

## INSIGHT

# Finding an alternative to identity politics



**Douglas Kindschi** Director,  
Kaufman Interfaith Institute, GVSU

Jonathan Sacks has pointed out that the 20th century was dominated by the politics of ideology. The battle between two universal ideologies, communism vs. capitalism, dominated much of the political landscape. The debate was about which political and economic system was best. Various identities came together in a "melting pot" working to bring some sense of coherence to our lives and communities.

The 21st century, however, is about the politics of identity, Sacks claims. Today there is a minimum of shared identity, and the resulting division tends toward polarization in our political as well as religious world. Some refer to this as a reemergence of tribalism. In his latest book, "Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence," Sacks argues that this tribal approach is built into our biology. While we inherit our genes from our individual father and mother, we survive not as individuals but as groups. We need families and communities and identification with our "tribe," all historically necessary to survival.

The issue of identity and its potential conflict takes form in a play written by Muslim novelist and playwright Ayad Akhtar. "Disgraced" was first performed in Chicago and then in New York City, where it played on Broadway and received a Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2013. It has been performed in many other cities in the past few years, including in Europe in translation. It is now being presented by Actors' Theatre in Grand Rapids and is in its second and

final week.

The tensions emerging from identity and tribalism can take place even among the sophisticated society of New York City, which is the setting for the action involving two couples at a dinner party. The characters include a Muslim attorney and his Caucasian artist wife, and a coworker in the law firm who is African-American and her Jewish husband who is an art promoter. What begins as a celebration soon exposes racial, ethnic, and religious prejudice that becomes what one reviewer calls a "combustible powder keg of identity politics."

The author, born in America to immigrant parents, describes how religion has become an identity marker, more important than ethnicity or nationality. Since 9/11, "folks get labeled 'Muslim' no matter where they're from," Akhtar said in an interview in *Guernica* magazine. He continued:

"If you are Muslim, then that is part of it, but here's the complicating factor for me: growing up, the only part of my identity that mattered was being Muslim, and I knew that. Being Pakistani was not as important as being Muslim. So the black guy whom I met who's a Muslim, I'm much closer to him than the Christian Pakistani guy who is my dad's friend. We have a closer bond. This

## Actors' Theatre "Disgraced"

**Performances and Talk-backs:** 8 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday

**Location:** Spectrum Theater, 160 Fountain St. NE, Grand Rapids

**Information and discount code at:** [interfaithunderstanding.org](http://interfaithunderstanding.org)

was innate to me as a kid."

As I watched the performance at Actors' Theatre, the increasing separation and division in our society, which seems to be reasserting a tribal mentality, was disturbing. The theatre asked the Kaufman Interfaith Institute to lead "talkback" sessions following each performance, and it was in this discussion that I sensed real hope that this division is not the direction we have to go.

There are still many people who want to affirm the basic humanity of all people as well as the fundamental principle of religious freedom. Our efforts to reach out to all religious groups and find that commonality are not in vain, but is more needed than ever. We may not hear it on the news or from our leaders, but there is indeed a yearning for an alternate narrative.

We may not be able to remove all tribal loyalties, and we will not likely all agree on politics or religious truth. We can, however, see that person who does not look like me, dress like me, vote like me, or worship like me as someone with human dignity and to be treated with respect. They may not be in my image, but we can see them as created in God's image.

[interfaith@gvsu.edu](mailto:interfaith@gvsu.edu)