.⁴

2 The Limits of Respect for Difference

One of the reasons our topic is novel is because to a large extent Abrahamic faiths see some forms of difference as very problematic and unwanted. We must therefore consider carefully what we mean by “difference”, and whether there are forms of religious life or ways of life that are not deserving of our respect, but rather of our condemnation. In other words, the exercise at hand is not fully open to all forms of religious life commanding full respect for their difference. I doubt it is possible to adopt such a position, certainly within a classical Abrahamic matrix. It may be that strongly pantheist positions will recognize all forms of life and all forms of religious life as Divine, thereby affording respect to all religions, regardless of their moral teaching and practices. But even religious systems that are pantheist, like Hinduism, do balance the philosophical view of *all* being Divine with a moral teaching that leads to the condemnation of certain lifestyles - whether they be described as religious or not, and the recommendation of what they consider more ideal or correct lifestyles. Any system that operates with a notion of evil - regardless of how strong or weak an understanding of evil it puts forth, is bound to consider the implications of its recognition of evil for a view of other religions. Thus, we take it as a given that not all forms of religious life are deserving of our respect, and this in turn forces us to define the boundaries within which the present theological exercise take place.

A Jewish view of other religions is largely informed by two concerns - idolatry and morality. Most religions, since biblical times, are judged as inferior on both counts. The judgement is often one of total rejection, as in the case of paganism, and is then softened with regard to Christianity or Islam, that may be validated as either non idolatrous or moral or both. While it is interesting to consider whether it is possible to reject a religion as idolatrous and at the same time to appreciate its “difference” of religious practice, manifested in its idolatrous understanding or practice,⁵ it is unlikely that appreciation of the difference of another religion will be completely devoid of consideration of minimal criteria for legitimacy. Therefore, I wish to put forth what seems to me an appropriate base-line for our conversation in the form of one rabbinic position of how to view other

⁴I will not offer a definition of “dignity” and “respect”, key terms of the present exercise, inasmuch as it seems to me their meaning and usage are intuitive and relatively unproblematic.

⁵The question is engaged in Marc Shapiro’s report on *The Dignity of Difference*. See Marc Shapiro, Of Books and Bans, *Edah Journal* 3, 2003. I do not think that Sacks’ argument for the value of difference in other religions requires foregoing the notion of *Avoda Zara*, and I doubt Sacks ever intended that. The two can be reconciled in ways other than removing the charge of idolatry from other religions.

religions, that of R. Menchaem Meiri, a 13c. rabbinic authority.⁶ For Meiri, idolatry and immorality are largely coextensive. Consequently, a religious tradition that follows paths of (God-given) morality points thereby to its adherence to God, rather than to some other being, and is therefore not to be considered idolatrous. For Meiri, then, idolatry is mostly a thing of the past, since all the religions practiced nowadays have moral codes and aim to guide society in righteous living. Once Meiri establishes the legitimacy of other religions, he cares little about the particularity of their beliefs and customs. On the legal front, his concern is to overcome prohibitions of Jewish law regarding relations with idolaters. On the philosophical front, he wishes to establish a higher ground for religions, in a common recognition of God and the proper workings of religion, as indicated by their moral way of living. Once this is achieved, the details may be overlooked. It matters little to him what the content of faith is, what the form of worship is, even how God is represented. Certainly, there is some common sense in this position. By looking to commonality, one looks to what is most important. Implied is a hierarchical view of what is most important in religion and it is the common essentials that members of different religions share. Meiri does not offer a theory of difference. Maybe it should be understood as cultural, a psychic expression of a people, their land, climate, etc. The relative and changing domain of difference is secondary to what is most important in religion.

Yet, we know that so much of what makes us tick as religious people is precisely that which the other finds different, the details of individuality, particularity and difference. If our view of the other focuses on commonalities and our own self understanding makes particularities as important, if not more important, than those basic commonalities, we experience a split in consciousness between our own self-view and the view of the other. This double-vision may not be a good thing. It creates double standards in what counts most. It offers a superficial view of the other and makes no room for genuine encounter. And while it may suffice for a distant recognition and acceptance of the other, it certainly cannot provide a foundation for real relationships. A real relationship must engage the fullness of individuals or communities in their particularity. If the depth of healing that is sought in interreligious relations requires us to go to the heart of the religious lives of participants, then we must find a way of engaging our differences, and not only our commonalities.

3 The Varieties of Difference

It is hard to speak of difference in the abstract. The subject demands attention to details, and therefore forces us to be clear about what kind of difference we have in mind. Not spelling out what kind of difference we have in mind can, as I shall argue, lead our conversation astray, allowing unspecified assumptions to take the place of considered definitions. In fact, we may view different kinds of difference differently. Some may be easier to accept, others harder. If we only wish to argue for the *principle* of the legitimacy or significance of difference, then further specification of types of difference may not be crucial. But if we seek to inspire respect for difference, and even more so if

⁶His views have been discussed at length in my contribution to an earlier volume of this series, devoted to the question of the “same God”.

that difference is to serve as the basis for appreciation and even inspiration, we must be clearer about what we have in mind when we refer to difference. It would seem the same holds true for a discussion of flourishing. If we seek to appreciate difference and diversity as expressions of flourishing, we must consider such flourishing as a function of the kind of difference we have in mind. The following are possible arenas of difference that should be considered:

A. Morality. One would initially consider the moral domain as common ground, rather than as an arena of difference. The classical Jewish strategy for affirming universal morality is to speak of a universal code or covenant, known as the Noahide commandments. These are a basic set of moral laws that are seen as binding all of humanity, and providing a common baseline for all people. The Noahide laws certainly consider morality an arena for commonality, which they then provide definition and substance for. Nevertheless, as we shall see below, there is also room to consider morality as being in some way colored differently or in some way expressive of the diversity of people. The following quote from Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook makes the point. Speaking of the moral power in different people, Rav Kook makes the point that “because that which connects human thought and feeling with the infinite and all-surpassing Divine light must be expressed in a multiplicity of colors, therefore the spiritual paths of every people are different”.⁷ The spiritual paths that tie into moral life are viewed as different and spoken of in terms of a multiplicity of colors. Thus, even if morality is one, it may be colored in accordance with a diversity of nations and collectives.

B. Theological diversity. It seems obvious that different religions have different theologies, hold diverging religious beliefs and bring varying nuances even to common belief. For Meiri, this doesn't really matter, once a common core faith is established. Once we know what matters most, we can overlook what are ultimately details. And so, for Meiri, faith in the Trinity would seem to be a detail to be overlooked in a Jewish theology of Christianity. Christians may agree to bracket some issues from a Jewish-Christian conversation, but one can hardly suggest that a theological conversation that ignores fundamental differences is complete or fully engaged. Now, theology takes us to the realm of truth claims and conflicting truth claims. Must a theory of the legitimacy and value of difference assume that details or theological difference are upheld and valued, beyond the right to uphold diverging views? And if so, can all this be achieved while bracketing truth claims? And in what sense is theological difference essential for the flourishing of the other? Is it that we affirm the other's need or right to develop robust theologies, with which we can disagree and then go out of our way to affirm in terms of respect for difference?

The domain of theology is possibly where it is hardest for us to affirm otherness, in its details, as such. It is particularly hard if we attempt to do so by means of a pluralistic strategy, especially one that sees religions as being God-given, rather than expressions of the deepest human yearnings, a matter to which we shall turn shortly. If we do resort to a view that religions are in some way God-given or refer back to God, are we to assume that all the diversity of varying theologies is also God-given, beyond the God-giveness of the right or possibility to reason, imagine or otherwise conceive the Divine? It is of course much easier if we consider that theological diversity expresses the human

⁷*Orot Hakodesh* 3,15.

capacity to imagine the Divine and to reason about God. If so, these capacities are part of human flourishing, as they rely on essential qualities of the human psyche and reason, and bring them to light in relation to the Divine. But if so, it is the *process* of thinking, imagining and theologizing that is part of human flourishing, rather than the *outcomes*, in the form of specific faith statements and recognitions. In short, it is much easier to recognize the common human need and common human ground from which theological reflection and religious imagination spring and to legitimate what comes forth from them, in its diversity, as part of similar processes that take place across religions. The attempt to validate actual theological differences between religions as either God-given or as foci of active respect, leading to study, engagement, inspiration etc., is a much taller order. I doubt that any proponent of diversity as a religious value and any attempt at cultivating respect for difference, especially in terms of flourishing, would seek to justify the otherness of all theological doctrine, moreover: of all religions, in any sense beyond the basic respect for the right to hold differing views of God, the benefit they bring to their believers and the common psychological and cognitive processes they draw on. That being said, there is significant room to try to listen to the depths of reason, inspiration and aspiration that come to expression in individual theological doctrines. While a better grasp of specific faith content and how it contributes to the lives of believers could enhance respect, this is still not the same as blanket respect for all theological difference on account of its specific faith content.

C. Ritual diversity. I consider it very likely that when we think of diversity and difference in religions we implicitly or intuitively think of varying religious practices and rituals. These are the concrete and most visible manifestation of our differences, faith in action. Again, for Meiri, these differences would be ignored. What we are asking is how to respect these differences. How do we view the actual practices of another religion in a respectful way, acknowledging the importance of the rituals for the flourishing of members of that religion? The answer may already lie in the question. It seems to me it is easier to draw the line connecting religious practice and flourishing than between flourishing and varying faith positions. And if we recognize the beneficial impact of varying practices, respect would seem to follow. Here respect would not be simply respect for the *right or need* for specific actions but an appreciation of the particular specific benefits they bring. Both a pluralist and an inclusivist can recognize the benefits of religious practices to believers.⁸ As we shall shortly see, the pluralist position includes the possibility of recognizing all forms of ritual, all religious traditions, as equally God-given, thereby enhancing respect for the variety as itself something willed by the Divine.

D. Diversity of agents of salvation and teaching. This point is rarely considered when we think of the stuff of religion, what counts most and consequently what differences our traditions bring to us. But, in fact, it is a very central aspect of how religions function and of what matters most to believers. Believers do not simply adhere to teachings; they follow teachers. Some of these teachers

⁸One could, of course, also make the point that different theological views are beneficial and helpful to the flourishing of the lives of believers and therefore command our respect for their positive benefits. This would be one way of bracketing truth issues. The Dalai Lama takes this approach in his *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths*, Doubleday, 2010.

are instruments of salvation and many of them play a role in the lives of believers that goes well beyond being instruments of a teaching. In many ways, the instrument is part of the message. Surely, this is the case for incarnational understandings of a religious founder, leader or teacher. But it is also the case for any school that presents its teacher as a mediator of Divine presence and a significant or even necessary means for attaining the goals of the religion. We cannot overestimate how important great religious figures are, and consequently how they shape the religious lives of their communities. And if so, the difference between religions is very often a difference that can be expressed also in terms of the difference between the individuals to whom one looks. To follow, or believe, in Jesus is not the same as to follow Krishna or Swaminarayan. And they are different not only in their teachings, but also in their personalities, their qualities and all that they bring to the spiritual life, just as any individual is different from another. Here it may be easiest for us to legitimate difference, as religious-spiritual difference is but an extension of a difference that we readily accept - difference between people as people. In the same way that love may be one, but is individualized in relation to the object of love, so the spiritual life may be common, but takes on very distinct and different characteristics in relation to the individual whom one follows. And in the same way that what we admire in a loving relationship is not simply the ideal of love incarnate but the particularity of the person, so our admiration for religious difference in great spiritual individuals would be for their particular individuality, not for their being one more example of common universal ideals.

4 Jonathan Sacks and *The Dignity of Difference*

The title of this paper echoes the title of a 2002 book by Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom.⁹ Sacks is a first rate thinker and the *Dignity of Difference* is a first rate book. In it, Sacks attempts for the first time a Jewish theory of respecting religious difference, in the framework of present day globalization, following the events of 9/11 and based on his own experiences in the domain of interfaith, in his capacity as Chief Rabbi.

What makes *Dignity of Difference* even more interesting for present purposes is the fact that within a year of its publication Sacks was forced to issue a revised edition, in which he retracted, or reframed, many of the daring statements made in the first edition. Sacks came under fire from Orthodox leaders in the Jewish community in Britain for his outspoken pluralist positions. Sacks based most of his argument on his reading of the biblical narrative, which in terms of Jewish argumentation is a very weak, and ultimately unacceptable form of making major theological points, especially when these are announced as novel positions reached through the author's own insight in an attempt to address contemporary issues, insights not visible to previous generations.¹⁰ A traditional minded perspective seeks to rely on earlier authorities and not to engage in contemporary innovation, and the mode of making a point is by pointing to precedent, rather than hearing

⁹Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, Continuum, London, 2002. Second edition 2003.

¹⁰See quote below from p. 19. See further pp. 17 and 48. The adjective "radical" by which Sacks describes his own efforts appears only in the original version and not in the revised version.

tradition anew. As Sacks' pluralism lacked the internal rigor that his Orthodox interlocutors expected,¹¹ he was forced to revise the book and to tone down many of his more daring statements. Thus, in thinking through a Jewish theory of difference Sacks, against his will, ends up providing us with not one but two such theories. Analyzing the differences between the two versions allows us to consider different ways of making the argument for difference and how these relate to a notion of flourishing. In support of his views, Sacks also put out an essay, in which he spells out for a Jewish audience what are the traditional sources for his views.¹² These provide further insight into the discussion, so that all in all we have three literary sources for thinking through how to put forth a Jewish view that respects difference. It may not be superfluous to note that while the essay is supposed to justify Sacks' position, in fact its sources provide proof at most for his rewritten thesis, but not for the original and more daring views he had put forth. In what follows, I shall compare the two formulations with an eye to identifying two different strategies for respecting difference and relating both of them to the notion of flourishing. Comparing these two articulations shows how a Jewish case for respecting difference might be constructed.

By way of introduction to the two arguments, I would like to classify the earlier position as pluralist and the later position as inclusivist. The radicality of Sack's pluralism is that he grounds it in God, thereby referring to differences of other religions as God-given, on a par with the particularity of the Jewish tradition. The later edition grounds pluralism in the human person and in human understanding and aspiration. Multiple revelations give way to multiple human understandings. If the earlier statement was open to multiple truths and to *religious* (as distinct from natural or human) diversity, the later position only recognizes human diversity as the source of differences between cultures, but has no room for religious foundations of the differences of different religions. The original pluralist view seems to consider religious plurality a Divine ideal; the later position seems to accept it as human reality. The changes are significant, and they are as significant for our present exercise as they are for Sacks' theology or for a Jewish theology of religions as such. They suggest there is more than one way to go about respecting difference and that perhaps even in terms of flourishing there is more than one way to find meaning in religious diversity as an expression of human flourishing.

5 Arguing for the Dignity of Difference

In this section I will identify key components of Sacks' thesis. The initial argument to be analyzed is that of the original version. By tracking the changes between the original and the later

¹¹See Marc Shapiro, Of Books and Bans, *Edab Journal* 3, 2003. After stating the problem, Shapiro makes some moves in the direction of offering traditional support for the earlier views of Sacks.

¹²The essay is titled "A Clash of Civilizations? Judaic Sources on Co-existence in a World of Difference" (no further publishing information). At the time of writing this essay, Rabbi Sacks' writings are in transition, migrating from his former website as Chief Rabbi to his not yet launched website. A copy of this work is available at other websites. See <http://www.scribd.com/doc/20065780/Rabbi-Jonathan-Sacks-Dignity-of-Difference-Sources-in-Traditional-Jewish-Literature>

versions we can follow the changes in the argument and the alternative justification for grounding religious difference.

Before presenting the argument, it is worth reflecting on changes in the two editions that address the processes that inform Sacks' thinking. Sacks is aware of the radicality and novelty of his argument. He therefore offers his own understanding and justification for how he has come to hold radical and original views.

I believe that God is summoning us to a new act of listening, going back to the sources of our faith and hearing in them something we missed before, because we did not face these challenges, this configuration of dilemmas before. In religions of revelation, discoveries are re-discoveries, a discernment of something that was always there but not necessarily audible from where our ancestors stood. God's word is for all time, but our act of listening is of *this* time, and the challenge is to discern within that word, as it speaks to us now, a narrative of hope. (p. 19)¹³

This entire section is absent from the second edition. Sack's original hermeneutics are based on a dialectic of being present to novel circumstance and hearing God's word anew in light of those circumstances. Significantly, God's word is applied in relation to the Hebrew Bible, not the entire scope of what is traditionally referred to as "Torah". Omitting this section suggests a return to a more traditional approach to the issues under discussion, as indeed the following analysis will demonstrate.

To understand Sack's thesis, it is useful to spell out the arguments, of which it is composed, and which shall be analyzed below. Sacks' thesis runs as follows:

- A. God is greater than any religion.
- B. No religion is in possession of the fullness of truth.
- C. God has created or is responsible for the multiplicity of religions. Divinely ordained diversity extends to religions. Hence we must respect them all.

Sacks never presents his thesis in such a formal way. Rather, its elements interact with each other in varying permutations. The goal is statement C. Statements A and B can lead to it independently, as some of the quotes below suggest, or by a reconstruction of the argument as incorporating all three claims.

The argument for God being greater than religion seems to be required if we want to make room for other religions. If God's greatness is co-extensive with one religion, there would be no room for another religion. Moreover, recognizing God as greater than a religion makes it possible to present God as the goal of our religious quest, rather than obedience to a given religion, thereby creating opportunities for learning and inspiration from other religions.

The educational challenges at hand are broader than the philosophical challenge. The question of God's relation to religion is of great educational and psychological import. A different kind of religious psychology and attitude to the other is established if one really recognizes God's greatness in relation to religion. This would yield a religion that is God-centered rather than Torah-centered.

¹³See further the quote from p. 65, brought below.

People who are God-centered, it seems, will have a greater inclination to recognize and share with similar minded individuals from other faith traditions.

This argument leads to and would be founded upon the second premise: no religion is in possession of the fullness of truth. Truth belongs to God, not to religion, and therefore no religion may be considered as possessing the fullness of truth. Sacks does not engage the possibility of proximate levels of truth and of one religion being *more* true than the other, in whatever respect, while still deficient in relation to celestial or Divine truth. Rather, all religions are deemed equally partial and imperfect in relation to Divine truth. To the extent that truth is the goal, no religion has a monopoly on truth, which therefore leads us to seek God and to respect other religions. Because Sacks seeks to gain respect for otherness, what this argument may be sufficient for his cause. If the argument were for the need, or even the legitimacy, of receiving from or being inspired by another religion, one could counter his reasoning and suggest that since no religion is in possession of truth, there is no point in learning from the other. One could further argue that one's religion is truer than that of the other. In that case, Sack's argument may have to be supplemented by one that requires us to go beyond the inherent limitations of our own tradition in search of some aspects of truth found in another religion, but not subject to the same limitations. Given that each culture has its own ways and circumstances of placing limitations upon God's truth, the argument is not implausible.

One might argue that God is greater than "true" religion, but that the dynamic between God's ultimate truth and the varieties of partial and limited truths does not apply to all religions. This is where the third argument comes in. God is responsible for the diversity of all religions. Diversity is understood along the lines of natural and human diversity. Just as these are God-given, so the diversity of religions is God-given. In this sense, all religions are on a par with each other, manifesting the same dynamics of tension between human and Divine truth. No one religion is singled out as superior. Not only is Judaism not portrayed as superior; Judaism's very message concerns the value attached to the multiplicity of faiths. One could almost say that Judaism is best because it does not claim it is.

The meaning of the third argument, that all religions are God-given, must be limited by the second -argument. All religions are God-given only within the parameters of limited human understanding that never exhausts the meaning of Divine truth. One assumes that some meaningful measure of truth is communicated, otherwise why does God bother?¹⁴ Whatever degree of truth does come through is both the basis for a demand of obedience to a given religion for its adherents and a basis for respect by others. If all religions were deemed to be hopelessly beyond the pale of a

¹⁴Sacks is concerned about affirming the plurality of religions in their God-giveness, not about their truth value. Therefore, his argument is constructed so that the lack of absolute truth of any religion serves as a gateway to affirmation of equal divine disclosure through all religions. Had truth been his concern he would have had to make the argument that the God-giveness of religions is a guarantee of their truth. Sacks never makes such an argument. They are to be appreciated as moments of encounter with the divine, rather than as moments of truth. That God-giveness of a religion need not lead to a view of that religion's teaching as true was already suggested by David Valle, who argued that all religions are God-given, so that there should be religion, even though they are false. See Brill, p. 219.

God-given truth, there would be no reason to respect them. So, Sacks ends up juggling a very fine line, wherein respect for the other is contingent simultaneously on the successful communication of Divine truth within religions and its inherent limitations. One might think that the need to dissociate truth from religion is meant for internal purposes, as a precondition for considering the validity of other religions, while the claim that all religions share, supposedly to the same degree, in their God-giveness, is the basis for offering respect to other religions. However, to the extent that the argument is made by dual reference to God's transcendence and the consequent inability to reach truth and to God's successful self disclosure in multiple religions, there seems to be some degree of contradiction in Sacks' thinking. His position was rejected due to traditionally based objections, relating to his lack of appeal to traditional sources. But there is also a philosophical tension in his argument that requires resolution. The shift from the earlier to the later formulation does in fact reduce this tension.

One last point that emerges from an analysis of Sacks' argument, which may hold the key to resolving the tension just described, is that in fact religion is not necessarily about truth. God may wish to communicate to us ways of life, ways of being in relationship with Him, a quality of presence etc., without framing this communication in terms of truth. It is noteworthy that in describing the positive values associated with other religions, Sacks never appeals to the notion of truth. But if indeed validation of another religion is not for its "truth-content", at least not in the sense intended by argument B, then perhaps Sacks has unnecessarily complicated matters by attempting to relativize or contextualize truth in the first place. Perhaps it would have been better to avoid reference to truth and to construct an argument for diversity without engaging the problem of religious truth. Even if his revisions in the later version did not seek to resolve this difficulty but stem from other, more political or communitarian concerns, the later version does in fact eliminate this difficulty, by no longer engaging the problem of religious truth.

Let us now take a closer look at each of these arguments. For each I will provide the relevant quotes from both editions, thereby providing multiple arguments for the same core point, or, as appropriate, how certain ideas were relinquished in the second edition. I will use the following format: where changes have been made, the original will be presented in parentheses and the new version in square brackets.¹⁵ This will allow us to readily juxtapose the two versions, identifying principal changes. I have chosen to keep quotes in their entirety, even where what I have classified as arguments A-C overlap within one passage. This also allows us to appreciate how Sacks ties the different arguments together. I have commented briefly on the various passages, as appropriate.

A. God is greater than any religion

P. 55: (The same applies to religion. The radical transcendence of God in the Hebrew Bible means nothing more or less than that there is a difference between God and religion. God is universal, religions are particular. Religion is the translation of God into

¹⁵I am indebted for about half the references that follow to the prior analysis found at <http://hirhurim.blogspot.co.il/2007/10/differences-of-dignity.html>, which presents the material using this format.

a particular language and thus into the life of a group, nation, a community of faith. In the course of history, God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims. Only such a God is truly transcendental – greater not only than the natural universe but also than the spiritual universe articulated in any single faith, any specific language of human sensibility. How could a sacred text convey such an idea? It would declare that God is God of all humanity, but no single faith is or should be the faith of all humanity. Only such a narrative would lead us to see the presence of God in people of other faiths. Only such a worldview could reconcile the particularity of cultures with the universality of the human condition.) [So too in the case of religion. The radical transcendence of God in the Hebrew Bible means that the Infinite lies beyond our finite understanding. God communicates in human language, but there are dimensions of the Divine that must forever elude us. As Jews we believe that God has made a covenant with a singular people, but that does not exclude the possibility of other peoples, cultures and faiths finding their own relationship with God within the shared frame of the Noahide laws. These laws constitute, as it were, the depth grammar of the human experience of the Divine: of what it is to see the world as God's work, and humanity as God's image. God is God of all humanity, but between Babel and the end of days no single faith is the faith of all humanity. Such a narrative would lead us to respect the search for God in people of other faiths and reconcile the particularity of cultures with the universality of the human condition.]

Comment: this is possibly the most famous quote from *The Dignity of Difference*, and probably the one to land Sacks in greatest trouble with his classically minded rabbinic colleagues. Here, religions, all religions, are presented as translations of God into particular languages. One supposes the need for translation arises from differences in the capacity to hear, following the linguistic metaphor. Thus, the primary difference is cultural and national. Human diversity requires multiple translations, engendering different religions.

This passage makes a leap from argument A to C, without engaging the question of religious truth. Accordingly, all religions are equally God-given. God speaks through different religions. In fact, Sacks applies the traditional language of revelation to all religions.

All this has been done away with in the revised version. God's transcendence is no longer transcendence in relation to religions, but in relation to human understanding. Sacks no longer speaks for all religions, offering a neutral vantage point on how they are situated in relation to God. Rather, he now speaks as a Jew and offers the ideal of Noahide commandments as the basis of legitimating and respecting other religions. Multiplicity of faith traditions is no longer a Divinely ordained fact, but a fact of history. It is grounded in humanity's search for God, rather than in God's reaching out to humanity. The particularity of cultures does not lead to Divine translation but to multiple expressions of a common human quest for God. And God's transcendence (argument A) no longer leads to the recognition of multiple God-given faiths (argument C). God may be beyond human understanding, but He has chosen to communicate only through one channel.

P. 65: The way I have discovered, having listened to Judaism's sacred texts in the context of the tragedies of the twentieth century and the insecurities of the twenty-first, is that the truth at the beating heart of monotheism is that (God is greater than religion; that He is only partially comprehended by any faith. He is my God, but also your God. He is on my side, but also on your side. He exists not only in my faith, but also in yours.) [God transcends the particularities of culture and the limits of human understanding. He is my God but also the God of all mankind, even of those whose customs and way of life are unlike mine.]

Comment: In the revision, God no longer transcends religion, but culture. It is not that God exists *in* the other's faith, but beyond the difference of customs.

P. 60: The God of Israel is larger than the (faith) [specific practices] of Israel.

Comment: one wonders whether the meaning of the change is that God is *not* larger than Israel's faith. How would one even argue for such a position? And yet, Sacks has toned down in the second version all references to God being larger than Judaism, let alone other religions.

P. 65: Only such a God would be truly transcendent – greater not only than the natural universe but also than the spiritual universe capable of being comprehended in any (one language, any single faith) [human language, from any single point of view].

Comment: Once again, one wonders whether the removal of “any single faith” from the reference to God's transcendence suggests that God is *not* greater than Judaism. Strictly speaking, argument A could have been upheld, even if Sacks had to retract arguments B and especially C. But as he has tied argument A to C, he seems to have been forced to step back even on what seems like a very sensible statement, concerning God's transcendence with regard to any religion.

B. No religion is in possession of the fullness of truth

Pp. 64-65: (In heaven there is truth; on earth there are truths. Therefore, each culture has something to contribute. Each person knows something no one else does.) [God, wrote Rabbi Abraham Kook, 'deals kindly with this world by not putting all the talents in one place, in any one man or nation, not in one generation or even one world.' Each culture has something to contribute to the totality of human wisdom.]

Comment: The original version tied argument B to argument C. Because there is no full access to truth, there is room for cultural diversity. The reworking presents argument C on its own, with cultural, not religious, diversity, being an expression of the grace of God, aiding in search of the fullness of wisdom.

P. 64: (Truth on earth is not, nor can it aspire to be, the whole truth. It is limited, not comprehensive; particular, not universal.) [The Divine word comes from heaven but it is interpreted on earth. The Divine light is infinite but to be visible to us it must be refracted through finite understanding. Truth in heaven transcends space and time, but human perception is bounded by space and time.]

Comment: the dynamics of heaven and earth have been changed from those of full vs. partial truth to dynamics of Divine word and its interpretation, thereby making it an internal Jewish affair, rather than a basis for viewing other religions and cultures. Instead of a discussion of full vs partial truth, which would have made room for other religions and their truth value, we now have a discussion of infinite vs contextual truth, thereby pointing to limitations on our (Jewish) understanding of truth, without opening up to the possibility that truth might exist among others.

P. 64: (Truth on the ground is multiple, partial. Fragments of it lie everywhere. Each person, culture and language has part of it; none has it all.)

Comment: this entire statement has been removed. The claim that all truth is fragmentary is no longer sounded. Note that the original statement does not even refer to religions, only to cultures; still the quote has been eliminated.

P. 55 - (This means that religious truth is not universal. What it does *not* mean is that it is relative.) [This means that though God makes absolute demands of the Jewish people, other than the Noahide laws these demands are not universal].

Comment: while attempting to avoid relativism, Sacks makes a clear statement that truth is not universal. In other words, no one particular religion can be said to offer a teaching that is universally valid. The reworked statement no longer refers to truth, but only to the nature of demands. There are no universal/absolute demands, a fact immediately qualified by reference to the Noahide laws.

C. God has created or is responsible for and wills the multiplicity of religions. Divinely ordained diversity extends to religions. Hence we must respect them all.

P. 200 - (God, the parent of mankind, loves us as a parent loves - each child for what he or she uniquely is. The idea that one God entails one faith, one truth, one covenant is countered by the story of Babel. That story is preceded by the covenant with Noah and thus with all mankind - the moral basis of a shared humanity, and thus ultimately of universal human rights. But it is followed by an assertion of the dignity of difference - of Abraham and his children who follow their diverging paths to his presence, each valued, each 'chosen', each loved, each blessed by God.)

[God, the maker of all, has set his image on the person as such, prior to and independently of our varied cultures and civilizations, thus conferring on human life a dignity and sanctity that transcends our differences. That is the burden of his covenant with Noah and thus with all mankind. It is the moral basis of our shared humanity, and thus ultimately of universal human rights. This why the later covenant with Abraham and his children does not exclude other paths to salvation. The righteous of all nations - those who honour God and his covenant with mankind - have a share in the world to come.]

Comment: Theologically, Sacks offered a novel idea for validating diversity - Divine love. This is a fruitful insight that could be developed way beyond the humble intimations in the original version. Is God's love a way of validating our differences after these have occurred? If so, Divine love is a strategy of accommodation and could serve as a basis for our own loving behaviour in

relation to difference. In fact, we have here an important suggestion. We need to not only accept or respect difference; we must learn to love it.¹⁶ But Sacks' idea may be even more radical. Divine love may precede diversity and find expression in it. If one asks what is the source of diversity, in nature, in humanity and in religion, one might answer it is founded upon Divine love. God seeks to love in rich and varied ways, or to give multiple expressions to his power to love, thereby creating or generating realities characterized by their diversity. Thus, tying creation and love as a basis for diversity opens up an entire theological argument that allows us to move from the realm of truth to the realm of love. The next quote lends further support to such a reading. The language of love inspires Sacks to make an even more radical statement, extending language of chosenness, typically the unique privilege of Judaism, to other religions. All are chosen in love, highlighting the value of their diversity.

If indeed Sacks has developed a theology of diversity, grounded in love, his retraction of it is a great loss, inasmuch as it has been replaced by much more standard theology. In the revised text, reference to religious diversity has been removed and we only have cultural diversity. The revised theology features the Noahide covenant, coupled with the notion of the image of God. The image of God endows humanity with value and ultimately includes the various expressions of spiritual aspiration that find expression in religions. But this is a far cry from respecting diversity as such. The image of God proffers value "prior to and independently of our varied cultures and civilizations". Because the image of God remains constant, it retains its values regardless of difference, provided the Noahide commandments are observed. Thus, one has value *despite* difference, not *in* difference. This particular revision backtracks on Sacks' original insights possibly more than the obvious revisions already analyzed.

P. 56: (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. That is the conceptual link between love, creation and difference. We serve God, author of diversity, by respecting diversity.) [Just as a loving parent is pained by sibling rivalry, so God asks us, his children, not to fight or seek to dominate one another. God, author of diversity, is the unifying presence within diversity.]

Comment: God may be the author of diversity, but it in the reworked version it is no longer religious diversity, but human diversity, that invites us to the unifying Divine presence. Whereas the original version provides a basis for appreciating religious diversity, the revised version presents religion as the grounds for appreciating human diversity. From the revised perspective one would gather that God *does* want all to be the same, at least in conformity with Judaism's vision for humanity, not in the true and existent diversity of faith traditions. Thus, it is not that diversity is willed by God, but that its negative consequences are contrary to His will. Linking religious diversity and creation shows how far reaching Sacks' initial insights on diversity were. Just as there is diversity within creation, so there is diversity within religion. Here we have not an ideal of diversity, but rather its harmful consequences. This passage presents us with one of the key challenges for

¹⁶On this, see Rabbi Abraham Isaack Kook, *Midot Re'ayah*, Love (*ahava*) 10.

respecting religious difference - the consideration of religious diversity on a par with natural diversity.

Pp. 17-18 Can I, a Jew, (hear the echoes of God's voice) [recognize God's image in one who is not in my image: in a] (in that of) a Hindu or Sikh or Muslim or Christian or in the words of an Eskimo.

Comment: as in the first text we saw, it is no longer God who speaks or whose voice is heard. All reference to a language of revelation have been removed.¹⁷ These have been replaced by appeal to the idea of the image of God, that we have already encountered. This text places us before an unanswered question, in Sacks' revised theology. Is the image of God itself a source of diversity, or is it a constant that is maintained despite diversity? We noted this question with regard to the quote on p. 200. Here the question arises more forcefully. What does it mean to recognize God's image in that of a Hindu? Is it that the Divine image is maintained regardless of his "hinduness" or is it precisely his "hinduness" that brings to light the full potential of the Divine image. I have not been successful in locating a quote that would make the latter case explicitly, though the present reworked text could be stretched that far.¹⁸

Had we been able to find clear application of the "image of God" as a basis for creative religious diversity, (or if we are willing to stretch the present quote that far), this could have provided an important alternative to the revelation-based theology that Sacks was forced to retract. Rather than a religiously sanctioned diversity based on God speaking, we would have a religiously-based diversity based on human *realization* of its God-given potential, in the image of God. Realization is a very promising term for the present discussion of flourishing and diversity. The image of God provides an ideal framework for presenting God's gifts and the full potential made manifest in the human person and the myriad original contributions and discoveries, in all fields including the religious field, that come from it. "Realization" is also a term that serves some religious traditions, notably Hinduism, that indeed operate with such a theology. If the shift from Sacks' original position to his revised position could have been conceived along the lines of a shift from revelation to realization, this could have been a very constructive theological approach, that upheld the values of flourishing and diversity, grounding them in a religious value, without appeal to revelation. This remains a promising avenue for endowing diversity with meaning, for those who wish to limit revelation to their classical scriptures and exclude others from recognized revelation. But it seems Sacks himself did not think through the full implications of appeal to the image of God

¹⁷But see p. 5 where "Can we hear the voice of God in a language, a sensibility, a culture not our own?" has been kept without alteration. The reason is probably that this passage did not refer to religious, but to cultural, diversity.

¹⁸Sacks' collection of texts in support of his *Dignity of Difference* has numerous references to the image of God. But in all of them it is what must be appreciated about the other, not the innate capacity for creativity leading to religious diversity. The quote from the mishna commentator, Israel Lipshuts, on p. 48, where acts of scientific creativity and benevolence are linked to the image of God, comes closest, but is still a far cry from potential theologoumenon that draws on the image of God as source of spiritual or religious diversity.

for his revised theology. I imagine much more time and thought went into the original theology than into its revision, carried out under time and public pressure. Still, he has led us to a point where we might take even his revised theology a step further.

Pp. 52-53 Judaism... believes in one God but not in one (religion, one culture, one truth) [exclusive path to salvation]. *The God of Abraham is the God of all mankind, but the faith of Abraham is not the faith* [the demands made of the Israelites are not asked] of all mankind.

Comment: references to religious plurality have been removed, as has been reference to one truth. Truth and religion emerge as coextensive, and concerning both Sacks retracts the statement that there is more than one of them. The change from “religion” to “exclusive path to salvation” is more than a change of wording. The former recognizes other religions as equally valid. The latter refers to two paths offered by Judaism, one for Jews and one for non-Jews. Judaism is not an exclusive path to salvation in the sense that it also offers the Noahide teachings, meant for the rest of humanity.

P. 21 the proposition at the heart of monotheism is not what it has traditionally been taken to be: one God, (therefore one faith, one truth, one way) [therefore one path to salvation].

Unity creates diversity replaced by *unity is worshipped in diversity*.

Comment: This is a very significant change. In the original version, Divine unity is the source of religious diversity. It is therefore apriori, part of a Divine ideal. By contrast, the rewording features diversity as a given reality, not an ideal, and certainly not something created by God. Once there is diversity, God in His unity is worshipped in diverse ways.

P. 59: (*We encounter God in the face of a stranger*. That, I believe, is the Hebrew Bible's single greatest and most counterintuitive contribution to ethics. God creates difference; therefore it is in one-who-is-different that we meet god. Abraham encounters God when he invites three strangers into his tent. Jacob meets God when he wrestles with an unnamed adversary alone at night.) [*God cares about the stranger, and so must we*. Abraham invites three strangers into his tent and discovers that they are angels. Jacob wrestles with an unnamed adversary alone at night and thereafter says, 'I have seen God face to face'. Welcoming the stranger, said the sages, is even greater than 'receiving the Divine presence'.]

Comment: In this much toned down version, God no longer creates difference. In the original version, difference is an invitation to encounter. The implications of this for a theology of dialogue are obvious. In the reworked version God does not create difference, he cares about it. And the encounter with otherness is no longer an encounter with God, thereby reducing the potential value, and threat, of dialogue and encounter. God is encountered not *in* the other, but by caring *for* the other.

Pp. 65-66: It would be to know that I am a sentence in the story of my people and its faith, but that there are other stories, each written by God out of the letters of lives

bound together in community, (each bearing the unmistakable trace of his handwriting) [each part of the story of stories that is the narrative of man's search for God and God's call to mankind].

Comment: while the change in this passage seems innocuous, it is one further instance of removing reference to God's active involvement in creating and valuing diversity. It is not God who is writing our story, it is man who searches for God, and man's search creates humanity's grand narrative. Here is reflected the core issue - is diversity God-given or is it an expression of the human quest for God.

P. 21 - The glory of the created world is its astonishing multiplicity, the thousands of different languages spoken by mankind, (the hundreds of faiths), the proliferation of cultures.

Comment: in this passage is a further argument for justifying diversity. Diversity is a fact of creation and of human culture. Religious diversity therefore is a natural extension of natural diversity. This argument itself provides the foundation and justification for a legitimation of religious diversity as God-given. This argument need not rely on a theory of revelation. Even appeal to human creativity as something endowed and God-given could provide an adequate foundation for religious diversity. Therefore, in removing reference to "the hundreds of faiths" more is sought than to temper the appeal to revelation in some of the quotes above. What we have in the rewording is a denial of some level of legitimacy of difference. The likely reason for this is that Judaism has engaged in a lengthy battle against other religions, on theological or moral grounds. It is one thing to justify diversity, assuming certain basic moral or theological requirements have been met. It is completely another matter to validate *hundreds* of faiths. These would have to be the kinds of faiths that are typically repudiated as idolatrous. The above quote from p. 18 includes reference to the Eskimo, not only the Christian or even Hindu (notably absent is the Buddhist). Affirming Eskimo religion, as one of hundreds of faiths, is not simply to reread something we did not see in earlier readings. It is to go against the thrust of most of Jewish history in its attitudes to other religions. Sacks' theology of difference does not seem to require moral foundations and seems to consider diversity as a God-given reality, regardless of any moral or religious requirements.¹⁹ By forcing Sacks to adopt a Noahide foundation to his legitimation of diversity, rabbinic critics have not only forced him back into the classical mold, but have also brought to light the question of how far reaching acceptance of difference can be. It may be that a less far reaching statement can be more readily accounted for than the out and out acceptance of all religions, regardless of their teachings. The later formulation, whereby human aspiration fills the place that the original theory allotted to Divine creativity, may account much better for actual religious diversity, providing it with no less respectable, and more plausible grounds. The present reworking does not suggest what foundations might legitimate "hundreds of faiths" and simply deletes the phrase. But those reworkings where the human quest for God replaces God's voice and creativity could actually provide the foundations for a theory of diversity that is less in conflict with traditional voices and which can therefore

¹⁹One possible proof-text for such a theological position is Malachi 1,10, cited by Sacks on p. 60.

accommodate even “hundreds of faiths”. We should note, however, that with reference to these “hundreds of faiths” it may be easier to legitimate their difference than to see them as equally valid means of bringing about human flourishing.

6 Dignity of Difference and Human Flourishing: An Evaluation of Two Strategies

Let us now assess what resources Sacks has provided us with in both versions of *Dignity of Difference*. Do both editions provide parallel strategies for affirming respect for difference, or does one do so more than the other? Do both allow for a meaningful appreciation of human flourishing through religious diversity? I begin with an assessment of the original version.

The original version offers various complementary strategies for affirming religious diversity as something God-given and valuable. The most far reaching strategy is reference to other religions as being God-given, instruments through which God speaks and can be recognized. Complementing a revelation-based appreciation is a creation-based appreciation. God creates diversity. This line of argumentation has various nuances. It refers to God’s paternity and metaphor of family as a means of justifying difference. Here Sacks introduces the notion of love as a means of justifying diversity, a love that is rooted in the Divine love for diversity, but whose consequence is obviously a call for love across diversity. It also appeals to the created order and its inherent multiplicity of species, and the social order and its multiplicity of human types. These are extended to the religious realm. The extension does not seem to be causal. In other words, Sacks does not state that *because* there is multiplicity of human types and natural species, this requires religious diversity, as a means of accommodating such diversity, so as to make religion suitable to different temperaments and types.²⁰ Rather, Sacks seems to simply be arguing from the analogy - just as there is variety in other domains, so there must be variety in religion as well, and such variety is itself God-given.

It is clear Sacks has a very important intuition and insight and he employs a variety of strategies to justify it. His thesis highlights the importance of diversity and is a call to move away from Platonic universals to the concreteness of particular individuals, including individual religions. Sacks has made a powerful argument for validating religious difference and provided us with the nuclei for several conceptual trajectories that can be elaborated upon by further reflection and study.

These multiple suggestions all contribute to an understanding of human flourishing. In Sacks’ reading, difference is grounded in God and therefore must implicitly lead to human flourishing. God creates diversity not only for his glory, but, we assume, also for our own benefit and growth. And such flourishing has God as its ultimate reference point, a God who stands above religions and beyond partial truths, inviting humans to reach him through their diverse religions, partial as their understanding of truth may be. Religion is not about truth. Religion is about reaching God and

²⁰This argument has been made by various Jewish thinkers who could provide pluralist precedent for Sacks’ far reaching theology. The most obvious case is that of Rabbi Nathanel Al Fayumi, 11 c., who offers a theory of multiple revelations, through different religions, suited to the nature and temperaments of different peoples and cultures. See Brill, p. 111 ff. This is similar to Muslim understanding of religious diversity. Similar understandings can be read in Abraham Abulafia. See Brill, p. 216 ff. Moses’ Mendelssohn’s construction of religion invites a similar understanding, even if it focuses on his understanding of Judaism. See Brill, p. 112 ff.

encountering the other. Herein lies human flourishing, and it is equally available through all religions.

What of all this is left in the revised version? The two strategies for affirming diversity have been split apart. The creation-based strategy validates natural diversity, not religious diversity. The revelation-based strategy affirms Judaism's multiple tracks of revelation, one particular - one universal, but not the plurality of religious difference. In the revised version Sacks no longer offers us a means of accommodating religious difference. Rather, different religions are valued for their similarity, based on acceptance of the Noahide covenant.

Does the common Noahite platform serve as a basis for secondary expressions of religious difference, around a common core of revelation? Some readers of Sacks have replied in the negative, considering therefore the revision inadequate in terms of contemporary interreligious needs. Thus, Bishop Richard Harries. Harries argues that if there is not a multiplicity of revelations, then people find their way to peaceful co-existence solely through ethics and not the teachings of their religions. If so, Sacks' revisions no longer give religions any role in the world, since there is a difference between recognizing individual gentile morality and recognizing other religions.²¹ I think Sacks deserves a more generous reading. For one, it may be that even within the recognized common moral ground there is room for diversity, wherein religions offer a different coloring to a common moral ground. We have already noted such a possibility in a quote from Rav Kook.²² Alan Brill has made the point that Sacks in fact moves the Noahite laws from a universal ethic to an appreciation that the diversity of religions each contribute to Noahite moral order.²³ Further, according to Brill, Sacks moves the Noahite laws from the morality of individual gentiles to the need to follow Noahite laws through the diversity of other religions.²⁴

My own reading is that the revised Sacks *does* recognize other religions in their diversity, and not simply as expressions of the Noahide covenant, colored or transformed by their particularity. Sacks moves from a model of Divinely authored difference to a model wherein difference is humanly generated, in a movement that is religiously significant - the quest and search for God. Thus, complementing the Divinely ordained portion of religion - the Noahide commandments, is the great wealth of human aspiration for God. Provided the Noahide foundations are in place, there is room for a great variety of legitimate religious diversity, as an expression of the human spirit's search for God. The following passage makes the point clearly: "As Jews we believe that God has made a covenant with a singular people, but that does not exclude the possibility of other peoples,

²¹Richard Harries, Jonathan Sacks' *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 571,1, 2004, pp. 109-15.

²²This quote is found in Sack's collection of Jewish teachings on the Dignity of Difference, suggesting he is informed by it, though I am not sure that he has noted Rav Kook's limitations of this argument to the moral context.

²³I do not see the point explicitly in Sacks, but it may be inferred from contextualizing noahide morality within a broader theory of difference.

²⁴For both suggestions, see Brill, p. 147. The latter suggestion may be supported by the quote on p. 55, depending on how we understand finding one's relationship *within* the Noachide covenant. I prefer a stronger reading, as I suggest immediately.

cultures and faiths finding their own relationship with God within the shared frame of the Noahide laws...Such a narrative would lead us to respect the search for God in people of other faiths and reconcile the particularity of cultures with the universality of the human condition” (p. 55). The universality of human condition is addressed through the common Noahide covenant. The particularity of faiths are expressions of humanity’s search for God. As the quote suggests, this provides a foundation for respect. Of course, it does not provide a basis for *equal* valuation of another religious tradition. Here the revised edition steps back from the full respect based on a pluralist view of other religions, grounded in God’s own initiative, to an inclusivist appreciation of other religions, based on a common core of moral revelation and on legitimating their struggle and search for the Divine. It is respect, but of a lower order.²⁵

What of human flourishing? Does the revised version allow for the fullness of human flourishing? This is a harder question to answer. A narrow understanding of human flourishing would consider following the Noahide commandments adequate for a good human life. But more is intended by flourishing, according to the definition offered above. If so, the question would be whether human aspirations, in their diversity, have the power to lead one to God so that human flourishing is attained. Respect for efforts is not the same as recognition of equal attainment on the human track of aspiration for God. While Sacks himself might be inclined to answer in the positive, here may lie one important difference in his two theologies. It may be that the revised theology lacks the power to uphold human flourishing through religious diversity. This leads me to explore further the logic that informs Sacks’ revisions and to ask how much is really achieved by his reformulation. The following interrogation might pave the way to a more robust understanding of Sacks’ revised theology than what Sacks himself could state, under the circumstances of pressure in which the revision took place.

7 Divine Revelation, Human Aspiration - Querying a Classical Dichotomy

Sacks’ original theology relied on two arguments for diversity, an argument from revelation and an argument from creation. Clearly, the former is more charged. The criticism under which Sacks came owes to a long tradition that juxtaposes reason and revelation, human effort and Divine initiative. This is the tradition that dominated Jewish thought in the middle ages, and it owes much to contemporary Muslim sensibilities.²⁶ I believe this dichotomy is highly overrated and is in need of

²⁵We assume Sacks would still refrain from critiquing the religious forms of other religions and see them as fully legitimate, without entering into details of theology and practice, in a way reminiscent of Meiri. Actually, Sacks’ recognition of the religious value of the human quest for God should lead him to value positively differences in worship, rather than ignoring them. These would be expressions of the human spirit and its quest for God, and therefore worthy of our respect, and possibly even of study and appreciation. There may be less room for being inspired by teachings that are of a lower order, falling short of being God-given, though even that conclusion is not necessarily mandated by the structure of his argument.

²⁶This conceptualization was a key instrument in establishing Judaism’s views of competing monotheisms. Rabbinic texts never faced such a challenge and therefore never elevated this dichotomy to a foundational distinction. There is room, therefore, to explore whether it does or does not hold true for rabbinic sources.

reevaluation. To begin with, contemporary sensibilities of what “revelation” means are much broader than a simple understanding of God speaking, as though he were a human. How does God speak? How do we hear him? What is the role of the human partner in articulating the Divine voice? Closer study of these issues reveals they are not as straightforward as one might think and that there is more than one sense in which to understand revelation.²⁷ Internal Jewish understanding of revelation is itself much more rich and nuanced than the Muslim paradigm that informs the dichotomy, as it has served a Jewish view of other religions. Judaism’s core recognition of a dual Torah, written and oral, one that follows the just-described model of revelation, while the other passes through the human agent, making room for creative interpretation and valuing innovation suggests we cannot adopt a facile model of revelation. And if we recognize Divine revelation *through* human creativity, then the decision of whether to recognize similar revelation in processes of other religions does not stem from the very distinction between revelation and human initiative but from our prior views of other religions. In other words, once a more generous or pluralist view of other religions is espoused, there is nothing inherent in our notion of revelation that would preclude application of the kind of rich understanding of revelation that we find within to other expressions of the human spirit. These too can be considered as manifestations of God’s revelation, in a manner analogous to the oral Torah, albeit without the authoritative stamp of approval provided by Jewish tradition for its internal purposes. Pushing the argument to the limit - the Noahide commandments could correspond to “revelation”, to the written Torah,²⁸ while human aspiration and realization of God would correspond to the oral Torah. Sacks’ revised theology could have therefore been cast in more traditional terms, had he had the theological and political flexibility of thinking through the core notion of revelation.

Just how problematic a classical notion of revelation is to present concerns becomes obvious when we return to the fourfold presentation of difference. As noted above, much of the difficulty in the present discussion stems from the fact that Sacks never spells out what kind of difference he has in mind and what it is he is trying to validate. Of the four kinds of difference, what really informs Sacks’ presentation, as it did that of medieval Jewish views of other religions, is, I submit, the difference of ritual and way of life. These, as we learn from Rabbi Yehuda Halevi and others, must be God-given to have full value.²⁹ But this is not the only meaningful difference. Theology is certainly not God-given. If the classical definition of “faith seeking understanding” describes

²⁷Many of these issues have had to be rethought in response to issues raised by biblical criticism. But the philosophical challenges are broader. As the present discussion suggests, the interreligious context is itself an important factor that invites reexamination of these ideas. See Abraham J. Heschel, *Heavenly Torah as Refracted through the Generations*, translated by Gordon Tucker, New York, Continuum, 2005; David Weiss Halivni, *Revelation Restored: Divine Writ and Critical Responses*, Westview, Boulder, 1997.

²⁸This formulation is somewhat ironic, in view of the fact that we only know of the noachide commandments through the oral Torah and they are nowhere expressed in the Torah itself.

²⁹Yet, even Halevy recognizes religious value, even if inferior, in human efforts that aim to bring one closer to God. If Sacks’s second theology is read in light of Halevy, there is legitimacy to such efforts, but not equal value.

theological activity, then all theology is human. And so is the articulation of faith content and dogma. It is impossible to argue that Jewish theologizing or articulation of faith statements is God-given, while that of other religions is merely human initiative. One may be true, the other false, but the dividing line is not that of Divine-human authorship. If so, there is much in theological difference that must be appreciated under similar circumstances, making “revelation” almost irrelevant.

And what of difference in the human instruments of religion? It would be impossible to argue, other than on preconceived grounds, that Moses is God-given, while Jesus is simply an expression of human initiative. The category of “revelation” falls flat when it comes to manifestation of God in humans, or the approach to God through chosen and unique humans.

Moral difference would seem to matter less than other kinds of difference, inasmuch as we recognize basic common moral ground between religions. And if Brill is correct, and certainly if we hear the voice of Rav Kook on this matter, morality itself is colored by the community that carries it. It is a hard sell to argue that Jewish morality is uncolored, and only other religions color their morality in particular ways. Here again, the human and the Divine commingle as part of humanity’s journey to God and God’s participation in that journey.

Even concerning ritual and way of life, where the distinction would be most apparent, the distinction may not withstand closer scrutiny. While the foundation of Jewish law is God-given, its application, development and expansion have been given to human interpretation to such an extent as to make the distinction not meaningful. And is human consciousness so impenetrable to Divine inspiration as to suggest that all forms of ritual and worship are purely human inventions? If we recognize cultural diversity, can we not recognize inspiration and providence as instruments of shaping other religions, without having to appeal to a bull bodied notion of “revelation”?³⁰ And were we to argue from error and imperfection, in other words from inspiration gone awry or from false attribution of inspiration, can we really say our own tradition is error fullproof?

A recovery of a richer sense of revelation, undermining the facile dichotomy of human and Divine allows us several things:

A. In terms of appreciating Sacks’ original position, I suspect he never intended full blown revelation. What he probably intended is something along the lines I am describing here. Under criticism he had to retract, not having the public leeway to develop an alternative theory of revelation, which would have established a new playing ground.

B. It allows us to overcome the temptation of reading Sacks’ revised theology of other religions as *merely* human aspiration. God can speak through human aspiration.

C. It places Judaism and other religions on a par in terms of the complex dynamics of Divine and human initiative, at least partially. Even if we do not recognize a full aspect of “revelation” in other religions, a large part of religion, maybe most of it, ultimately shares the same ground, that of the complex and sometimes confusing meeting ground of God and humanity in the human psyche,

³⁰On providence as a category for appreciation of religious difference, see Zalman Schacter Shalomy and Netanel Miles-Yepetz, *A Heart Afire: Stories and Teachings of the Early Hasidic Masters*, Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 2009, p. 32. Schacter applies the category to the difference in human instruments. It may be applied more broadly, as an alternative to revelation.

mind and inspiration and in the human ability to listen, interpret and understand correctly what is God's mandate for it. With this comes the possibility for learning and inspiration in this common ground.³¹

D. Finally, it allows us to recover a notion of flourishing even within the revised theology. Flourishing need not depend on full blown revelation. Flourishing can be attained in the meeting ground between God and humanity. Were that not the case, flourishing may not have been possible even within Judaism.

8 The Grounds of Flourishing - Additional Strategies

Having revisited the notion of revelation and queried what constitutes religion, we are in a position to offer additional strategies that would enhance an understanding of human flourishing and legitimate religious difference.

A. The image of God. On the heels of the previous discussion, I would like to return to comments made above concerning the notion of the image of God. The notion appears multiple times in Sacks' second edition, as well as in the supplementary volume of traditional sources. However, in all these cases, the image of God is used as the ideal of respect, not as the generative category by means of which diversity is legitimated. Given the recognition that our religions are discovered and take place in the space between God and humans, it is worth considering the image of God as a generative principle, that empowers human spiritual life and its search for God. I have already raised the distinction between "revelation" and "realization", drawing on a terminology current in Eastern traditions. The image of God can provide a basis for realization of its potential in the broad human quest for the Divine. Indeed, an examination of how the term has been applied in Christianity, particularly in Orthodox Christianity, suggests it is a rich resource that can carry us into the depth and heights of the human reach into the life Divine.³² A serious engagement of the concept would allow us not only to legitimate the principle of difference but to be inspired by the actual manifestations and expressions of the image of God in the teachings and spiritual realities of other religions.

Let me move on to other strategies. Sacks put together a reader of Jewish sources on *The Dignity of Difference*, in an attempt to deal with criticism from Jewish authorities. This collection is an

³¹The understanding of multiple revelations could potentially limit learning and inspiration. Everyone should stick to their own revelation. Sharing a common ground that passes through common humanity opens this possibility, unless we argue that each religion follows the particularity of its psyche or social condition, in which case inspiration and learning are once again curbed. But it would be difficult to exclude all commonality in the human condition and to assume that our psyches are only expressions of difference. At the very least, the question of common and different human circumstances would stand at the heart of a quest for deeper mutual understanding and learning, in God's light.

³²One notes the relatively low place the notion occupies in Jewish thought. See my *The Image of God in Rabbinic Literature*, *Harvard Theological Review*, 87,2, 1994, pp. 171-195. Therefore, this idea too must be constructed, rather than being taken for granted.

argument for an open minded and inclusive mentality. It is certainly not a defense of the original theology. None of the arguments of the first edition of *Dignity of Difference* appear in it. There is much theoretical overlap with the revisions, and so it must be seen as a supplement to the second edition. But the argument for openness and inclusiveness does not match that of *Dignity of Difference*, not even the second edition. In terms of our discussion, lacking completely is any attempt to validate religious difference, even as an expression of the human quest for God. What it presents is an open view of religions and cultures, mostly in response to a typically insular Jewish mentality. This presentation lacks the originality found in either edition of the *Dignity of Difference*. The argument runs as follows: There are two tracks to recognizing others, one religion-based and one wisdom-based. The religious track is historical, recognizing the offshoots of Judaism in Christianity and Islam. Thus, it is not diversity that is recognized, but rather oneself in the other. Nothing is said of other religions. Complementing this is a recognition of the universality of wisdom, a recognition that allows our quest for wisdom to go beyond the boundaries of Israel, though not necessarily beyond the boundaries of Judaism. There is an argument for diversity, but it is a diversity of people and its purpose is largely to avoid the kinds of corruption that a unified and totalitarian society might engender.³³ It is not a rich diversity and certainly not a religious one. Thus, on the face of it, the supplementary text does little to enhance Sacks' argument in *Dignity of Difference*, in either edition.

There are, however, certain nuclei of ideas that if developed further might yield new lines of argumentation in support of a validation of difference, especially according to the revised version.

B. Wisdom - Universal and Particular. Sacks' presentation of wisdom is of a universal wisdom, to which all have access. Accordingly, we may receive that wisdom from all who have it. At one point, Sacks does refer to particular cultural achievements of specific nations (pp. 42-3). This leads us to query whether wisdom is really as universal as the Jewish philosophers upon whom Sacks bases his argument contend. The universality of wisdom is largely a heritage of the medieval period, where indeed wisdom was understood to be identical across cultures, based as it was on Greek philosophy. But those days are over. This is certainly the case in our world where we must account not only for "Abrahamic" wisdom but for the wisdom found in all religious traditions. If the dichotomy between revelation and wisdom that Sacks presents (p. 39) is valid, is it really a universal wisdom, or does Wisdom manifest in individual and particular wisdoms? And do these wisdoms bear any relationship to concrete religions? Religions that to begin with are not revelation-based would feel very comfortable with the wisdom foundations of religion. Even competing revelations may be approached in terms of their wisdom-content. Wisdom is elusive and we no longer have the same confidence that we possess it as did our medieval predecessors. But whatever sense we give to wisdom, if we take the category seriously (and most Jewish practitioners, as well as teachers do *not*), we must consider constructing it in ways that maintain the same balance between universal and particular that we recognize in our own faith and its related wisdom. If so, wisdom may be retrieved as a category by means of which diversity is appreciated. One can readily envision a wisdom-based flourishing of other cultures and religions. If other religions are more than simply human gropings

³³Significantly, the final chapter of this work focuses on diversity and antisemitism, suggesting his audience's concerns. There is no reference to antisemitism in either edition of *Dignity of Difference*.

for the Divine but expressions of (Divine) wisdom through other cultural and religious instruments, the difficulties that Sacks faced with a notion of revelation may be resolved. Wisdom provides us precisely that middle ground between the human and the Divine that we seek in order to get past the dichotomy of Divine revelation and human aspiration. Certainly, a wisdom-based appreciation of religious diversity would also amount to an invitation to study and engage multiple expressions of Divine wisdom.

The Inspiration of Rav Kook. The collection of supplementary sources in support of *Dignity of Difference* appeals to one author more than any other, this is Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the great mystic, philosopher and creative genius of the early 20th century. Indeed, the collection opens with a lengthy quote from Rav Kook, and his teachings are interspersed throughout Sacks' collection. There is good reason for this. Rav Kook may be the finest example of a broad, inclusive, loving view of humanity, taking into account all its spiritual movements, and thereby providing validation for others, as well as for otherness itself. I believe Rav Kook's contribution to a discussion of religious difference and human flourishing deserves an extended discussion, which is beyond the present scope. Sack draws on the inspiration of Rav Kook to set much of the mood for his work, though he does not attempt an analysis of Rav Kook on his own right. I believe Rav Kook provides us with a more far reaching view than the tame theology of the supplementary collection or even the revised version of *Dignity of Difference*. Rav kook would not go as far as the original version of *Dignity of Difference* and his attitude to other religions is complex and fraught with complications and even contradictions. For present purposes I would like to identify two strands in the quotes cited by Sacks, each of which deserves to be unpacked on its own, and each of which could provide the foundations for a theory of legitimating religious difference and human flourishing.

C. *The inclusive streak - goodness recognized.* One strand of thought grows out of a deep mystical and spiritual urge to unify all phenomena into a holistic view and an integrated spiritual reality.³⁴ This includes the drive to accept and integrate all schools of thought. The recognition of diversity and the quest for its integration grow out of this streak. It is fuelled by love for all, and by a vision of the unity of all life. Ultimately, its foundations are pantheistic, recognizing the Divine in all. The tension between the pantheistic, or panentheistic, recognition of the Divine life in all, and the battles of good and evil that inform our day to day spiritual life is refracted in the tension between inclusive statements and exclusionary ones, that are rejecting of other traditions.

D. *From human to spiritual diversity.* One of the challenges that Sacks had to face had to do with where to place the limits of legitimate diversity. The move from human to spiritual diversity seemed like an obvious one, until he attempted to account for it and encountered opposition.³⁵ A look at Rav Kook's thought, including quotes brought by Sacks, suggests Rav Kook was comfortable with

³⁴See source no. 1 in Sack's collection, which serves as a motto. *Orot Hakodesh* II, 442-443.

³⁵Actually, it is much facilitated by the construction of Judaism as both a people and a religion. The view of other religions as expressions of diversity of peoples would be an easy extension of what is taken for granted with regard to Judaism. While this may have been recognized in strands of Biblical theology, later Judaism viewed religions and not peoples. (Here it is worth noting Meiri's reference to other religions in terms of "nations bounded by religions"). The move from people to their faiths requires a return to earlier foundations.

the transition from human diversity to spiritual and religious diversity.³⁶ The spiritual life is adapted to the many circumstances of life's diversity and therefore we can expect to encounter moral, spiritual and religious diversity. Human quest and aspiration for God is itself part of the spiritual wealth that is validated and recognized.³⁷ It is appreciated and validated, but not necessarily given the status of truth. Rav Kook, like the later Sacks, emerges as an inclusivist, not a pluralist. Such diversity is approached from a dual perspective. On the one hand it is seen as a legitimate expression of the diversity of human consciousness and culture. The reality of human diversity, God-given in itself,³⁸ legitimates its outcomes in the moral and spiritual life of others. On the other, end, it is not appreciated as an equal. It is respected and received in a movement that is one of active transformation. One receives what is good in it and then transforms, raises and purifies what requires purification.³⁹ There is perhaps no more inclusivist view than the one that receives in order to purify. But this openness is also much more total and receptive than views that merely recognize the commonality of cultures or even the legitimacy of cultural differences. It is a view that engages and validates otherness. In its legitimation it also seeks the wellbeing of others and is certainly open to the possibility that flourishing is available through other spiritual and religious instruments. At the same time, as an active spiritual drive it does more than simply afford legitimacy. It encounters others in a dynamic movement of integration. Such integration addresses both that which is appreciated and that which requires transformation.

In many ways this approach provides the best synthesis between classical Judaism's suspicion of other paths and the spiritual breadth and vision that Rav Kook brings, grounding all in the presence of God and the inclusive drive of love. These lead to genuine engagement and encounter, beyond the declaration of legitimacy that the pluralist makes. The pluralist's goal is to legitimate others. It may also include the drive to learn and be inspired. However, as we have noted in discussing Sacks' argument, a full bodied pluralism may actually include blocks on full receptivity. If God speaks to each tradition in a way appropriate to it, it may not be possible to translate the lessons and inspiration of one tradition to the other. By contrast, Rav Kook offers full engagement, deep validation and at the same time continuing struggle with the value of the other in the light of the ideals of spiritual reality known to him from Judaism. In many ways this is a vision that is truer to both Judaism's history and its vision than a facile pluralism that lacks the roots by means of which it can take hold within a tradition.

³⁶See quote 79 in Sack's collection. *Orot Hakodesh* 3, 15. See further quote 81, *Arpelei Tohar*, 46.

³⁷Source 80 in Sacks' collection, the reference is faulty.

³⁸Source 78 in Sacks' collection. *Orot*, p. 152.

³⁹A similar notion is articulated by Rabbi Eliyahu ben Amozagh, cited in Sacks' supplementary collection, p. 52.