

"Is Religion a Source of Peace or Unrest in Society?"

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The 7th of November will see the first anniversary of the death of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, a distinguished Jewish theologian, philosopher, author, and public intellectual. He was a colleague of mine in the British House of Lords and many of us still mourn his passing and miss his important contributions. Referring to people of faith, he expressed the view that *"Together we are called to heal a fractured world."* However, as he also noted, *"The fact that the great universal monotheisms have not yet formally endorsed a plural world is still the un-exorcised darkness at the heart of our religious situation."*¹ However, Rabbi Sacks himself ran into problems within his own Jewish community when, in the first edition of his book the *"The Dignity of Difference"* published in August 2002 in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, he suggested that Christianity and Islam were as valid as Judaism. Such was the storm of criticism this sparked from fervently Orthodox rabbis in Britain and Israel that when the second edition emerged in 2004, he had modified the offending statements to be less robust in their recognition of pluralism. One could hardly have a more clear or topical demonstration of the relevance of the question that is the title of my lecture – *"Is Religion a Source of Peace or Unrest in Society?"*

Sometimes when religion is accused of causing division, its defenders can argue that the contentious question is political rather than religious, but in this case, it was clearly a religious conflict within the same religious community about its relations with other religious communities, and the nature of religious adherence itself. That these religious divisions are a challenge that must be addressed is clearly stated by Pope Francis, not just in his words but in his actions. He chose the name Francis in a clear reference to St Francis of Assisi and in his Papal Encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, he points out that St Francis, at the time of the Crusades, went to visit the Sultan Malik-el-Kamil, in Egypt, a visit which entailed considerable hardship, not least given Francis' poverty, scarce resources, the great distances to be travelled and their differences of language, culture and religion. He takes this action as a precedent not only for the ecumenical engagement that he has had, for example with Bartholomew, the Orthodox Patriarch, but with the inter-faith dialogue he undertook with the Grand Imam, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, in Abu Dhabi, where together they declared that "God has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, and has called them to live together as brothers and sisters". He maintained that this joint statement was no mere diplomatic gesture, but a reflection born

of dialogue and common commitment – a demonstration that for him religion has an imperative to “seek peace and pursue it” as the Psalmist says.ⁱⁱ

For those who value what they would describe as ‘religious beliefs’, there are usually at least two fundamental assumptions. The first is that there is such a thing as religion, and secondly that it is, at least on balance, a good thing. Non-believers often ascribe much more malign consequences from the espousal of what they call ‘religious beliefs’, dismissing them as at best mere superstition, but often a device whose effect, and perhaps even its intention, is to keep gullible people under control in the interests of the powerfulⁱⁱⁱ.

Other colleagues, including some who have spent their whole lives studying the phenomena of ritual and religiosity, are doubtful that it is possible to construct a definition that encompasses all that we would usually describe as ‘religion’ and conclude that there is an arbitrariness in designating something as ‘religious’.^{iv} So perhaps there is a problem with our notion of religion itself, particularly as what we tend to think of as religiosity seems to be something that some people have, and others do not, rather than something that is an essential element in being human.

For much of history, and what came before, most communities did not think of religion as a separate entity. What we call religion was simply their way of understanding and relating with each other as community and with the universe in which they found themselves. It included ideas about how they and their community had come to be, what was ultimately important in life, and how they understood their obligations to their fellows and not only the world, but the universe in which they found themselves, however they understood that. These understandings were not always doctrinal statements in the way that we might understand them. They were felt appreciations of life. Often, they involved descriptions of another form of living after death and an appreciation of life that transcended day-to-day human experience to which the word ‘God’ or its equivalent is usually attached. These elements were not inevitably present, but they inform, and are often the key factor, in the identification of religiosity, especially by secularists. However, this excludes people who have similar religious experiences and would call themselves religious, but do not believe in life after death or a transcendent ‘God’ in the traditional sense

In the course of living their lives, people have experiences which seem to convey a sense of meaning, conviction and significance to them. In this way sexual engagement and excitation gives a depth to human relationships and helps to bind people together. Similarly, we feel a

sense of awe when we look up at high mountains; are both exhilarated and terrified by the power of a lightning storm; and gaze in wonderment into a night sky peppered with innumerable heavenly bodies whose light reaching us departed its sources longer ago than we can comprehend. Such experiences make people feel that they have encountered something that takes them beyond the ordinariness of life and there is often a wish to hold on to the feelings, so they may repeat the actions that they think enabled them to have that special experience – they want to remember it, repeat it, and understand what it meant.

In chapter 9 of Mark's Gospel, we are told that the disciples had a special experience on a mountain, probably Mount Tabor, which became known as the Mount of Transfiguration. They wanted to build reminders of what had happened, and, as they left the place, they debated amongst themselves what had been the meaning or significance of what they had seen. This was of course a very unusual and special experience, but in everyday life too, ordinary people engage with each other and with their surroundings, are moved by them, and want to develop a set of understandings that help them to navigate their conduct of life. We are meaning-seeking creatures. For most of history, the idea that the way they understood and experienced life should somehow be isolated and separated off from every other aspect of their life and understanding would have seemed very strange indeed to most people. Their way of being-in-the-world was something total, and was in addition not a private matter, but something shared with the rest of their community. Living together in community is about relationships; not just what I think about someone else, but how I feel about them; how we engage with each other; and what we do together.

Those activities that ensure that people and their children have food, water, shelter, and security, are more successful when understood in some frame of reference that is shared with others, but these understandings are not static. As time passed some ways of doing and being were more successful than others, and some ways of understanding what was going on, were more persuasive, not only because they seemed to make sense of a confusing, unpredictable, and uncertain world, but also because they accorded with felt experience and helped to structure the social group in such a way as to provide some security.

A way of relating emerged – relating with oneself, with others in the group and with the heavens and the earth of which one felt one a part, but only a very small part. Where and how did it all of this begin or end? How do I understand such remarkable things as the appearance of new life, and the ending of the life of those one loves, and even of oneself? These, the most

remarkable and important matters of all – birth, life, and death – are all matters of relationships. We are born as the result of a relationship, short or long; we live, but not to ourselves alone; and when we die it affects those with whom we have lived. We also relate with the rest of creation. Some time ago I was talking with the chief of a North American indigenous nation and he was complaining to me about the local environmentalists. *“I was angry with them,”* he said, *“because they were stopping us hunting, and I asked why they were stopping us doing something that my people had done for hundreds of years. The environmentalist said that he was protecting the environment, and I told him that I was part of the environment and he wasn’t protecting me.”* The chief was saying something quite profound about his entirely different perspective that humanity was a part of nature and the natural order. We are not a separate phenomenon.

The Irish theologian, J Ernest Davey defined religion as *“the most ultimate, the most real and the most compelling form in which we conceive the social or universe relationships and obligations of our lives; and in the case of those who may be called non-religious it is only necessary to invert the form of the sentence; the most ultimate, real and compelling form in which they conceive their social or universe relationships and obligations is their true religion.”*^v In other words, from the time when human beings developed the capacity of conscious reflection on their condition they engaged in a conscious relationship with the rest of creation. But this ‘way-of-being-in-the-world’, was not just cognitive; it was experiential; and it was shared and communal – not just my individual experience. This defines religion and religious experience in a different way. It is not merely a set of beliefs that may or may not influence how you conduct your life, or a series of rituals that you perform representing the culture of your community, or the hope that through such practices you can manipulate some unseen ‘powers that be’. Religion is how you engage harmoniously with yourself, your community, and the universe – which you know to possess a complexity beyond what you can understand or command.

In that sense religion is a way of living at peace with the world. By constructing or adopting from respected others, a world view or perspective, it is possible to make some sense of what happens and how to live. This also contributes to relationships with fellow human beings and the rest of creation. A common way of living emerges in your community with agreed boundaries on behaviour. Having some sense of how the world came about, how it continues and will perhaps end, gives a degree of understanding about things that in truth it is not possible to be certain about.

So, in as far as religion is what J Ernest Davey described as *'the most ultimate, the most real, and the most compelling form in which we conceive the social or universe relationships and obligations of our lives'*, religion is a word to describe something felt as profoundly meaningful and that directs us in how we live life and is shared to some degree at least with those with close social relationships. In this sense then religion is the bringer of peace, enabling human beings who live together to be calm in the face of the profound uncertainty of life, and to share deeply, physically, emotionally, and spiritually with others.

All of life is shared to some degree but since, as René Girard has shown, we are imitative creatures whose imitation of each other leads to conflict as we imitate each other's desires, wanting the same thing, and sometimes the same person, we need to set down boundaries, rules and shared understandings that enable us to live in relative peace with each other.^{vi} These boundaries, rules and shared understandings emerge from experience and are handed on to the next generation where they may be modified in the light of different experiences, or they may be endowed with increasing power with the passage of time, so while the experiences of birth, love, survival and death are shared by all humanity, the explanations given to those experiences and the ways that each individual and community have learned are useful, moving and motivating to them in their situation and time in history, will not necessarily be the same as those of another community. These laws, beliefs, rituals, and stories are not themselves religion, but the epiphenomena of religion, in the same way that life is demonstrated or evidenced in the functions and operations of our bodies and those of other animals and plants, but those functions are not 'life' itself. So, when some thinkers question whether there is really such a thing as 'religion' it seems to me that they are mistaking the infinite variety of the epiphenomena of religion for the common reality of religion itself – the fact that we all relate meaningfully with the rest of creation.

The phenomena that communities have developed to express or live out their social or universe relationships and obligations, have an almost infinite variety of explanations, rituals, social conventions, and cultural expressions, and so it is impossible to produce inclusive definitions based on the observed epiphenomena. To observe that many societies do not have a word for religion should not imply that religion does not exist for them, but rather that it is for them, all of life's experience.

Conflict arises when one way of living and understanding confronts another which expresses itself differently and incompatibly. There is then no agreement on what is 'a good way' to

experience life. In small communities such differences about how life is to be conducted were either maintained by the community as a whole by excluding any offender, or by the most powerful person in the community making the decision about what was 'the good' and imposing his will. I found this in talking with First Nation leaders in the Yukon when they told me how their law would conclude that a serious offender should be driven out of the community. In that region in the past, this would likely mean death alone in the freezing cold. Now it meant that the offender would just be exported to offend in another community and in any case would be contrary to the human rights provisions of Canadian Federal law. What had worked as a lawful sanction in the past was no longer possible, but this was a source of difficulty between the First Nation people and the mainstream of Canadian society.

The alternative to such 'scapegoating' of an individual was for those who wished to differ to depart and form another community or engage in a conflict that would threaten the integrity of the group. These mechanisms are seen with some clarity in the history of Christendom.

In the first few centuries different ideas developed in different communities about the meaning of the message of Jesus. He himself had an unusual perspective. We are told in Mark chapter 9, verse 40, that he rebuked his disciples who had wanted to define the boundaries of their group using his authority, and he said, "Whoever is not against us is for us." If the person was doing a good thing, that was what was important.

This same attitude was manifest in his interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus had no problem asking her for a drink and she was surprised because of the socio-cultural boundaries that history had erected between their two peoples. She pressed him further and it became clear that he was not just sitting lightly to these cultural boundaries because he was thirsty but because he had a different perspective. When she introduced the notion of conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans about where they should worship – on the mountain where they were, or in Jerusalem, Jesus talks in terms of worshipping in spirit and in truth rather than in any specific place, and goes on to speak in metaphorical terms about the water of eternal life.

The story makes it clear that even though she has had a powerful and moving religious experience and appreciates that something important is happening that transcends what she had known until now, she still does not understand what he is talking about and says, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

These two principles, that the spirit is not bound by either social boundaries or physical boundaries, is central to the message of Jesus, but right from the start it is misunderstood or ignored. There continues to be a struggle between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians; what rituals should be performed; what explanations should be believed; and where authority to decide these things should lie. There are arguments among the bishops, elders, or presbyters in various councils and eventually the Emperor Constantine, impatient with all these disagreements convokes the First Council of Nicaea in 325 and insists on an authoritative statement that creates a boundary between what is acceptable in belief and behaviour and what is not. He had been a military man who came to power through the army and had been a pagan for most of his life, so it is not surprising that he took a robust authoritative line, and it is doubtful that he gave very deep consideration to the complexity of Jesus' extraordinary message. What he succeeded in doing was implementing a common way of engaging with the world – a common religion which came into conflict mostly at its borders with those who had developed a different way of engaging with life. The Crusades were an expression of that conflict at the borders, but as time passed the differences emerging within led to splits, first between East and West Christendom and then with the wars of religion in Europe, between those states which espoused the traditional Roman faith and the Protestants who had developed a different approach that they believed to be truer to their own experience and understanding of Jesus message. After the wars were brought to some kind of closure with Treaties of Westphalia it would be the rulers of each individual state who would decide on the religion of their subjects. However, this could never hold. Once it was accepted that there was no final external authority, and that each person had the right and the responsibility to engage themselves with the ultimate questions, religion was no longer a way of living peacefully with oneself, and with others, but a constant struggle over what represented 'the good' in life.

The Enlightenment changed the rules. Religion was no longer the whole way that I live life and think about it, but rather a personal set of perspectives and behaviours limited to the private sphere. The most severe form of this view is found in the principle of *laïcité* in French political culture. It is not the king that has the divine right to determine what I believe but the community under the primacy of Reason, or more truly Rationalism, and the requirement for this to be enforced by the rule of law.

In principle, you could believe what you wished, but your behaviour had to accommodate to group norms. This was a very different situation from those societies or communities where there is no need to have special word for religion since there is nothing in life that falls outside

its purview. There is no secular in such a community because all of life is infused with a shared appreciation of the sacredness of all creation. The solution of privatizing issues of purpose, meaning and ultimate questions created religion as a separate domain. No longer was it possible to maintain the religious perspective of a life where everything was brought together and infused with the same values and meaning. Secularism pushed such value perspectives to the margins and made everything a matter of pragmatism, and religious people and institutions withdrew from the public space except in so far as it intruded upon a limited range of specific social and moral stances that had been derived from earlier, mostly pre-scientific times, communities, and experiences. As I have previously said elsewhere, perhaps the most important contribution of Pope Saint John Paul II was his insistence that his faith drove him to address questions of politics and science. When he was elected in October 1978, he became the first non-Italian pope since the 16th century when Christendom had split again, and the Roman Church had focussed since then on maintaining as much of its place and people as possible and turned in upon itself. Pope John Paul II engaged in a process of looking outwards. He became not only the most travelled Pontiff, but one of the most travelled world leaders in history and in the personal encouragement he gave to the formation of the Solidarity Union, he was key not only to the ending of Communist rule in his native Poland and eventually in all of Europe, but to the collapse of the whole Soviet system. He also led the Roman Church in addressing its relationship with science, regarding the work of scientists as their contribution to the search for truth and a twin sister of the search of faith. This was a priority for him all through his papacy. He gave real support to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, an independent body within the Holy See whose first leader had been Galileo Galilei. Pope John Paul II took an active interest in the Academy, updating its statutes and increasing the number of academicians. In 1979, in a speech at the Academy on the centenary of the birth of Albert Einstein, he requested the establishment of a committee of historians, theologians and scientists to examine again the case of Galileo and to remove the distrust that this episode still generated and any obstacles that it created in the way of fruitful concord between science and faith. The committee reported in 1992 when Pope John Paul II made clear that the Church's ruling had been in error and that Catholics were not hostile to science.

These actions helped to draw the Roman Church back into the broader conversation of religion as an approach to life rather than as a walled-off private space.

In the first place thinking about religion, especially in the West, had focussed very much on what people believed and on the observance of rituals and behaviours and how they are

explained. The Reformation raised fundamental questions about the importance of religious ‘works’ - rituals and requirements which were regarded as too susceptible to corruption and they focussed instead the centrality of ‘grace’, which was the unmerited favour of God not the result of works, but of ‘faith’ as they believed it to be proclaimed in the Bible – ‘Sola Gratia’, ‘Sola Fide’ and ‘Sola Scriptura’.

However, this attempt to address the problems was not ultimately successful. Firstly, if religion had earlier been about people finding a way to live at peace with themselves, their fellows, and the world, the different perspectives enforced by different authorities now produced conflict initially between different countries, whose rulers adopted different perspectives, and then between communities of those who shared beliefs as over against those who differed. The principle that “Whoever is not against us is for us” was based on what people did – they were healing people, an obvious good. However, it was not so obvious. The disciples had come from a background where even doing something good might be made less than good if it was done on the wrong day, or by the wrong person, or in the wrong way.

In addition, after the invention of printing, and as people began to read, the previous interpretations of the authorities no longer seemed believable. While more conservative theologians engaged in ever more complicated explanations to obviate the seeming contradictions or inadequacies of the old beliefs, more progressive theologians found it increasingly difficult to match the new findings of science with biblical accounts of the life of Christ. They decided that the problem was that the account of his life had been corrupted by generations of retelling the story with an increasing supernatural overlay. They thought that to really understand Jesus they needed to peel back those layers, scrape away the accretions of history and demythologize the stories to reveal the ‘real’ Jesus. We could then all come to agree on this ‘real’ Jesus and what he said and meant. They believed that myths were stories about things that never really happened, and so to find the true historical Jesus, the mythical elements need to be removed. However, myths are not stories about things that did not happen. On the contrary, they are symbolic stories about things that happen all the time and they have the potential to give us profound insights into ever relevant, real-life human dilemmas. Demythologizing the stories simply empties them of much of their meaning. They need to be understood neither as inaccurate history nor as primitive science, but as something more like poetry that conveys true messages about the human condition. This is true in the Abrahamic faiths, the Dharmic religions and all the other wisdom traditions. If it was not the case that they conveyed some real truths, they would fade away.

One reason why humanity developed this highly symbolic way of speaking and behaving was that we necessarily have a very limited and modest capacity for understanding and relating with the universe. The more we learn about it, the more we appreciate that our understanding is restricted to a narrow bandwidth that does not, for example, include the very small sub-atomic world or the very large intergalactic multiverse, just as the bandwidth of our sight or hearing is also limited to those things that our senses can perceive. Bats can communicate and find their way around in the dark by emitting sonar frequencies outside the range of human hearing. With a suitable electronic device this can be defected, but without the device, human beings are deaf to the sounds and cannot see the bats in the dark. This is not just true of what we can and cannot hear or see. There are things will always be outside the bandwidth of our human capacities especially when we are considering meaning and purpose. Since this is so, the only way that we can think about, talk about, and engage with such matters is in a symbolic way. We tell stories that convey some element or aspect of the mysterious reality that transcends our capacities. No single story conveys or explicates it all, so a library of books of stories is required, some of which seem to conflict with or contradict each other, and this is what the Bible is. This is because there is a complexity about reality and about ‘the good’. Isaiah Berlin had a good deal to say about this problem.

“The notion of the perfect whole, the ultimate solution, in which all good things coexist, seems to me to be not merely unattainable - that is a truism - but conceptually incoherent; I do not know what is meant by a harmony of this kind. Some among the Great Goods cannot live together. That is a conceptual truth. We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss. Happy are those who live under a discipline which they accept without question, who freely obey the orders of leaders, spiritual or temporal, whose word is fully accepted as unbreakable law; or those who have by their own methods, arrived at clear and unshakable convictions about what to do and what to be that brook no possible doubt. I can only say that those who rest on such comfortable beds of dogma are victims of forms of self-induced myopia, blinkers that may make for contentment, but not for understanding of what it is to be human.” ^{vii}

In other words, it is not religion that leads to conflicts but the fact that, whether or not we believe in what are known as ‘the Great Religions’, we will inevitably have differences of perspective because choice is inevitable in life, and we will all have made different choices and come to different places in our thoughts and lives. Indeed, more than that, when he refers to “those who live under a discipline which they accept without question” he is speaking of those

who espouse a system of thought that is not their own but taken on authority. In other words, it is not religion as traditionally understood that leads to conflict, but the breakdown of religious authority which is inevitable when there is the opportunity of choice.

Thinking is only one aspect of our engagement or relationship with others and the wider universe. We have also developed ways of behaving which assist relationships. These ethical boundaries enable us to relate to other human beings and we have rituals that help us to express our relations with the wider creation too. If we have no boundaries to our behaviour, we will quickly run into difficulties with others with whom we live, and indeed with nature more generally. While different boundaries for behaviour have developed in different societies at various times, all societies have found the need to establish some set of boundaries. To dismiss these as arbitrary or foolish is to fail to understand the fundamental necessity for boundaries if we are to guard us from ourselves, and to protect all of us from foolish or destructive aspects of each other. Some of the boundaries will change from time to time as social or cultural mores change, but the need for some boundaries does not diminish if society is to function. There are also some boundaries for behaviour that are more universal. Thou shalt not do murder, steal, or lie are relatively universal and can justifiably be regarded as human values. Whether or not to commit oneself to one other person of the same sex changes. The great Jewish patriarchs had a number of wives and concubines, and now-a-days in some countries same sex relationships are entirely acceptable. These issues would seem to be social or cultural norms more than fundamental human moral values. Many people would insist that forced sexual intercourse is morally unacceptable whether with someone of the same sex or a different sex and is therefore of a different order – a fundamental human moral value.

However, we not only engage or relate through how we think and in the ways that we behave, but also in how we feel. When we look up at the majesty of nature and feel a sense of awe, we may try to convey that sense in words, in paintings or music, but we will experience it in how we feel. This is the kind of transcendent experience to which we may or may not apply the word ‘religious’, depending on whether we think in such a way. But however we differ in our description of it, whether we understand and speak about the mountains in scientific, artistic, or religious terms we will be conveying an experience that is common to us all as human beings and without such experiences our lives would be thin and feeble.

I have been referring to how we manage to construct our lives not only as individuals but also in community. The human baby will not live for any length of time without some more or less

caring relationships and throughout our lives, societal relatedness is a hugely significant driver. Religion is about how we think, behave and feel about our human existence, not only as individuals but as communities, and those practices that we describe as ‘religious’ almost always involve someone else, whether the here-and-now presence of another person or a transcendent experience of relatedness that goes beyond.

While the anthropological observation of religion has tended to focus mainly of observing external actions (rites, conventions, and modes of behaviour) the study of religious beliefs (creeds and doctrines) and the description of religious structures (churches, mosques, temples and the authority of religious leaders) these are the issues on which we tend to differ, from religion to religion and from place to place, but also from one time to another time within religious communities. There are however other elements which are common to us as human beings, especially what we call ‘religious experience’, the need for ethical boundaries as distinct from the adoption of particular boundaries, and the requirement for shared practices that enable us to relate together.

When I was dealing with the violent conflict in Ireland, some of those who were involved in politics were keen to focus on the differences in the ways our communities thought, behaved, and related. While these were often characterised as religious differences they were more accurately understood as differences of identity and allegiance. The differences were real and resulted in disturbed relationships between Protestants, most of whom identified and felt allegiance with Scotland or England, and Catholics for whom the rest of the island of Ireland represented their vital relationship. These were competing conceptions of ‘the good’ and no solution could be found by seeking the victory of one perspective and the defeat of the other, or indeed of both. What was necessary was to accept that there was a plurality of perspectives, and to seek commonality of needs. This was also the approach of the recently deceased, John Hume, the leader of constitutional nationalism in the North and winner, with the unionist leader David Trimble, of the 1998 Nobel Prize for Peace. John often spoke about working together on common social and economic challenges – “spilling our sweat instead of our blood” he called it. The outcome of this approach was the pluralist political settlement of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement – even the name represented the two differing perspectives. This kind of pluralism is neither multiculturalism nor relativism. It is a recognition of different ways of engaging or relating with the world. Protestants and Catholics have different ways of thinking about problems and how to deal with them and both needed to be given respect.

What then is the answer to the question in the title of this lecture - "Is Religion a Source of Peace or Unrest in Society?"

From the line of thinking I have been trying to follow, the answer I would give is that religion is an attempt to bring peace within us, between us and with the universe we live in, and the great world religions have been an attempt to enable people to subsume their individual differences in a shared appreciation of the complexity of our experience. Our determination to have choice leads inevitably to profound differences of perspective and culture and therefore to the potential for conflict as we fear that if our culture, our way-of-being-in-the-world as a community does not survive, that which is essential to us as individuals and community will be destroyed – and we will in that profoundly human sense, ‘die’. It seems likely that only religious pluralism can accommodate the fundamental religious purpose of bringing peace – which brings me back to the comments I referred to at this start of this lecture, that got Rabbi, Lord Jonathan Sacks into such trouble with his Orthodox colleagues. The ecumenical movement tried to achieve this within much of Christendom without notable success, but perhaps this was due to a focus on the external phenomena – beliefs, rituals, and religious structures – the things on which we differ. If inter-faith dialogue addresses the same issues, it is likely to have the same outcome. If, however, it can explore the fundamental nature and purpose of religion, and do so in a pluralist mode, religion may be able to achieve its primary purpose of bringing peace on the other side of conflict.

What then is the role in society of those of us who appreciate this central significance of those elements of life and living to which we apply the term ‘religious’? It is perhaps to explore an understanding of how the obligations of our lives, and the meaning of the universe we inhabit, can only be appreciated in symbols and stories; to be modest about our current understandings; to be committed to follow where the Spirit leads as we evolve and develop individually and in community; to be appreciative of the richness of experience we can enjoy; and especially to take seriously how we need to conduct ourselves in relation with others and with our world – doing justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God.

ⁱ Braybrooke, M (2020) *Healing a Fractured World*, Faith Initiative, Issue 42, 10.

ⁱⁱ Psalm 34:14-15, The Holy Bible, KJV.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dawkins, R (2006) *The God Delusion*, Bantam Press.

^{iv} McKay, R., & Whitehouse, H. (2015) *Religion and Morality*. *Psychological Bulletin*. 141, 2, 447–473, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0038455>.

^v Davey, JE (2021) *Religious Experience – its nature, validity, forms and problems*, p7, ARTIS (Europe) Ltd, London.

^{vi} Girard R, (1972) *Violence and the Sacred*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

^{vii} Berlin, I (1998) *The Pursuit of the Ideal* in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, p11, Pimlico, Random House, London.