Discussion Transcript: Power & Responsibility Science, Humanity and Religion in the 21st Century

Jonathan Sacks

Overview

A lecture entitled `Power and Responsibility: Science, Humanity and Religion in the 21st Century' was delivered by the Chief Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks in November 2003 at the Cockcroft Lecture Theatre, University of Cambridge. It was part of the Cambridge CiS-St Edmunds Public Lecture series on `Science, Religion and Society' sponsored by the Templeton Foundation. A written version of the lecture can be found at the CiS-St Edmunds website (along with audio as well as an archive of other series lectures):

http://www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/cis

Subsequent to the lecture, a dinner/discussion with the speaker was held at St Edmunds College, Cambridge. An edited transcript of this discussion follows. It was chaired by Professor Bob White, who, along with the other contributors is briefly described at the end of the discussion.

The Discussion

Bob White: The Chief Rabbi would like a word before we begin, and then I am going to invite Denis Alexander to start off our discussion.

Jonathan Sacks: I wonder if, on your behalf, I may say thank you to the Vice-Master and to the College for the wonderful, wonderful hospitality of this evening. I have found it thrilling and wanted to say thank you and, if I may, to say thank you by way of a story. The lovely thing about this is that it actually happened, back in 1992 when Elaine and myself received our first invitation to lunch at 10 Downing Street. We were enormously excited. John Major was hosting a lunch for the-then President of the State of Israel, the late Chaim Herzog and 10 Downing Street phoned to ask whether Elaine and I would like to come to luncheon. Our office very enthusiastically said "Yes" and a very embarrassed voice on the other end of

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the line said "I suppose the Chief Rabbi would probably prefer a kosher meal" and my office said "Yes, probably". We said we would organise this. And then a few days later the same official phoned again and said would the Chief Rabbi please be willing to say "grace" and our office said "Yes" and an equally embarrassed voice said "Could it please be a short grace"; and so we said we'd organise all this.

Anyway, all the organization was done and the great day came and we were ushered into a small dining room at 10 Downing Street. It was about the same size as this one, about 20 of us, about a quarter of the Cabinet, the Prime-Minister, the President of Israel and a couple of Israeli Cabinet Ministers. It was then that I discovered that just when you think you've explained everything, there is one thing you haven't explained. What I hadn't explained is that before you can make a blessing in Judaism, you have to have something to make a blessing on. You have to take the bread in your hands and thank God for it; and I didn't realize that it is *de rigeur* in such circles to have a completely empty table in front of you.

At this point, as I realized this aghast, John Major stood up and said "and the Chief Rabbi will now say grace" and everyone stood up and turned expectantly toward me. Consider the choice that I faced: either I could say grace over nothing, thus taking the Lord's name in vain and breaking the second of the Ten Commandments; or I could decline the invitation of the Prime Minister and thus set back fifty years of Anglo-Israeli relations!

As my eyes were lifted towards the hills whence my salvation I hoped might come, out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of the one thing that saved the day. Somebody in 10 Downing Street, in a fit of aesthetic enthusiasm, had apparently decided that one of the gold table ornaments would look much better if it were draped with a bunch of grapes. It was the only edible item in the entire room and so I said a very general blessing that covered grapes and everything else, took a bite, and honour was satisfied.

After the meal I went up to John Major, and said "Prime Minister, you must realize that our faith is different from yours. In fact, you have much more faith than we do. You are prepared to thank the Lord for that which you are about to receive. We, from long historical experience, prefer to have received it first".

So may I thank both the Lord and the Vice-Master for having me here this evening – it's been an honour and a delight.

Bob White: Thank you. On that note may I invite Denis to start off our discussion.

Denis Alexander: Yes, well I'll comment off very briefly because I know that we want to get straight into the discussion.

I greatly enjoyed the lecture this evening, and that's the first thing I wanted to say; I can identify with so much of what was said. I wanted to make one brief comment and then also ask a question, which possibly might lead us into the discussion.

The comment I had is this: as the lecture this evening moved into the whole question of genetic engineering, and especially the status of the early embryo, I was interested, Chief

Rabbi, in your suggestion that often this is the point at which Christianity and Judaism have somewhat different views. However, I think the reality is that virtually the complete spectrum of views on these issues are represented somewhere within the Christian community. And so I think there is certainly a subset of Christian views that would line up very much with the kind of line that you were presenting this evening. But on the other hand there are plenty of other sub-species of Christian thinking on the matter, so it's difficult to generalize. So that was just a general comment that came to me as I was listening to your lecture.

The question I have, and possibly this is something that can lead us into the discussion, is on the issue of being made in the "image of God". I thought it was fascinating to have your comments on how much the value of the human individual is rooted in the whole Genesis doctrine of the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27), which is something I relate to very much. I would be very interested to hear more about how Judaism views the next few chapters of Genesis and the whole idea of the Fall; and to what extent, accepting that the image of God doctrine gives a basis for human value and human justice and so on, has that been spoilt by the doctrine of the Fall in Genesis? For example, God states pretty bluntly in Genesis 8:21 during the period after the Fall, referring to humankind in general, that "every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood". What has been the impact of that "inclination to evil" on science and technology, resulting in the misuse of science, to which you allude? I'd be very interested to hear more, because I feel very ignorant about how Judaism views the whole negative side of human personality and what many people would call sin in the life of humans – to what degree does that play a role in the application of science and technology to society – that's the question.

Bob White: Just before we ask the Chief Rabbi to respond – does anybody else want to add anything to that from their perspective?

Michael Schluter: I would like to add another question based on the "image of God". I was rather surprised actually, Chief Rabbi, by the answer you gave to the first question that was asked you after your lecture this evening, about how you understood the phrase in Genesis "Let us make human beings in *our* image", because I'd never heard that particular argument before. I was talking to somebody afterwards who said that the more traditional explanation that they'd been taught was that this might refer to angels, but obviously there might be a variety of explanations.

Where I would be very interested in your perspective is that the verse goes on to say "Male and female, created he them", and I've always in my Christian tradition understood that the male and the female are a plurality of human beings and their inter-relatedness, in a sense, goes back to an inter-relatedness in the nature of God. That is a Christian understanding, as you would know. I am interested in how, from a Jewish perspective, you would understand that issue, because it seems that if you're going to give the full weight to the nature of man and the nature of woman, as both made in the image of God and being

different from one another, it requires something in the way that you understand "let us make human beings in our image", which somehow gives due weight to that plurality in the Godhead. So I'm just interested in how, from a Jewish point of view, you would understand that.

Jonathan Sacks: That's very simple. First of all, Denis, there is no doctrine of original sin or of the Fall in Judaism. It's very, very striking by its absence. No-one, but nowhere in all the rest of the books of what we call the tenach (and what you call the Old Testament in the Bible), is there any reference to the Fall, any reference to humanity bearing the sin of Adam, none whatsoever. In fact the first references to it, and the only pre-Christian references, are from the inter-testamental literature which was ruled out as extracanonical, i.e. apocryphal, by the sages who canonized the Bible. Some of those books are, as you know, included in the Catholic Bible, of texts like Eccliasticus Ben-Sirum and so on. Those are the first documents that make reference to the doctrine of the Fall. So there's no reference at all in the Hebrew bible to this doctrine.

Secondly, it absolutely conflicts with the principle that you will find in Deuteronomy, chapter 6, verse 24, and most obviously in Ezekiel. Against any kind of vicarious guilt, the carrying on of guilt through the generations, Ezekiel says (and incidentally Jeremiah also says), that you shall have no reason any more to repeat the saying "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge".

Deuteronomic law says that children will not be put to death for the sins of their father, or fathers for their children, that each person will be punished for their own sin. So the concept of vicarious guilt, vicarious atonement, vicarious punishment, vicarious forgiveness, are simply not part of Judaism. Of course the rabbis had to square that with the famous verse, repeated several times in the Pentateuch, of visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation. The rabbis in the Talmudic tract of Makkot, page 24, just simply rather abruptly said Moses came along, or in another version Ezekiel came along, and abolished it.

Well you know they had more powers than Chief Rabbis, so there is in fact no tradition whatsoever of original sin that is so central to Pauline theology. But as I say, it has pre-Christian roots in what Judaism, before the birth of Christianity, deemed to be apocryphal. So there is a kind of split.

Does Judaism recognise the potential evil within humanity? Absolutely, absolutely. And therefore, what is key to us is the principle of free will. We have good within us, we have bad within us, and it's up to us to choose. Moses, as you know, said "Behold I set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse, therefore choose life". And of course the key text really in the first dialogue on free will is already in Genesis, chapter 4, when God says to Cain "If you do well, will you not be accepted? Sin is crouching at the door, it desires to have you, but you can master it".

I think that verse applies, incidentally, to any contemporary theories of genetic

determinism. We may indeed be disposed to one line or another but there is a Jewish doctrine, and I think a humanistic one, that nobody is born evil, but that we have the chance to rise over it. We say every morning at the beginning of our prayers "My God, the soul which you gave me is pure". I always find those words particularly moving because my brother was holding my father's hand and reciting those words when he passed away six years ago. So we're evenly poised between good and evil and there are relationships, family, community and so on, which can help us in the struggle against evil. If I were to apply that, let us say, to contemporary society, I would give you perhaps the following very simple example.

I spent a day in 1994, as part of a documentary I was making for the BBC, at a centre for young offenders called Sherburn House with a documentary maker called Roger Graef who had done a film about it. Sherburn House is for serious young offenders around the age of 18 who have been in crime more or less since around the ages of 8 or 10, you know, stealing mountain bikes etc. This was their last chance of a non-custodial sentence. These were kids, all from broken homes but most of them from abusive homes, and they were good kids. I asked the person who ran this house what support networks they had outside when they left, to which her answer was "None". In other words they don't have a community. Yes, they had probation officers or whatever, and they had to report back, but there was no-one there to make sure they had a job, no-one there to make sure they kept away from crime.

Therefore, I don't say free will is an absolute given, there are things we can do to encourage the good in people, things we can do to leave people to their own devices, in which case who would blame them for falling foul of this, that or the other. But Judaism is predicated on a doctrine of free will and not on a doctrine of original sin. That doesn't mean to say there is not a doctrine in Judaism of divine grace – on the contrary there is. The very act of creation is an act of divine grace and we speak constantly about it, but no doctrine of original sin.

Michael, you referred to "Let us make man .." – you were surprised by my answer. Well, so was I, but I thought it would cut out a lot of the discussion about angels! So here you are, here are two classic answers from the ancient rabbinic tradition going back to the second and third centuries.

The first answer, which is in my book *The Dignity of Difference* around page 64 when God was about to create man and he consulted with the ministering angels. The angel of kindness said "Let him be created because man is capable of acts of kindness". The angel of peace said "Let him not be created because he is full of strife". The angel of righteousness (which means justice and charity said "Let him be created because he is generous, he gives". The angel of truth said "Let him not be created because he is full of lies". So, a split vote. I don't know, Vice-Master, whether you would do this but the Midrash of the rabbinic tradition said "What did God do? He took truth and threw it to the ground, and then had a two-to-one vote in favour". The angels said "Sovereign of the universe, what have you done to this attribute of yours, for you are a God of truth?" And God replied, and all this incidentally is exegesis to a verse from Psalms "Let truth grow from the ground". I think any scientist knows what it is to gather together fragments of truth from the ground and build on them and I think

if we have the humility of seeing that our truth is truth on the ground and not truth as it is in heaven, that at best that we offer conjectures which are open to refutation, that humility may be the answer to the challenge of peace. If we're not absolutely convinced that we have the truth the way God does, maybe that answers the poem of the angel of peace.

The other passage, which comes from the Hebrew Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin folio page 38b, says that when God was about to create man he created a group of ministering angels and said "Shall we create man?" The angels said "What will he be like?" and God then showed them an advance trial run of the video of human history and the angels replied, in the words of Psalm 8, "What is man that you are mindful of him?" – in other words, whatever you do, don't create it, it's bad news.

So God instantly destroyed those angels. He created a second group of angels and said "Shall we create man?" and the second group of angels said the same as the first, so he destroyed them. And he created a third group of angels and said "Shall we create man?" and the third group said "Well the first two groups tried to tell you their honest opinion and it didn't help them much so, Almighty, the world is yours, do with it as you wish".

God then created man. And, giving you a not quite verbatim translation: when it came to the generation of the flood, the angels said "God, we told you so". And God replied in the wonderful words of Psalms (translated from Hebrew) "Even to old age I remain the same, and to grey hairs I will still suffer". In other words, God has more faith in man than man has in God.

So those are two rather graphic little rabbinic interpretations.

Bob White: May I open it up to some other people? John Polkinghorne has written about free will and determinism. What's your perspective on this?

John Polkinghorne: I would like, if I may, to slightly change the topic and pick up what was raised several times by the Chief Rabbi in his lecture, that is this question of the embryo and the status of the early embryo. I think practically everybody agrees that human persons are ends and not means, but the question is exactly as it was put to us this evening in the lecture, when does human life become human personhood? And you gave, if I may say so, a very interesting answer to that which I hadn't heard before, that it was a matter not of nature, but of law. You gave us the example of Sheba and Solomon. But I am troubled by that, I have to say, because it seems to me that there is a degree of stipulation in it all, a degree of arbitrariness. To refer to the illustration you used in answering the question after the lecture, that there is a definite border between England and Scotland but exactly where is a matter of historical accident and of how the battles ebbed and flowed, rather than anything else. That's one comment I want to make.

Another comment I want to make is that it seems to me that actually metaphysics influences very much what you think about this. If you pick up a dualist view, that human beings are detachable spiritual cells and material bodies, it would be quite natural to think of the spiritual soul as bestowed by God, at conception, and that a conceptus from the start would therefore be

truly human because it had a soul. If you think of human beings as psychosomatic unities, as I do, and as I understand Hebrew thought to do, then we would see personhood as something that grows and develops. And so you wouldn't attain that status from the start. I myself would think that the fourteen-day rule [prior to which experimentation is allowed on fertilised eggs under English law] is a very conservatively estimated boundary to draw. I'm interested to hear your response to that.

Bob White: There are some other medics here tonight, I think.

Hill Gaston: Well, along the same lines I wondered about whether the dividing line of birth, which you chose and which at first sight seems to be very straightforward and easily understandable, really works in real life, again, because of the status of that which is born. For instance an encephalic foetus is born in every sense, but is not normally given the same recognition of personhood and I felt that if you were really using birth as the be all and end all, then it is difficult to distinguish the status of early foetal life which was human from any other human cell collection that I might happen to grow in the lab. I didn't see what criteria you were going to invoke to distinguish between those two, although clearly we would always distinguish between those two, so they are related points.

Justin Holme: I was wondering, if you draw the line at birth how would you stand if there was a situation which is a kind of counter-example? If you had a pre-birth child and a child that had just been born, and for some reason you could only save the child that's just been born, using the organs of the child that hadn't yet been born, would that be permissible?

Derek Burke: I would like to add one thing to this discussion, because I again was struck by this idea [that human life begins at birth], which was quite new to me. That would seem to me to argue for the admission of termination of late pregnancy.

Bob White: Are there any other comments on this topic?

Hyung Choi: The Chief Rabbi's two ideas do not seem to go well with each other. On the one hand, he identified a legal personhood "at birth" and, on the other hand, he conceptualized a person as an independent being who "has ability to speak languages and (therefore) creativity." Of course the latter comes later than the former in human development. It seems to me that he gave us one account of personhood on a legal level and a quite different account on a conceptual level. It would be nice if we had a coherent account on both levels.

Jonathan Sacks: Well you rightly noted that in the course of the lecture I wanted to throw that idea in as a "for instance".

I was concerned to say a few very general things and give you a "for instance" which

those who’ve read *The Dignity of Difference* wouldn’t have come across. I haven’t written it up yet, and I just thought that the difference between *physis* and *nomos*, as it were between law and nature, is an interesting one. Doubtless it will be challenged – it’s not the terminology of which Jewish law itself is constructed.

As you would imagine Jewish law, as such, is very, very much more complex than the extremely simplified version I gave you. For instance, the rabbis will distinguish between the first forty days of foetal development and subsequently; they will distinguish between the first trimester and subsequently; they will not allow late pregnancy terminations except solely and simply to save the life of the mother. So all these gradations come into being and those are all gradations in Jewish law.

Secondly, one talks about the metaphysics behind the law and Sir John Polkinghorne rightly pointed out that there are metaphysical presuppositions here. It’s very difficult because the rabbinic literature does talk about this, but not in a systematic way. So as you alluded, the concept of a kind of platonic cell and body-cell dichotomy is not really natural to Judaism at all, although it is there in Greek thought, but all the words for soul in Hebrew have to do with breathing –*nefesh, ruack, neshamah* – which are three different terms for soul, each with their own particular nuance, are all forms of breathing. *Neshamah*, which is the most standard form for the human soul, really means to breathe deeply. It’s very interesting, incidentally, that in the wonderful phrase from Ecclesiastes (which was my late father’s favourite phrase) which used to be translated “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity” or as modern translations say “Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless” the word *hevel* actually means “breath” and I suppose the word *hevel* is the opposite of *neshamah*, it is a very little breath rather than a deep breath; it’s like Lear at the end of King Lear when he carries the dead Cordelia and says “Life have thou no breath at all”. I think Ecclesiastes is saying that the difference between life and the absence of life is mere breath, how fragile it all is; all this will be lost when I cease to breathe. So that is the metaphysics there, the soul is not something separable in some metaphysical sense except amongst those Jewish thinkers very much influenced by Greek philosophy – Moses among these very obviously – but also certain strands of Alexandrian Jewry from the inter-testamental period.

Now that has a definite relation to Jewish law in that, for instance, we have enormous problems today with brain death as a measure of death because we take respiration rather than brain activity as a sign of life, because of this deep connection between soul and respiration. That has to do with the metaphysics of personhood, of independent respiration at birth and that is the substance behind it. When you ask me what a person is in Jewish law – what’s the concept of person in Judaism – obviously I wasn’t talking about the legal definition of a person which is that which has been born, from the moment of birth (or in the strict Jewish law from the moment the head is emerged from the woman, or the majority of the body has come out). I thought you were asking a kind of general “What do we strive for as persons?” My answer did not come straight out of Judaism, but was an answer that I improvised on the spot and which I would be willing to defend in another book, so long as we have the time.

What about non-viable foetuses? The answer is that the concept of person does carry with it the concept of viability and therefore, for instance, a very premature delivery is not deemed to be a viable birth until the baby has survived for thirty days. That doesn't mean to say that the baby lacks any of the rights of the person: it has them all. It's just that if, God forbid, a baby died before thirty days, the full rites of mourning would not be observed. So the whole legal position is very, very nuanced. But I didn't think you'd appreciate a long development of that especially if I tried to get through it in forty-five minutes, because really it requires a book-length treatment. One book that you will certainly have available because it's not a new book and it's widely circulated, is David Feldman's book – I think it goes back to 1976 – *Abortion and Birth Control in Jewish Law*. It is a very enthralling book, a lovely book, actually, very well written and incidentally explains one of the sources of the divergence between the Jewish and Christian traditions based on the translation of a single word. Would that be interesting, Sir John? Can I just talk you through it? There's a passage in Exodus 21 that talks about two men fighting and while they're fighting, one of them injures a pregnant woman: in Hebrew "*ason*". If there's no *ason* then the person has to pay a fine to the woman for the damage he's caused her, but if there is *ason* then his sentence is still liable to capital punishment.

Now, the word *ason* in Hebrew means "mishap, catastrophe". When Jacob knows that he'll only get grain from Egypt if he sends Benjamin with the other brothers, he says "No, because last time I sent Joseph and he never came back, and therefore how can I send Benjamin lest there happen to him an *ason*. So *ason* means "catastrophe" and therefore Judaism reads those verses in the following way – if the woman survives then you have to pay a fine, but if she dies, you are guilty of a capital offence.

However the Septuagent translated *ason* as "form" and related both verses to the foetus. If the foetus doesn't have form, then you have to pay a monetary fine. If it *does* have form then you are guilty of a capital offence. So you have this distinction, which you'll find in Jerome and the early church fathers, between the *foetus formatus* and the *foetus informatus* and hence that patristic tradition had Exodus 21 saying that there's capital punishment for abortion or when, as is this case, there was a forced miscarriage, which was never a Jewish position. Now where did the church get this from? It's very interesting – they got it from the Alexandrian Jewish community, the community to which Philo belonged, which was a very Hellenised community. So that Christian tradition has Jewish roots and this may be not so much a difference between Judaism and Christianity as an internal difference in Judaism in the pre-Christian centuries between Palestinian Jewry and Alexandrian Jewry. But that's how it arose – from the interpretation of one word.

Peter Lipton: I wanted to make a comment about your discussion against reproductive cloning. Like many people, I have a kind of instinctive aversion to the idea of reproductive cloning, but I have some difficulty coming up with arguments against it that completely satisfy me.

You gave us about half a dozen arguments against cloning, but I'm not yet entirely sure about any of them. I want briefly to comment on the last two you gave, which I think were

probably the most important one: they were, as you put it, the arguments of principle. The first of these is the argument from the obligation not to treat people as mere means; the second is the argument from the importance of the uniqueness and irreplaceability of people. I want to say why I don't yet find these completely convincing. You considered the comparison with identical twins, though you suggested that in many ways this is a bad comparison. I agree with you. I think a way to make progress on the thorny problem of cloning is to see the disanalogies between identical twins and reproductive cloning, but I am going to use the case of twins here. The reason I didn't find the mere means argument against cloning completely convincing is that one twin does not necessarily treat the other twin as a mere means – one hopes that he will treat the other twin as an end in herself - but similarly the clone may well not be treated as a mere means by the mother, or the source of the egg. Conversely, you can have someone who is not a clone (or a twin) who you produce whom you do unfortunately treat as mere means, say as your slave. So I didn't feel that there was a tight enough connection between cloning and treating someone as mere means for this argument against cloning to go through. As for the argument from uniqueness or irreplaceability, that was the idea that it is essential to us as humans that we are not replaceable, and yet if there were reproductive cloning we would be replaceable. I didn't find that completely convincing as it stands either, because that seems to be guilty of a kind of genetic determinism. I don't think that identical twins are one individual, they are two individuals and they are not exactly similar. They are very different individuals and one does not replace the other. Similarly the egg mother and the clone would not obviously not be the same individual, and nor would they be exactly similar. Whom you are and what you become is not determined by your genes. The case of twins may be in various ways importantly different from the case of cloning, so that cloning is morally impermissible whereas having twins is no bad thing, but neither twins nor clones need be treated as mere means; nor will they be identical to the other individual whose genotype they share.

Bob White: May I take other comments, because I think this might be the last round. Ed, do you want to say something?

Ed Kessler: At the other end of the spectrum, Chief Rabbi, in terms of the issue of euthanasia: you touched on it in this discussion, but not in your lecture. I wonder if you could just consider the issues associated with euthanasia – you mentioned breath and the significance of breath, but what does one do in that situation where there isn't a sense of humanity or a sense of personhood in someone who is linked to a machine and their life is dependent upon that machine? If you're saying that Judaism views the birth as that moment when one enters humanity, is death at the other end, or are there moments before then when that life ends?

Hanan Alexander: I actually have a very different kind of question that could take us further afield, but would at least put it on the table for consideration.

Everything that we've been talking about heretofore has to do with the relationship between

Judaism and some form of the natural sciences for which, as you quite rightly point out, there is actually a very long tradition in Jewish philosophy. What's more problematic for religion, I think, and for Jewish religion in particular, is the relationship between Judaism or religion in general and the social and humanistic sciences. How might we relate, for example, to the behavioural sciences? How does the notion of free will somehow fit with the idea that there is operate conditioning? Or even more radically, and perhaps more troubling, the humanistic study of, say, the biblical texts and the treatment of the biblical text as a text like any other ancient text that might, say, have an authorship other than the divine authorship, that we normally would attribute to it if we were taking, say, a religious as opposed to a scientific attitude. So I wonder if you could comment about the relationship between these.

Bob White: Does anybody else want to say anything before we have a final word from the Chief Rabbi? We might manage a minute each!

Colin Humphreys: Can I come back to what you understand the image of God to be? One interpretation is based on the ancient Egyptian practice that they had golden images which were the images of their gods, and they believed them to be representatives of their gods on earth. People worshipped them since they were representing their gods. So do you think that the Bible is using that sort of language? That the image of God is not that we're like God in some way but that we are meant to be the representatives of God on earth. Do you think that's a valid interpretation?

Simon Dangoor: May I add one thing? It was in your critique of utilitarianism. You mentioned that although you may take the view of maximising the consequences of our actions, the problem is that we have no ability to predict unintended consequences. And then in your critique of a more *laissez faire* view you talked about how we should make certain moral choices – we shouldn't just let things go out and find their own consequences, we should make these moral choices which, in a way, is blocking off any unintended consequences which could be positive. Also I was wondering how, whenever we take these difficult problems, it is best to be sure that we can make a moral judgment while not limiting off the possible unintended consequences which are positive from any view.

Jonathan Sacks: Well, if I can take them in reverse order.

This whole issue of consequences is really best dealt with by looking at Hans Jonas' book *The Ethics of Responsibility*. It's a very interesting book, not written from a religious perspective as such, in which he points out that the whole issue of technology does challenge traditional ethical thinking whereby you could foresee the consequences of your actions because they tended to be limited to a relatively small group and be relatively immediate, whereas the consequences of technology are far more diffuse and far more long term. He develops from that his basic principle, that is probably, whatever other responsibilities we have, we have a

responsibility to see that there is still a planet to hand on to those who come after us. That dictates an ethic of safety, of not taking unwarranted risks, because the downside of those risks is much greater than the loss of possible good consequences; and E.O. Wilson takes essentially the same view at the end of his book *Consilience*. So these are two good books to read and they're much better than anything I could say.

What the phrase "the image of God" means – I'm sure God's representative here on earth is right and good. My own feeling, and this is hugely speculative territory, is that what is revolutionary about Genesis I is not that human beings are in the image of God; I think that idea would have been quite intelligible to Sumerian kings and Egyptian Pharoes. I think that what is remarkable is that everyone's image is the image of God and not just the guy at the top of the social structure and I think that is really what is played out in the Exodus story. You will know Norman Gottwald's *Tribes of Yahweh* seeing biblical Israel as an attempt to create, within limits, a non-hierarchical society, a society of equal dignity; and I think that's it – that everyone is in the image of God.

Judaism and the Behavioural Sciences – I just find the prospect of serious dialogue there absolutely enthralling and I hope, and he's agreed in principle, that Robert Winston and I will do a book together because he's been doing a lot of this stuff on human instinct and so on. We've known each other a long time, and he studies religious texts with me: a good conversation is one where you can't predict the outcome in advance so we don't know where that's going to go.

As to the biblical texts, my goodness me, I can't summarise that – I have at least another six books to write to do the theological underpinning for what will have to be a book on biblical criticism because there has not been an adequate response in Judaism in the past 200 years. It was one our guys, Spinoza, who started it so we really ought to have thought of a decent answer to it and we really haven't. But if you have a chance to read Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi's little book called *Zachor, Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, you will understand that the distinction between memory and history is crucial to Judaism. Three-quarters of the Hebrew bible is historical. Jews were, in Baruch Halpern's phrase, "the first historians". They were as J.H. Plum says in *The Death of the Past* the first people to see meaning in history, history as a narrative. Yet it's very interesting to ask what the biblical word for history is and there isn't one. When Hebrew was revived for the modern state of Israel and they wanted a word for history, they came up with historic, they chose the Greek word. Instead the bible uses a quite different word which appears 169 times, *zachor*: remember. There is a difference between history and memory; to be very crude, history is *his* story – it happened some time else to someone else. Memory is *my* story.

As you know on the Passover, we lift up the unleavened bread and we say this is – well, we say, it happened to *me*. The rabbi says everyone has to tell the story on Passover as if he or she personally left Egypt, that's memory. Therefore there is a certain alienation implicit in the 17th, 18th, 19th century development of histiography as that from which we are alienated and it is clear that that category cannot have applied to the bible as understood by Jews.

To hear the bible as God's word to us means a de-alienation, it means working within the parameters of memory rather than history. Therefore there must be a difference between historical study of the text, which is an academic process, and listening to it, which is a religious event, and how one does that phenomenologically or epistemologically I don't know. All I know is that I've got to do a lot of work before I'm even able to begin to write an answer to that.

Euthanasia – you know our position on this, we will oppose any form of active euthanasia. We will nonetheless not necessarily take heroic efforts to extend life and we will mandate the aggressive treatment of pain, even though we know the inevitable outcome will be a shortening of life: it's not unlike the Catholic principle of dolour. So active euthanasia, no; some form of passive euthanasia, yes, and that is the position as I'm prepared to say at ten o'clock at night – any more than that goes into the footnotes.

As to your feeling that you're not entirely persuaded about my arguments on cloning, well you rightly noted that it's a little difficult because we are dealing with a tradition going back two or three thousand years and reproductive cloning is not the first thing that the rabbis started thinking about. We are a little bit in the dark here; however, there is a very interesting story, in fact it's the biblical passage we're going to read this week, the story of toledot, Genesis 25:19. It says the following, beginning with the words " These are the generations of Isaac the son of Abraham; Abraham begat Isaac".

Now the rabbis assume that God always says things in the shortest number of words, that's one big difference between God and rabbis! So therefore since it seems to say the same thing twice, "Isaac the son of Abraham, Abraham begat Isaac", the rabbis constructed a whole story about this. You'll remember that Isaac is born in Genesis 21. If you have a look in Genesis 20, there's a famine in the land, Abraham and Sarah go into Geraar in the land of the Philistines. Sarah is taken into Abimelech's harem and God tells Abimelech "Don't touch this woman". However the rabbis sort of put two and two together and they said, for all these years she never had a child, and she's suddenly taken into Abimelech's harem, who's to say that Abraham was the father? Are you with me? She becomes pregnant immediately after that. So they said the following "By a miracle, God made Isaac a clone of Abraham", so that everyone would know that Abraham was the father of Isaac. Abraham begat Isaac but everyone knew that Isaac was the child of Abraham because they looked identical. I'm stringing together a lot of rabbinic exegesis. Can there be vicarious suicide?

So the rabbis strung together all of this stuff together with Genesis 24:1 which begins "And Abraham was old, advanced in years" and they came to the following story. Isaac was a clone of Abraham and therefore nobody could tell the difference between Abraham and Isaac because until Genesis 24:1, it doesn't mention old age except of Sarah. So the rabbis said until Abraham nobody grew old, but when Abraham for these years had a son who was his clone, he was so fed up of everyone mistaking him for his son and his son for him that he prayed for old age so that people could tell the difference between him and his son, and the Almighty decloned them and made Abraham old and so on and so forth.

So there is a lot of somewhat fanciful literature about cloning in the bible, some

of which says that God did actually clone X, Y and Z and Abraham and Isaac are not the only ones; and we are wrestling with this. There is no clear reason in Jewish law to forbid reproductive cloning and my rabbinical court is of the view that if a couple are absolutely unable to conceive in any other way, we will permit it. That is their view. However, firstly I am wrestling with it and I believe it goes against the grain of Judaism and we're all struggling with it. You read Leon Cass's writings on this, his little essay along with James Q. Wilson published by the American Enterprise Institute and his more recent book *In Defence of Human Life and Dignity*. I think Leon Cass has written very eloquently about it. I've given you where I think Jewish law is heading, but some rabbis may disagree with me on that.

Secondly, I'm told by Robert Winston that reproductive cloning is actually medically a blind alley, that reproductive cloning will never be safe enough to work as a procedure and that the future lies in stem cell research. There are sufficient frozen embryos produced as a by-product of IVF in one single Australian laboratory to provide all the world's needs for stem cell research for the prospective future. That may not be so, but that's what he told me a year ago – I didn't ask him just before this lecture – and therefore that cloning is not the road that he will go down, not the road that he expects medical science to go down. I was the tiniest bit provisional tonight in my remarks but I may be wrong and I am glad you've challenged me on it. I accept your difference between what is called a genotype and a phenotype. A clone will not be identical with the person of which he is a clone. Secondly, identical twins only really share fifty per cent of attributes in common and you and I know enough identical twins to know that each of them is a separate person.

I felt, oddly enough, that Steven Spielberg's film "A.I." was actually a very profound meditation on this unknown territory. But I also say that the dialogue between Judaism, Christian positions of various kinds, and secular positions, is an important dialogue because each one of us feels our own limitations as we are dealing with some of these fateful issues. So you were right, I was teasing out, testing, flying some kites and we haven't yet reached any resolution as a matter of a rabbinical court in the form of cloning.

Bob White: Thank you very much. The Chief Rabbi, when I asked him during dinner what his next book was going to be on, told me that he's got at least twenty-six books in mind. Well from what you've shown us tonight I'm surprised it's only twenty-six!

One thing the Chief Rabbi mentioned right at the beginning of his lecture was the trauma that 9/11 had on us and I think you commented on the same thing at the beginning of your book on *The Dignity of Difference* as well. Something that struck me as I thought about that is that in the 20th century, which has just gone by, it's reckoned that there were one hundred million violent deaths. If you calculate the average rate, that's 2,400 deaths per day, which is about the same as the number of people who died on 9/11. I have to say that it already looks as if the 21st century is excelling itself beyond that 20th century number. So I think the message at the end of your last book *The Dignity of Difference*, that it is crucial that we see the differences and we respect the differences between ourselves and other peoples and other cultures is an

important one for us to listen to. It is crucial unless we're going to have a 9/11 every single day of this century.

So thank you very much, Chief Rabbi, for your thought-provoking comments.

Discussion participants:

Dr Jonathan Sacks is Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth and widely acknowledged internationally as one of the leading contemporary exponents of Judaism (refer to the lecture transcript for a brief biography).

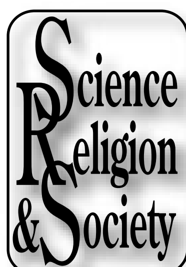
Dr. Denis Alexander, Chairman of Molecular Immunology, The Babraham Institute, Cambridge, and Fellow of St. Edmund's College. Editor of the journal *Science & Christian Belief.*

Professor Derek Burke, Honorary Fellow, St. Edmund's College, former Vice-Chancellor University of East Anglia, President of Christians in Science, molecular biologist, broadcaster and government adviser.

Professor Colin Humphreys, Professor of Materials Science, Cambridge; author of papers on science and Christianity.

DProfessor Bob White, FRS, Fellow St. Edmund's College, Department of Earth Sciences; geophysicist, prime mover of Templeton grant; writer on science and Christianity.

(A complete list of descriptions will be forthcoming shortly.)



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