

Book Review

***The Dignity of Difference* by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks** (published 2004)

Picture two groups of people standing outside the same building at the same time: one group is wearing woollen gloves and hats and padded jackets: the other group is wearing shorts and tee-shirts. Somebody said that there is no bad weather, only inappropriate clothing. We, a group of people from Orkney, were in Malawi during September and October (their spring-time): we thought the day (24°C by mid-morning) was hot: the locals shivered because it was too cold!

How do you view the world around you? Ten people may hear the same musical performance but there could be ten different interpretations of it. It has been said that Britons and Americans are two nations divided by a common language — different words for the same thing (pavement / sidewalk); different spellings (gaol / jail): the same language masked by accent and dialect. But this also applies within Britain. At the beginning of one university year someone had to translate between students from Dundee and those from Liverpool — the Geordies succeeded!

I like this piece of music — but I do not like that one; I like that painting, but not the other; I enjoy cooked sprouts, but my daughter will only eat them raw! Some people love watching football, but I prefer cricket. Some gardeners want their garden to be neat and tidy whilst others prefer the natural look. Cats or dogs? A or B? All different ... but all the same.

The Dignity of Difference explores the importance of difference and how it makes the world more interesting. We make difference dangerous by choosing to make it important without considering whether it is relevant. The two groups of people above accepted the weather by its relevance to their own experiences. Neither was wholly wrong, neither was completely correct; each group's interpretation of the weather was justified, but each group had to recognise the correctness of the other. That is when difference becomes irrelevant, or rather, becomes interesting. Pitch-pine, oak, beech, and mahogany are all used to make furniture: each is hard wearing but they are different. Ultra-marathon runners and High-jumpers are equally athletic. Tomatoes are truly fruits, but would you put them into a fruit-salad?

'Different' does not mean better or worse; it only means 'not the same'. Jonathan Sacks reminds us that it is important to accept difference. Laugh at it when it is incongruous (as in the opening story), embrace it when it is useful (as with the furniture), but never decry it or use it as an excuse for exploitation.

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