



Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks' Speech
The Becket Fund's 19th Annual Canterbury Medal Dinner

Professor George, beloved friends, I am actually so overwhelmed this evening that I'm almost lost for words... something for which my congregation has been praying for many years. For I cannot tell you how moved I am by this occasion, I really am. And I wanted to salute you, Robert, for your quite outstanding work. And I have just humbly followed in your slip string and I wish you continued blessing and success. But above all, to pay tribute to this extraordinary organization, the Becket Fund, which is just, so magnificent, which is lead and supported by the people in this room, such outstanding individuals. I really do absolutely salute you. I believe, Robert, as you said, we have to work together, and the way I put it is very simply this: Every faith is a candle we light in the public domain. A little light drives away much darkness. And no one else's candle diminishes mine. But if we all light our candles together, we can turn a dark world into one full of light. And that is why working together for the cause of religious liberty is so fundamental and so precious to me. And Elaine and I are so moved to discover how precious it is to you.

I have to say, Robert, you mentioned my being in the House of Lords. People sometimes ask me which do I prefer: the House of the Lords or the House of the Lord. I say, if given a choice, always choose the House of the Lord, because, in the House of the Lord, only the Rabbi gives a sermon and in the House of Lords everyone gives a sermon. But it is a great privilege to be with you here to receive this award. And I am particularly moved that today happens to be the very day on which the president of the United States, opened the 9/11 memorial museum. It was standing at Ground Zero shortly after 9/11 that inspired me to write my own book *Dignity of Difference*, my own argument that religion is a force for freedom. And therefore, all I have done between then and now and especially tonight, has been an inadequate way of paying tribute to the memory of those who died as the result of religious hatred. And the only way we can defeat it is through religious love.

But let me begin by just saying how refreshing it is for Elaine and I to come, from England to New York and receive a medal called Canterbury. It makes us feel extremely at home. So let me tell you the story-It's by now a bit of a notorious story about my first public meeting with the Archbishop of Canterbury. It took place twenty-three years ago. He had just been appointed, George Carey, as Archbishop of Canterbury. I had just been appointed Chief Rabbi. And we have something in Britain, you have baseball and we have something called football; I think you call it soccer here because football means something else. And it has the same religious significance as baseball does. I have to say, teaching at NYU I have come to know the president at NYU John Sexton, who a couple of months ago published a book called *Baseball as a Path to God*. I said to John, I read the book and I agree all the God stuff I understood completely but the baseball was pure mysticism for me. So we have this thing called soccer which becomes terribly



important... and somebody discovered, and I don't know how, that the Archbishop of Canterbury and I were supporters of the same football team called Arsenal. And they came to both of us and said, would you like your first ecumenical gathering to be at Highbury Stadium when Arsenal are playing, a mid-week match for obvious religious reasons. And of course we both said yes and I have to tell you the occasion was magnificent. There we were, flood-lit match, mid-week, we were taken down before the game to meet the players. We were taken out onto the holy ground itself. The football pitch of Arsenal where they were playing Manchester United, they had the public address system announce that tonight we have with us the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbi. And you could hear the buzz go around the ground that whichever way you played this particular theological wager, one way or another, that night, Arsenal had friends in high places. They couldn't possibly lose. That night, Oslo went down to their worst home defeat in sixty-three years. An absolutely true story. The next day a national British newspaper - again all of this is true - a national newspaper published the following article: If between them, the Arch Bishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbi cannot bring about a win for Arsenal, does this not finally prove that God does not exist? The next day, they carried my reply, which said, "It proves that God exists. It's just that he supports Manchester United."

Friends, I tell that story, actually, for a very simple reason. It actually contains a rather serious insight. What if God is not only on my side, but also on the other side? What if God cares about the game, not just the team? Or let me put it Biblically: now this is very interesting fact about the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew Bible tells the story of Abraham and Sarah and their descendents. But the interesting thing about it is Abraham and Sarah don't appear until the twelfth chapter of Genesis. The first eleven chapters of Genesis have got nothing to do with this particular family, the family of the covenant. They have to do with humanity as a whole. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the flood, Babel and its builders. And I believe what the Bible is saying to us is that our common humanity precedes our religious differences. And that becomes a very, very important religious insight. It seems to me that it was some such thought, that gave rise in the 17th century after a century when there were religious wars throughout Europe, to the very concept of religious freedom itself, or as it was called, liberty of conscience. The quest, that is the question that John Locke and of course in a different way, Thomas Jefferson wrestled. How can a society cohere when it contains a multiplicity of religious groups whose convictions clash. And the result was what Locke called the Doctrine of Toleration and what in America became the first amendment, the formal substantive separation of religion and power. So that religion, by an act of self-restraint, does not attempt to control the government, and the government, by a parallel act of self-restraint, does not attempt to control religion. If those two are kept with their own respective domains and their own respective integrity, then you have religious liberty. Government is about power; religion is about influence. Government is about state; religion is about society. And that is how religious liberty was born.



Now today, I'm sad to say, that that liberty is at great risk throughout Europe. In Britain, we have seen a worker banned from wearing a small crucifix at work. A nurse was censured for offering to utter a prayer on behalf of one of her patients. The Catholic adoption agencies were forced to close because they were unwilling to place children for adoption to same-sex parents. And as far as Judaism is concerned, religious liberty has been under very serious threat indeed. We have seen *Shechita*, the Jewish way of killing animals banned in Denmark. We have seen circumcision banned by a court in Germany. These are liberties Jews have enjoyed throughout Europe for centuries. And this is for me the empirical proof that this deeply secularizing Europe - that the secular societies of Europe - are much less tolerant than the religions that they accuse of intolerance.

And the truth is I understand why: that it takes the idea of divine sovereignty of divine power over all earthly power to establish, number one, the priority of right over might, number two, humility in the exercise of power, and above all, number three, the moral limit of power. There are certain things you should not use power to achieve and one of those is to tell people what they should worship or what they should believe. The truth is, why is this dangerous? It is dangerous not just for religion. It is dangerous for society as a whole. Why? Number one, because for Jews, Christians, moralists, and all other religious believers, our religious commitment cuts very deep, it cuts to the very heart of what and who I am. And therefore political wisdom should tell us that only in very very rare circumstances, indeed, should governments even dream of setting up a conflict between my loyalty to the state and my loyalty to my faith. Very rarely should governments make that a real conflict. Number two, even nonreligious people, I think, were they to come back to life today, would be horrified by what they see. The truth is, the greatest defender of liberty in the 19th century in Britain was an atheist, or maybe just an agnostic, called John Stuart Mill. John Stuart Mill would be horrified to see what is happening today in the name of political correctness. Look at what has happened to people in this country merely because they oppose same-sex marriage or they gave a donation to a body that opposed same-sex marriage. John Stewart Mill was acutely concerned, as we all are, because he believed that freedom includes the right to voice opinions that dissent from whatever is the majority view of a society at a given time. That is the only way we avoid error: by allowing dissent of voice. In Roman law, indeed in Judaism, there is a principle of justice which says, *audi alteram partem*, which means justice depends on the ability to listen to the other side. When one side is silent there is neither freedom nor justice and this effects everyone, religious and non-religious alike.

It is that willingness to listen respectfully to those whom with we disagree that has been lost today. It has been lost in the media, it has been lost in university campuses, it has been lost in the internet where we can chose to only listen to the people we agree with. Broadcasting is gone and narrowcasting has taken its place and the result is that society has been fragmented into sects of the like-minded. And we all thereby suffer. However, even if we are not religious there



is still a case to be made and it was made by the most brilliant people who ever wrote on this subject, Alexis de Tocqueville, as he says, in France I see the spirit of religion and the spirit of liberty marching in opposite directions but in America I saw them walk side by side, hand in hand. And the reason was, he said, that religion in America is the antidote to the biggest threat to society and societal freedoms - something he called individualism. Religion, he said, strengthens democracy by strengthening families, strengthening communities, strengthening charities, and that led to what he called the art of association which he defined as the apprenticeship of liberty.

Now that argument has recently been empirically demonstrated and quantified by one of the leading sociologists here in America, Robert Putnam. I'm sure you've all read his book *American Grace*. It was an absolutely enthralling work. What he showed, through extensive research that laid behind this book, is that being a member of a religious community is the single strongest indicator of willingness to give to others, of involvement in charitable giving- whether to secular or religious causes, of engaging in welfare work to help a stranger... on every index, the best guide to altruism and active citizenship is membership in a faith community. In other words, everyone gains thereby, because it is faith communities that are our great heritage of that wealth of nations called social capital.

Of course I also tried to tell people in Britain that being a member of the religious community is good for health. Actually it extends your life expectancy by seven years apparently in the latest American research. Although, I said to Elaine, when I saw this research, that going regularly to the synagogue makes you live seven years longer or maybe it just seems seven years longer. But the truth is, that it is religion that is the antidote to the individualism that quickens the breakup of society. A loss of religious freedom is bad for religion, bad for liberty, bad for a society. But all these things taken together pale into insignificance when placed across, alongside the most fascinating phenomenon of all, which is the history of American liberty. America is unique in being the living tutorial in the fact that religious liberty was and remains a religious achievement. It was the Oxford political philosopher John Plamenatz who pointed out that liberty of conscience was born in the 17th century. The 17th century was one of the most religious ages in all of European history. It was born by people of faith not by people who lost their faith. And Plamenatz explained what happened. He said, liberty of conscience was born in the simple move from the idea that faith is immensely important, therefore everyone should have the one true faith, to the idea that faith is immensely important therefore everyone should have the freedom to live his or her own faith. That one step led to religious liberty in the most religious of all ages.

Now, history is pretty unrepeatable. And rarely does history offer us a controlled experiment. But I think we have one in the following phenomenon: the modern world was created on the basis of four revolutions. First the English, then the American, then the French, then the



Russian. The English and American revolutions were based on the Bible. The French and Russian revolutions were based on secular philosophy: France, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Russia, Karl Marx. The fascinating thing is, that the American and English revolutions were not without their birth pains, but they did indeed lead to a new birth of freedom. But the French revolution led to the age of revolutionary terror and the Russian revolution led to Stalin and the gulag. If that is not a controlled experiment, I don't know what is. American and English revolutions were done by religious people under the inspiration of the Bible, and it is only those two, not the other two that created a real, new reign of liberty.

Now that difference is quite simply something we notice the moment we when we compare the actual wording of the American Declaration of Independence and the wording of the Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen of the French Revolutionary Assembly thirteen years later in 1789. The American Declaration, as you know, states its proposition in religious language: We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. The French Revolution makes no reference to God: it says all men are born and remain equal in rights. In other words, the American Revolution explicitly bases its concept of human rights on God and the Bible and the French Revolution explicitly avoids it. It is very interesting the way I read, as an Englishman, reading the key moments in the history of American liberty and how the great shapers of that liberty were conscious and articulated it; that this liberty was something they were doing because of God and in the name of God. So, Lincoln in his Gettysburg Address talks about this nation, under God, having a new birth of freedom. In his second inaugural, he says, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right. And of course, that message is absolutely central to John F. Kennedy's great inaugural address, where he speaks about the revolutionary belief, for which our fathers fought, that the rights of man come from the gift of God and not from the generosity of the state. What he meant was, quite explicitly, to contrast the American Revolution with the French Revolution, which did hold that the rights of men only came from the generosity of the state. And that is why American liberty is constitutively religious. You cannot have American liberty without that religious base. Whereas the French type liberty isn't so. It is explicitly based on the French concept Laïcité which means you keep religion out of the conversation. And the difference is huge. The difference is that the American concept of rights is a formula for limited government. What Jefferson meant when he used that phrase inalienable rights was saying, this belongs to us, it cannot belong to the state. The state may come thus far but no further. It cannot interfere with life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It is a formula for minimal government. The French formula, where rights are simply brought about by the generosity of the state tells us, if you want more rights, then you need more government. It is the formula for maximal government. And that, frankly – it can step in, as the French recently did, and ban Christians from wearing a crucifix, ban Jews from wearing a Yarmulke, and ban Muslims from wearing a Hijab in public places. Now does that make France a more tolerant society than America or less tolerant? Nobody stopped me wearing my Yarmulke here.



This is what I want to say as a guest from over the pond, and we forgive you for 1776. But let me say this to you loud and clear: America's great achievement was to turn religion into a force for freedom. And that is what the world needs to know today.

You look at the world and see religion becoming a force for violence and oppression, and heaven knows what. Countries throughout the Middle East, Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, which are turning into a war of all against all in Hobbes' words, where life is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. They can see religion as a force for violence, terror, or oppression, and therefore, what the world needs now is for America to stand tall and assert its unique and outstanding history and show that here we saw and here we showed and here we proved that religion is indeed a force for liberty.

Friends, in America, the tree of liberty has religious roots. Don't believe you can sever those roots and have the tree of liberty survive.

Let me be very blunt. When we lose religion what we are left with is moral relativism and individualism which may be fine for individuals—I have no problem with it—but don't think you can run a society as a whole that way. You cannot defend freedom on the basis of moral relativism. The truth is you can't even defend moral relativism on the basis of moral relativism.

Let me say, as a religious leader myself, religious liberty, as it developed in America, is, I believe not just a great political achievement, it is also a great spiritual achievement because it is based on humility and self-restraint, on the knowledge that this is one nation, under God. Because it involves asking each of us making the great religious gesture of making space for difference.

I argued in *Dignity of Difference*, the miracle of Abrahamic monotheism is not necessarily one God, one truth, and one way. I say the miracle of Abrahamic monotheism is that unity in heaven creates diversity down here on earth. And, what is wrong with fundamentalism is the attempt to impose a single truth on a plural world.

Friends, we have just a couple weeks ago, in Judaism, celebrated the festival of Passover, which is our festival of freedom. And you may know, if you've ever seen a Jewish house before Passover, it's hard work. It really is. I try and be away from home when it's happening. You have to clear the house of all products that contain leaven, you got to clean everything, you got to take out a new set of utensils and cutlery and crockery and it is really hard work. I got somebody in England to design a special apron for Passover cleaning. That read, "For this, we left Egypt?" And I used to wonder, why? Why make Passover such hard work? And now I know: because freedom is hard work. And it has to be fought for in every generation. We have to tell and re-tell the story. We have to remind ourselves what it feels like each year to eat the



bread of affliction and taste the bitter herbs of slavery. Freedom is hard to attain, but it is very easy to lose. And that's why it has to be fought for in every generation.

Today, when freedom – not just religious freedom but every kind of freedom – is threatened by a resurgent Russia, a driven China, and wars of religion destabilizing vast areas of the globe, the world needs the American message that religion is true to itself when it is a force for freedom, that religion is about influence, not power. It's about society, not the state. It's about not purchasing my liberty at the cost of yours. It's about that wonderful truth that, as Robert said, that we are all in God's image. Which means what? It means that somebody who is not in my image, whose color or culture or creed is different from mine, even though they are not in my image, they are still in God's image. Can we see the trace of God in the face of a stranger?

Friends, deep down in this Judeo-Christian heritage is the astonishing Idea that the free God seeks the free worship of free human beings. Or, as only a Yiddish novelist like Isaac Bashevis, would say, he said, "We have to be free. We have no choice." But friends, the fact that God asks us to create, sustain, and celebrate freedom tells us something very deep indeed. It tells us that more than we have faith in God, God has faith in us. And let us honor that faith.

Friends, I thank you and the Becket Fund, not just for this honor, but really and truly for the years and the day after day when you fight this good fight, which is the fight of our time. And I say, let us do it together: Jews, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Buddhists, Jains, Zoroastrian, and Ba'hai, people of good will, of all faiths and those of none, so that we can show the world that religion can be a force for freedom. And the proof is America itself, one of the world's most religious of nations. And at the same time, the one that was, is, and I pray always will remain, the world's great defender of liberty.

Thank you.