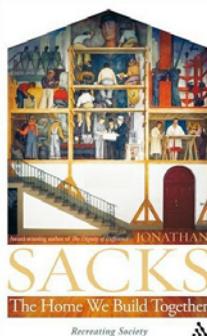


Building the social covenant around social diversity

Rick Brown reviews

The Home We Build Together: Recreating Society

by Jonathan Sacks
(Continuum, 2007, 272 pages)



At 'the end of history there are no serious ideological competitors left to liberal democracy.' So said Francis Fukuyama in the early 1990s. Since then culture and identity have replaced ideology. *The Home We Build Together: Recreating Society*, by Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregation of Britain and the Commonwealth highlights the significance and consequences of this development.

Sacks believes that multiculturalism 'is now counterproductive. It has encouraged segregation rather than integration.... Undertaken in the name of tolerance it has created new forms of intolerance'.

Holland demonstrates his point. Sacks refers to Paul Sniderman's and Louk Hagendoorn's study which reveals that most Dutch have a high regard for Muslims and think that Muslims are entitled to live according to their beliefs, but oppose multiculturalism because it compounds the differences between the majority and minorities. Tolerance and multiculturalism is not the same thing, especially when multiculturalism has morphed into valuing all cultures except your own.

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Sacks says came to be framed in terms of groups—Jews, African-Americans, women and then homosexuals. In making the transformation from individual rights to group rights, groups defined themselves as oppressed, a claim which led to the politics of victimhood. This development represents a fundamental shift from classical liberalism to what Sacks believes is a combination of neo-Marxism spliced with post-modernism. This conclusion punctures the complacency of Fukuyama's pronouncement.

A concept created as a defence against excessive government intrusion into the lives of individuals has become the basis of an argument for more government intervention. Thus, work which historically was undertaken by voluntary and self-help groups now is undertaken by 'professionals' and is largely paid for by the taxpayer.

A number of Sacks' observations have been dismissed previously by the

multicultural lobby on the basis that they reflect cultural prejudice or a desire to return to the days of assimilation. Sacks cannot be dismissed this easily. In Britain the opposition to multiculturalism is being led by people such as himself and the Archbishop of York, John Sentamu who comes from Uganda.

Further Sacks rejects assimilation. He supports 'integration' which he likens to a home in which differences are accepted and people work together. For Sacks, society is made out of the contributions of us all. What we give is unimportant; *that* we give is essential. 'A nation is made by contributions not claims; active citizenship not rights; what we give. Not what we demand'.

Sacks cites a practical demonstration of his point. Having attended a private dinner, the King of Jordan and an Israeli foreign minister, were astonished when their host required them to wash up dishes before leaving. A friendship was born and, had it not been for a prime ministerial veto, would have resulted in a peace treaty between Jordan and Israel. In 1995 the host, Lord Mischon, was awarded the Star of Jordan.

While Sacks' views on multiculturalism and the incompatibility of group rights with the foundations of liberal democracy accord with those of Fukuyama, he disagrees with Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis and argues that 'there is nothing inevitable about liberalism and the free society.' Sacks reminds the reader that it took over a thousand years for liberalism to evolve and argues that there is no guarantee it will survive because it cannot offer an objective justification for itself. For Sacks:

Liberal democracy is in danger. ... Non-political institutions are becoming politicised, university campuses are turning into ideological arenas, and a combination of political correctness and

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ethnic-religious separatism are eroding the graciousness of civil society. Religious groups are becoming pressure groups.... Boycotts and political campaigns are infecting professional bodies.

Australian readers should ask if Australia is one of the countries which fit Sacks' description.

With the emergence of groups of professionals advocating on issues outside their expertise ('Lawyers for Forests'); the passage in Victoria of the *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act*; the drumming of Geoffrey Blainey out of the Arts Faculty at the University of Melbourne in the 1980s because of politically incorrect statements about history; and the apparent exclusive focus of some clerics on various political issues leaving churches open to the criticism expressed by former Victorian premier Jeff Kennett that 'church leaders getting involved in the political field is almost to me an indication of an acknowledgment of failure in their primary purpose... They are not looking after the souls of the community', the answer would appear to be obvious.

Sacks highlights how multiculturalism has reinforced the undermining of national identity by globalisation, one result of which is that ethnic identities are becoming religious identities. This development has major implications because religions are global. This explains why religion is emerging as the most powerful form of global allegiance.

Sacks own circumstances demonstrate the point. Religion 'alone can be handed on across the generations....Eating sushi does not make me Japanese; liking Monet does not make me French. But Judaism makes me Jewish, and not Christian, Sikh or Zoroastrian. If I wish

to hand on my identity to my children, it will have to have a religious dimension'.

However, the global nature of religion is not a complete explanation for the increasing popularity of religious schools when, in Australia for example, the use of civil celebrants for marriages is high and attendances for major Christian denominations are declining.

Sacks' explanation will resonate with many. Parents want their children to earn self-respect through hard work and genuine achievement. They do not want them to think all lifestyles are equally valid and be moral relativists who are 'tourists in all cultures, at home in none'. They do not want their children to take drugs or alcohol, be sexually promiscuous or become teenage parents.

For societies, such as in Australia, in which many deem religion irrelevant to public debate, and some, especially amongst our self-appointed élites, have replaced it with manifestations of secularism, such as environmentalism, the idea that religion plays a significant cultural role is anathema and exposes divisions between those living in inner, metropolitan areas and those living in outer suburbs and regions.

In canvassing the inability of cosmopolitans to understand why everybody does not desire to be a bit of this and a bit of that, Sacks notes that cosmopolitanism is a highly specialised identity, prevalent especially in academic and international business circles, and that cosmopolitans do not relate to non-cosmopolitans.

This analysis would strike a chord with Mark Latham. In *Latham's World: The New Politics of the Outsiders*, Margaret Simons wrote that Latham says 'the insiders live like tourists in their own country. There is a sense in which they don't live in Australia at all. The outsiders, on

the other hand—the people who live in the outer suburbs and the regions—are the Residents of Australia... They cannot distance themselves from the problems of the neighbourhood.'

For validation of Sacks' and Latham's analyses, one need only to look at the results of the biggest focus group on a cultural issue undertaken in Australia—the referendum on a republic in 1999.

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Politics is about power and a social contract distributes that power. It defines the legal relationship between the citizen and the state and the limits we accept on our freedom in exchange for peace, order and a coherent society.

However, as Sacks argues, the problem we face is not about power but about society. We need to re-establish a consensus around issues of culture, morality and social cohesion. Civility and toleration are values which cannot be legislated but which provide part of the glue for a cohesive society. The way we interact with each other is determined by what Sacks calls a social covenant, and it is that covenant that must be established not only in the United Kingdom but also Australia. The argument that integration is a key element in building that covenant is compelling.

Sacks confronts issues many would prefer to ignore and presents responses which will make some people uncomfortable. Nevertheless these are issues we have to address if we want to enjoy social cohesion.

