

The Relationship between the People and God

Lambeth Conference 28th July 2008

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Friends -- this is for me a profoundly moving moment. You we have invited me, a Jew, to join your deliberations, and I thank you for that, and for all it implies. There is a lot of history between our faiths, and for me to stand here, counting as I do the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Archbishop of York as beloved colleagues, is a signal of hope for our children and the world they will inherit.

Many centuries ago the Jewish sages asked, who is a hero of heroes? They answered, not one who defeats his enemy but one who turns an enemy into a friend. That is what has happened between Jews and Christians: strangers have become friends. And on this, I think the first occasion a rabbi has addressed a plenary session of the Lambeth Conference, I want to thank God in the words of the ancient Jewish blessing, *Shehecheyanu vekiyemanu vehigiyanu lazman hazeh*. Thank You, God, for bringing us to this time.

I

You have asked me to speak about covenant, and that is what I am going to do. We will discover not only a transformative idea, one that changes us as we think of it; not only a way forward for faith in the 21st century. We will also find ourselves better able to answer the question: what is the role of religion in society, even in a secular society like Britain.

And let's begin our journey at the place we passed on our march last Thursday, in Westminster. It was such a lovely day that I imagine meeting up with my granddaughter on the way back and taking her to see some of the sights of London. We'd begin where we were, outside Parliament, and I imagine her asking what happens there, and I'd say, politics. And she'd ask, what's politics about, and I'd say: it's about the creation and distribution of power.

And then we'd go to the city, and see the Bank of England, and she'd ask what happens there and I'd say: economics. And she'd say: what's economics about, and I'd say: it's about the creation and distribution of wealth.

And then on our way back we'd pass St Paul's Cathedral, and she'd ask, what happens there, and I'd say: worship. And she'd ask: what's worship about? What does it create and distribute? And that's a good question, because for the past 50 years, our lives have been dominated by the other two institutions: politics and economics, the state and the market, the logic of power and the logic of wealth. The state is us in our collective capacity. The market is us as individuals. And the debate has been: which is more effective? The left tends to favour the state. The right tends to favour the market. And there are endless shadings in between.

But what this leaves out of the equation is a third phenomenon of the utmost importance, and I want to explain why. The state is about power. The market is about wealth. And they are two ways of getting people to act in the way we want. Either we force them to – the way of power. Or we pay them to – the way of wealth.

But there is a third way, and to see this let's perform a simple thought experiment. Imagine you have total power, and then you decide to share it with nine others. How much do you have left? 1/10 of what you had when you began. Suppose you have a thousand pounds, and you decide to share it with nine others. How much do you have left? 1/10 of what you had when you began.

But now suppose that you decide to share, not power or wealth, but love, or friendship, or influence, or even knowledge, with nine others. How much do I have left? Do I have less? No, I have more; perhaps even 10 times as much.

Why? Because love, friendship and influence are things that only exist by virtue of sharing. I call these covenantal goods -- the goods that, the more I share, the more I have.

In the short term at least, wealth and power are zero-sum games. If I win, you lose. If you win, I lose. Covenantal goods are non-zero-sum games, meaning, if I win, you also win. And that has huge consequences.

Wealth and power, economic and politics, the market and the state, are arenas of *competition*, whereas covenantal goods are arenas of *co-operation*.

Where do we find covenantal goods like love, friendship, influence and trust? They are born, not in the state, and not in the market, but in marriages, families, congregations, fellowships and communities -- even in society, if we are clear in our minds that society is something different from the state.

One way of seeing what's at stake is to understand the difference between two things that look and sound alike but actually are not, namely *contracts* and *covenants*.

In a contract, two or more individuals, each pursuing their own interest, come together to make an exchange for mutual benefit. So there is the commercial contract that creates the market, and the social contract that creates the state.

A covenant is something different. In a covenant, two or more individuals, each respecting the dignity and integrity of the other, come together in a bond of love and trust, to share their interests, sometimes even to share their lives, by pledging their faithfulness to one another, to do together what neither can achieve alone.

A contract is a *transaction*. A covenant is a *relationship*. Or to put it slightly differently: a contract is about interests. A covenant is about identity. It is about you and me coming together to form an 'us'. That is why contracts *benefit*, but covenants *transform*.

So economics and politics, the market and the state, are about the logic of competition. Covenant is about the logic of co-operation.

II

Now I want to ask, why is it that societies cannot exist without co-operation? Why is it that state and market alone cannot sustain a society?

The answer to that is an absolutely fascinating story, and it begins with Charles Darwin.

Darwin hit a problem he could not solve. I understand from Darwin that all life evolves by natural selection, which means, by the way of competition for scarce resources: food, shelter and the like.

If so, you would expect that all societies would value the most competitive, even the most ruthless individuals. But Darwin noticed that it isn't so. In fact, in every society of which he knew, it was the most altruistic individuals who were the most valued and admired, not the most competitive. Or, if I can put it in the language of Richard Dawkins: a bundle of selfish genes get together and produce selfless people. That was Darwin's paradox, and it lay unsolved until the late 1970s.

It was then that three very different disciplines converged: sociobiology, a branch of mathematics called games theory, and high-speed computer simulation. Together they produced something called the iterated prisoner's dilemma.

To cut a long story short, what they discovered was that though natural selection works through the genes of individuals, individuals -- certainly in the higher life-forms -- survive only because they are members of groups. And groups survive only on the basis of reciprocity and

trust, on what I have called covenant, or the logic of co-operation. One human versus one lion, the lion wins. Ten humans versus one lion, the humans are in with a chance.

It turns out that the very things that make Homo sapiens different – the use of language, the size of the brain, even the moral sense itself -- have to do with the ability to form and sustain groups: the larger the brain, the larger the group.

Neo-Darwinians call this reciprocal altruism. Sociologists call it trust. Economists call it social capital. And it is one great intellectual discoveries of our time. Individuals need groups. Groups need co-operation. And co-operation needs covenant, bonds of reciprocity and trust.

Traditionally, that was the work of religion. After all, the word 'religion' itself comes from a Latin root meaning 'to bind'. And whether we take a conservative thinker like Edmund Burke, or a radical like Thomas Paine, or a social scientist like Emil Durkheim, or an outside observer like Alexis de Tocqueville, they all saw this, and explained it, each in their own way. And now it has been scientifically demonstrated. If there is only competition and not co-operation, if there is only the state and the market and no covenantal relationships, society will not survive.

What then happens to a society when religion wanes and there is nothing covenantal to take its place?

Relationships break down. Marriage grows weak. Families become fragile. Communities atrophy. And the result is that people feel vulnerable and alone. If they turn those feelings outward, the result is often anger turning to violence. If they turn them inward, the result is depression, stress related syndromes, eating disorders, drug and alcohol abuse. Either way, there is spiritual poverty in the midst of material affluence.

It doesn't happen all at once, but slowly, gradually and inexorably. Societies without covenants and the institutions needed to inspire and sustain them, disintegrate. Initially, the result is a loss of graciousness in our shared and collective lives. Ultimately, it is a loss of freedom itself.

III

That is where we are. And now let's go back to where it all began.

In the ancient Near East, covenants existed in the form of treaties between tribes or states. They had little to do with religion. To the contrary, in the ancient world, religion was about politics and economics, power and wealth. The gods were the supreme powers. They were also

the controllers of wealth, in the form of rain, the earth's fertility and its harvests. So, if you wanted power or wealth, you had to placate the gods.

The idea that there could be a covenant between God and humanity must have seemed absurd. If you had told people there could be, between the Infinite and the finite, between the eternal and the ephemeral, a bond of love and trust, I think they would have said: go and lie down until the mood passes.

If you had added that God loves, not the wealthy and the powerful, but the poor and the powerless, they would have thought you were mad. But that was the idea that transformed the world.

Covenant is a key word of Tenach, the Hebrew Bible, where it occurs more than 250 times. No one put it more simply than the prophet Hosea, in words we say every weekday morning at the start of our prayers:

I will betroth you to me forever;

I will betroth you to me in righteousness and justice, love and compassion.

I will betroth you in faithfulness,

and you will know the LORD.

A covenant is a betrothal, a bond of love and trust. And it was the prophet Jeremiah, who in the name of God so beautifully spelled out the result:

I remember the devotion of your youth,

the love of your betrothal,

how you were willing to follow me into the desert,

through an unknown, unsown land.

Covenant is what allows us to face the future without fear, because we know we are not alone. 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for You are with me.' Covenant is the redemption of solitude.

There are three covenants set out in the Bible's opening books of Genesis and Exodus. The first, in Genesis 9, is the covenant with Noah and through him with all humanity. The second, in Genesis 17, is the covenant with Abraham. The third, in Exodus 19-24, is the covenant with the Israelites in the days of Moses. None supersedes or replaces the others. And without going into details, I want to look at one significant distinction between two types of covenant.

For this insight we are indebted the individual I regard as the greatest Jewish thinker of the 20th century, a man whose name may not be familiar to you, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik.

Perhaps the simplest way of approaching the idea is to ask: when did the Israelites become a nation? The Mosaic books give us two apparently contradictory answers. The first is: in Egypt. We read in Deuteronomy 26: 'our ancestors went down to Egypt and there they became a nation'. The second answer is, only when the Israelites *left* Egypt and stood at the foot of Mount Sinai, where they became, in the words of Exodus 19, 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation'. Now these two answers can't both be true -- or can they?

Rabbi Soloveitchik's answer is that both are true, but they involve two different kinds of covenant. There is, he said, a covenant of *fate* and a covenant of *faith*, and they are very different things.

A group can be bound in the covenant of fate when they suffer together, when they face a common enemy. They have shared tears, shared fears, shared responsibility. They huddle together for comfort and mutual protection. That is a covenant of fate.

A covenant of faith is quite different. That is made by a people who share dreams, aspirations, ideals. They don't need a common enemy, because they have a common hope. They come together to create something new. They are defined not by what happens to them but by what they commit themselves to do. That is a covenant of faith.

Now we understand how it was that the Israelites had two foundational moments, the first in Egypt and the second at Sinai. In Egypt they became a nation bound by a covenant of fate -- a fate of slavery and suffering. At Sinai they became a

nation bound by a covenant of faith, defined by the Torah and by God's commands. That distinction is vital to what I have to say today.

Why is it that no-one made this distinction before Rabbi Soloveitchik, in other words, before the second half of the 20th century? The answer lies in one word: Holocaust.

At the level of faith, Jews in the 19th and 20th centuries were deeply divided. But during the Holocaust they shared the same fate, whether they were Orthodox or non-Orthodox, religious or secular, identifying or totally assimilated. What Rabbi Soloveitchik was doing, within a deeply fragmented Jewish world, was to rescue a sense of solidarity with the victims. Hence his concept, always implicit within the tradition but never spelled out so explicitly before, of a covenant of fate even in the absence of a covenant of faith.

V

Now that we have made this distinction, we can state a proposition of the utmost importance. When we read Genesis and Exodus superficially, it seems as if the covenants of Noah, Abraham and Sinai are the same sort of thing. But now we can see that they are not the same kind of thing at all.

The covenants of Abraham and Sinai are covenants of faith. But the covenant of Noah says nothing about faith. The world had been almost destroyed by a flood. All mankind, all life, with the exception of Noah's Ark, had shared the same fate. Humanity after the Flood was like the Jewish people after the Holocaust. The covenant of Noah is not a covenant of faith but a covenant of fate.

God says: Never again will I destroy the world. But I cannot promise that *you* will never destroy the world -- because I have given you free will. All I can do is teach you how not to destroy the world. How?

The covenant of Noah has three dimensions. First: 'He who sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God, He created man.' The first element is *the sanctity of human life*.

The second: Read Genesis 9 carefully and you will see that *five times* God insists that the covenant of Noah is not merely with humanity, but with all life on earth. So the second element is *the integrity of the created world*.

The third lies in the symbol of the covenant, the rainbow, in which the white light of God is refracted into all the colours of the spectrum. The rainbow symbolises what I have called the dignity of difference. The miracle at the heart of monotheism is that unity up there creates diversity down here. These three dimensions define the covenant of fate.

There is a famous prophecy in Isaiah 11, that one day the wolf will lie down with the lamb. It hasn't happened yet (though there is the apocryphal story of a zoo in which, in a single cage, a lion did lie down with a lamb. How do you do that? a visitor asked. The zookeeper replied: 'Simple - you just need a new lamb every day').

There was, however, one time when the wolf *did* lie down with the lamb. When? In Noah's Ark. Why? Not because they were friends, but because otherwise they would drown. That is the covenant of fate.

Note that the covenant of fate *precedes* the covenant of faith, because faith is particular, but fate is universal. That, then, is Genesis 9: the global covenant of human solidarity.

VI

And with that, I come to the present. We are living through one of the most fateful ages of change since Homo sapiens first set foot on earth. Globalisation and the new information technologies are doing two things simultaneously. First, they are fragmenting our world. Narrowcasting is taking the place of broadcasting. National cultures are growing weaker. We are splitting into ever smaller sects of the like-minded.

But globalisation is also thrusting us together as never before. The destruction of a rainforests there adds to global warming everywhere. Political conflict in one place can create a terrorist incident in another, thousands of miles away. Poverty there moves consciences here. At the very moment that covenants of faith are splitting apart, the covenant of fate is forcing us together -- *and we have not yet proved equal to it*.

All three elements of the global covenant are in danger. The sanctity of human life is being desecrated by terror. The integrity of creation is threatened by environmental catastrophe. Respect for diversity is imperiled by what one writer has called the clash of civilisations. And to repeat -- the covenant of fate precedes the covenant of faith. Before we can live *any* faith we have to live. And we must honour our covenant with future generations that they will inherit a world in which it is possible to live. That is the call of God in our time.

VII

Friends, I stand before you as a Jew, which means not just as an individual, but as a representative of my people. And as I prepared this lecture, within my soul were the tears of my ancestors. We may have forgotten this, but for a thousand years, between the First Crusade and the Holocaust, the word 'Christian' struck fear into Jewish hearts. Think only of the words the Jewish encounter with Christianity added to the vocabulary of human pain: blood libel, book burnings, disputations, forced conversions, inquisition, auto da fe, expulsion, ghetto and pogrom.

I could not stand here today in total openness, and not mention that book of Jewish tears.

And I have asked myself, what would our ancestors want of us today?

And the answer to that lies in the scene that brings the book of Genesis to a climax and a closure. You remember: after the death of Jacob, the brothers fear that Joseph will take revenge. After all, they had sold him into slavery in Egypt.

Instead, Joseph forgives -- but he does more than forgive. Listen carefully to his words:

You intended to harm me,
but God intended it for good,
to do what is now being done,
to save many lives.

Joseph does more than forgive. He says, out of bad has come good. Because of what you did to me, I have been able to save many lives. Which lives? Not just those of

his brothers, but the lives of the Egyptians, the lives of strangers. I have been able to feed the hungry. I have been able to honour the covenant of fate -- and by honouring the covenant of fate between him and strangers, Joseph is able to mend the broken covenant of faith between him and his brothers.

In effect, Joseph says to his brothers: we cannot *unwrite* the past, but we can *redeem* that past - if we take our tears and use them to sensitise us to the tears of others.

And now we see a remarkable thing. Although Genesis is about the covenant of faith between God and Abraham, it begins and ends with the covenant of fate: first in the days of Noah, and later in the time of Joseph.

Both involve water: in the case of Noah, there is too much, a flood; in the case of Joseph, too little, a drought.

Both involve saving human life. But Noah saves only his family. Joseph saves an entire nation of strangers.

Both involve forgiveness. In the case of Noah, God forgives. In the case of Joseph, it is a human being who forgives.

And both involve a relationship with the past. In the case of Noah, the past is obliterated. In the case of Joseph, the past is redeemed.

VIII

And today, between Jews and Christians, that past is being redeemed. In 1942, in the midst of humanity's darkest night, a great Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, and a great Chief Rabbi, J. H. Hertz, came together in a momentous covenant of fate, called the Council of Christians and Jews. And since then, Jews and Christians have done more to mend their relationship than any other two religions on earth, so that today we meet as beloved friends.

And now we must extend that friendship more widely. We must renew the global covenant of fate, the covenant that began with Noah and reached a climax in the work of Joseph, the work of saving many lives.

And that is what we began to do last Thursday when we walked side-by-side: Christians, Jews, Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Zoroastrians and Baha'i.

Because though we do not share a faith, we surely share a fate. Whatever our faith or lack of faith, hunger still hurts, disease still strikes, poverty still disfigures, and hate still kills. Few put it better than that great Christian poet, John Donne: 'Every man's death diminishes me, for I am involved in mankind.'

Friends, if we look at Genesis 50, we will see that just before Joseph says his great words of reconciliation, the text says: 'Joseph wept.' Why did Joseph weep? He wept for all the needless pain the brothers had caused one another. And shall we not weep when we see the immense challenges with which humanity is faced in the 21st century -- poverty, hunger, disease, environmental catastrophe. And what is the face religion all too often shows to the world? Conflict -- between faiths, and sometimes within faiths.

And we, Jews and Christians, who have worked so hard and so effectively at reconciliation, must show the world another way.: honouring humanity as God's image, protecting the environment as God's work, respecting diversity as God's will, and keeping the covenant as God's word.

Too long we have dwelt in the valley of tears.

Let us walk together towards the mountain of the Lord,

Side-by-side,

Hand in hand,

bound by a covenant of fate that turns strangers into friends.

In an age of fear, let us be agents of hope.

Together let us be a blessing to the world.