

MESSAGE TO BORDERLINES CONFERENCE

I wish to take this opportunity to send those taking part in the Borderlines Conference blessings and best wishes for this most important gathering. I am sorry I am unable to be with you in person.

There has never been a more important time to address the issue of religion, nationalism and identity in the contemporary world because we are living through a deeply troubling age on all these fronts.

In the 21st century, we have seen religion and religious beliefs challenged, not just from an ever-increasing number of angry atheists, but by religious fundamentalists and extremists that has seen people who kill in the name of the God of life, wage war in the name of the God of peace, hate in the name of the God of love, and practise cruelty in the name of the God of compassion. The challenge for faiths and their leaders today is to stand together and speak up for the true face of religion: one of compassion and mercy, dignity and respect for all.

We are also living through a period of history that has seen the rise of a dangerous strand of political nationalism. This is not politics as usual. The American Presidential election, the Brexit vote and the rise of extremism in the West have given birth to a new politics of anger. Traditional party lines and positions have been replaced with an 'insider' versus 'outsider' matrix; the defining political question asked by societies today is how much they will put their own interests above the interests of the common, global good. In an age of unrelenting globalisation, these new political fault lines will only lead to further instability in the years ahead.

The concept of identity presents an ongoing challenge to our common humanity because every group excludes as it includes. Every Us is defined against a Them, and too often, especially when these groups are drawn from the Abrahamic monotheisms, they are harsh towards the Them. Identity is formed on the basis of exclusion of the Other. For every 'Us' there is a 'Them', those not like us. Identity is about particularity, but our common humanity demands a universalistic approach. The challenge therefore is not easy yet couldn't be more timely: the universalisation of particularity. How can we construct a world in which there is a dignity of difference? How can we ensure our common humanity precedes our religious differences? How can we make space for the one not like us?

These are the discussions that will undoubtedly form the basis of your conference and the ideas presented will feed into a global narrative that will define the future of humanity in the 21st century. I congratulate all those involved in the organisation of the Borderlines Conference and wish you blessing and best wishes in all you do.



Rabbi Jonathan Sacks
December 2016